



The Museum of Herat: From the Beginning until Present Times

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The museum in Herat was established in 1303/1925 under the rule of Ghazi Shah Amanullah Khan, whose reign¹ was marked by the effort to modernise the country and to establish art and culture in order to promote education, innovation and independence. With the help and advice of leading intellectuals, foremost Mahmoud Tarzi, whose daughter Soraya Shah Amanullah Khan later married, he established schools for girls and boys, and hospitals in Kabul and in other provinces of Afghanistan. In addition to these activities, he installed press media and various printed magazines. The ruler dismissed the *hejab* for women and believed that the country's independence and innovation could only be achieved by means of modernisation.

At that time, museums were known to the general populace as *Ajayeb Khaneh* ('House of Wonders') and the preservation of antiquities was considered as aberrance and obliquity. Yet, the museum in Herat was not the first or only one established by Shah Amanullah Khan; in 1919 he also founded the National Museum of Afghanistan in Kabul.

In Herat, an old Timurid building in Chahar Bagh, west of the Masjid-e Djami, was chosen for its location. Entrance tickets were sold at the cost of 1/100 Afghani. When the old city of Herat was enlarged in 1312/1934, this building was destroyed and the museum relocated to the Herat Hotel on the Sarag Pul-e Pashtoon, the present airport road. Until 1323/1945 the museum was under the auspices of Herat Municipality, but subsequently it was transferred to the Independent Directorate of the Ministry of Information and Culture in Herat. In 1343/1965, the objects were shifted to the governor's office, but were not put on display due to lack of space.

At that time, its collection consisted of about 3000 objects from several historical



Fig. 1 Conservation of the citadel, Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 2009

eras, including more than 110 sculptures and statues from the Buddhist Period, a total of 28 gold coins, 826 silver and 811 copper coins from the Sasanian to the Qadjar Period, 52 historic paintings and miniatures, and old guns made in Herat. Most of these objects were collected during the reign of Shah Amanullah Khan; others came later as gifts or transfers from Kabul.

After the fall of the government of Dr M. Najibullah, President of Afghanistan from 1986 to 1991, and during the period of the Mojaheddin, the Herat Museum was robbed and a large number of objects, including at least 18 gold coins, 816 copper coins and 12 guns were looted.

The museum was moved once more in 1374-75/1996 by Ismail Khan, this time to Qala'-e Ekhtyaruddin, the old citadel of Herat which had been restored in the 1970s for this purpose within the framework of a major restoration and conservation programme carried out by UNESCO. The collection was not open to the general public.

After the attacks of 9/11, the objects were transferred first to the main library in Herat and then to Qala'-e Ekhtyaruddin. Under Taliban rule, the 110 sculptures and statues were severely damaged. During the turbulences in the final days of their regime, ending in Herat on 22nd Aban 1380/13th November 2001, 52 handwritten, gilded manuscripts were stolen.

In the winter of 1382-83/2003-04 Ismail Khan, who was re-appointed Governor of Herat in 2001 after the defeat of the Taliban, transferred the collection from a store in the citadel, at that time still occupied by the military, to halls in a modern building of the main library in the new city. At that time, the archaeological collection comprised c. 1000 objects,

¹ As third son of Habibullah Khan, from 1919 to 1929.

