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By Larry Rohter
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Afghan art's post-Taliban return

By Carlotta Gall

KABUL

The newly repaired National Museum of Afghanistan has opened its first exhibition in 13 years, a display of life-size, pre-Islamic idols smashed by the Taliban three years ago and now painstakingly restored by museum and international experts.

The wooden statues from Nuristan, one of Afghanistan's mountainous northeastern provinces, are an apt subject for an inaugural exhibition. Museum staff had worked hard to hide the collection from looters and Islamic fundamentalists intent on destroying all idols and artistic depictions of the human form. The figures, from what was formerly known as Kafiristan, or Land of the Heathens, are ancestor effigies and animistic and polytheistic gods, representing beliefs and traditions that were practiced there little more than 100 years ago.

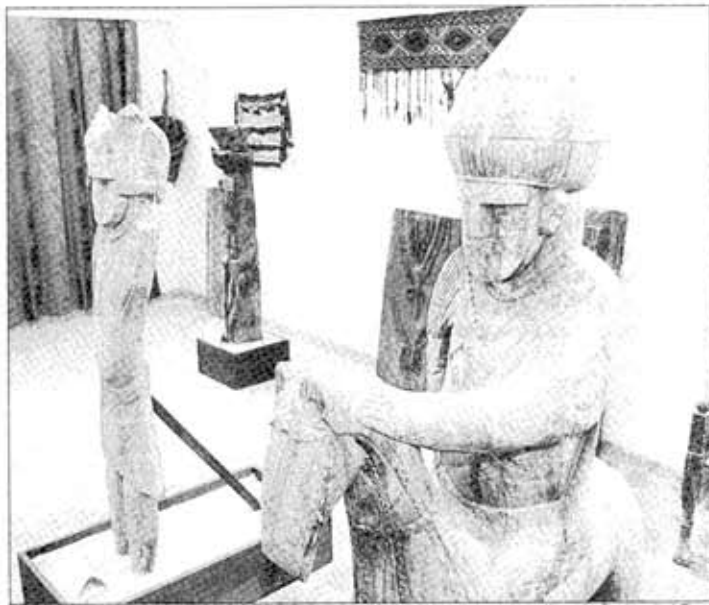
"This is part of our culture and we should preserve it," said Fauzia Hamraz, director of the ethnographic collection, who helped piece the statues back together. "Our country is an Islamic country, but displaying these things will not destroy our religion."

The statues, as well as carved doors, pillars and furniture, date from the 18th and 19th centuries. The figures were brought to Kabul by the army of Emir Abdur Rahman, a ruler of Afghanistan who forcibly Islamized Kafiristan in 1896 and renamed it Nuristan, or Land of Light.

The 14 statues that remain stand like silent sentries, with primitive flat faces, large turbans and head-dresses, skirts and gaiters, similar to the clothes still worn in Nuristan. Many are warriors, one astride a horse, one armed with an ax and a dagger. Another sits on a throne.

They come from different tribes in Nuristan's high valleys. In addition to the ancestor effigies, others represent the pantheon of gods once worshipped by the local people, said Max Klimburg, director of the Afghan-Austrian Society and an expert on the Kafirs of the Hindu Kush mountain range. One with a moon face, thought to be Disani, the goddess of goat fertility, sits astride a mountain goat and rests her face between its horns.

There are also elaborate carved wooden bedposts that depict embracing, seated couples with legs en-



Hiram Yasui for The New York Times

The pre-Islamic idols on display had to be restored because they were smashed by the Taliban.

twined. Remarkably, they escaped the attention of the ax-wielding Taliban.

The statues were packed away in the early 1990s as the country threatened to dissolve into civil war after the withdrawal of the occupying Soviet Army. Some were stored in the Ministry of Culture, some in the Kabul Hotel and some in the museum itself, on the western side of Kabul, which came under heavy rocket fire in 1993.

Some pieces looted then are still missing, said Klimburg, who donated a number of his own discoveries from Nuristan to the museum in the 1970s. A large male bust he found in 1971 and

**'Our country is an Islamic country,
but displaying these things will
not destroy our religion.'**

temple posts with deity figures acquired by a Kabul museum expedition in 1976 are missing, he said. One figure, an effigy from the Kafirs of the Kalash valley in Chitral, in neighboring Pakistan, was found cut in half at the waist by smugglers who were trying to export it. It was seized by customs at the Kabul airport.

In April 2001, as extremists gained the upper hand in the Taliban government and blew up the giant Buddha statues at Bamiyan, armed men turned on the museum collection. The staff

managed to hide the most valuable pieces in old crates, but the larger ones, including the figures from Nuristan and many Buddhist and Kushan statues, were smashed. The wooden figures were splintered with an ax into as many as 20 pieces.

It took more than a month of intense work by staff and a visiting Austrian-Italian wood restorer financed by the Austrian government to reconstruct the figures.

Even the tiniest slivers of wood were salvaged and, where appropriate, a mixture of paint, chalk and glue was used to fill in gaps. The cracks are barely visible now, and the figures look as they did when last on display 13 years ago.

Schoolchildren and youth groups have been among the early visitors to the exhibition. "They ask many questions," Hamraz said. "They ask why the Taliban didn't destroy all the broken pieces."

But that question still haunts her and the staff just three years after the Taliban was removed and peacekeepers of the International Security Assistance Force, known as ISAF, arrived in Kabul.

"As long as ISAF are here, I don't think anything will happen," Hamraz said. "But if they leave, we could have insecurity again and maybe those who did these things would come back again."

The New York Times

BOOKS

NINE SUITCASE

By Bela Zsolt
Translated from the
by Ladislav Lvb
324 pages. \$25. Sc

Reviewed by Scott

From the first caustic memoir Bela Zsolt ceases to sense of disbelief a ing before his rheu

A prominent H the first half of the saw his homeland him. His wife saw h captor. Hungarian friends and neighb death sentences.

This numbing d the reader: Despite caust work, one c taken back at the st inhumanity that Zsc

"Nine Suitcases" lished 60 years ago a gary until 1980. (Zso the book, translated first time by Ladisla mediacy because c personal experience nalism and his dry w

The memoir open tress. Zsolt is in a g garian town of Nag the German invasion Bodies are piled up. I The Jews are confin fit for animals.

But this isn't wher gins, nor where it end

BRIDGE

Frank Stewart

The 2004 Olympic end November in Ist (For results, see www: bridge.org.) In May, (Steiner, Jill Meyers, Inesa Letizia, Randi M Tobl Sokolow and Seamon-Molison won Trials to pick the U.S. en's team.

Today's Trials deal ports the idea that a tract's success may b versely proportional t length of the auction. A table of the match, N South took seven bic reach six spades: Ne three spades promi singleton somev South's 3NT asked w and North showed singleton diamond.

■ Winning Lead

That sequence might let North-South reach a grand