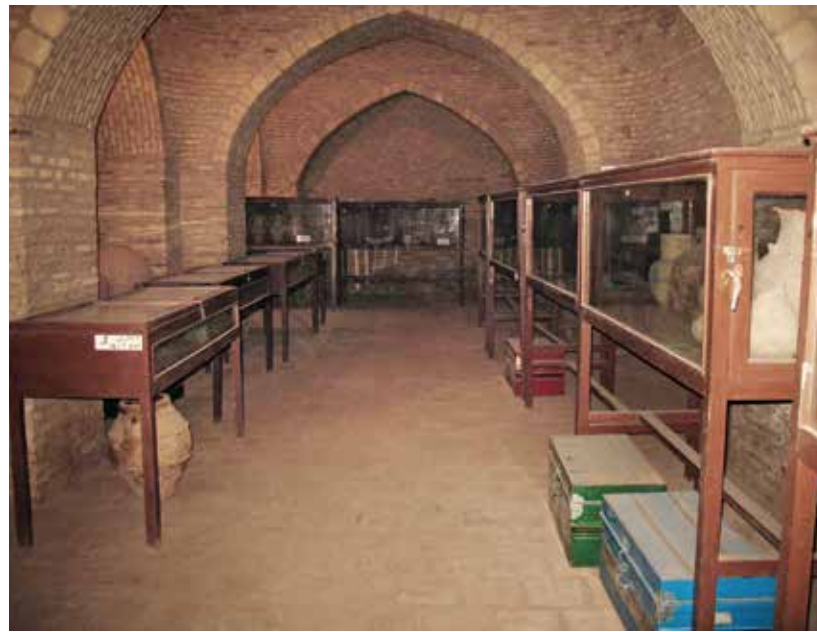


Fig. 2 Old museum in the citadel



Fig. 3 Old museum in the citadel



Fig. 5 New exhibition hall

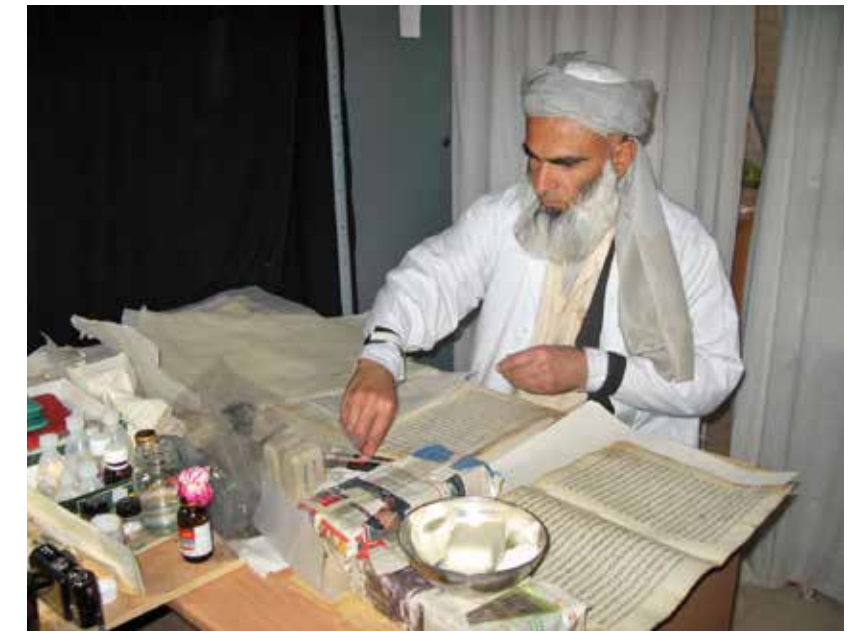


Fig. 6 Paper conservation area



Fig. 4 Arrival of new objects to the museum

while the Archive housed c. 250 manuscripts and books. Subsequently, it was decided to reinstall the exhibition. Prepared by the directors of the Museum and Archive of Herat, Gholam Yahya Khushbeen and Baha Timuri², it opened at the end of 1383/2005. By 1384-85/2006, 117 manuscripts were registered. Following incidents of public unrest in the city, the objects were packed again and transferred back to the citadel in the winter of 1385/2006, after Qala'-e Ekhtyaruddin had been demined, cleared of the remains of war and handed over by the military to

² Khushbeen/Timuri 2008.

Wali Shah Bahra, Director of the Regional Office, Ministry of Information and Culture in Herat. It soon turned out, however, that the rooms designed as exhibition halls, and particularly the one housing the manuscripts and books, suffered from substantial humidity and ventilation problems. Therefore, the museum was closed for the general public again.

As no archaeologists and specialists were present, studies on the objects and restoration projects were not conducted for a long time. In 1384/2005, however, permission was granted to the German-Afghan Archaeological Mission, working in Herat since 2004, to make a brief documentation of the exhibition in order to raise funds for a larger project.³ Shortly afterwards, the Director General of the Museums in Kabul, Omara Khan Massoudy, also sent members of his staff, headed by his Deputy Director Mr. Yahya, to register the objects in 2007/08 and 2009 together with the employees in Herat. It was very clear, however, that the Herat Museum required a thorough restoration and remodelling – not only of the building, but also of the objects, which had severely suffered from frequent shifting and other damages.

³ Franke 2008d.

This opportunity turned up in the frame of the archaeological project conducted by the German-Afghan Archaeological Mission, directed by Ute Franke, and by the consolidation and refurbishment project of the citadel, carried out from 2008 to 2011 by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, supported by the US Ambassador's Fund. The documentation and conservation of the objects, going hand in hand with the planning and installation of laboratories, stores and new exhibition halls, were carried out in close collaboration of all partners.

Most objects needed to be cleaned, repaired and protected from further damage and destruction. Security was also an important issue, particularly since at the very beginning of the project in 2008, 23 objects from the Buddhist, Saljuk and Ghurid periods were stolen from the old building. Their retrieval in 2014 by the police and return to the museum was a major success in the ongoing fight against illegal trafficking of antiquities. In the process of establishing the new museum, the collection grew again to about 3100 objects in total through the collaboration with antiquity dealers in Herat, who dedicated more than 1000 objects to the museum when Wali Shah Bahra again became Director of Information and Culture in Herat, and upon the inauguration of the museum at the end



Fig. 7 Anorganic conservation laboratory

of 2011. Another constant input of objects to the museum is due to the increased attention of the police and customs who frequently confiscate illegal shipments in Badghis and Herat.

We would like to extend our sincerest gratitude to Dr Ute Franke and the German team under her directorate. They achieved a remarkable project and success during five years of restoration, preservation and study at the National Museum of Herat. The training that they provided to our teams in Herat and Kabul in terms of documentation, conservation, and museum management has been of great help and is a lasting contribution to establishing the long history of Herat as part of the people's education.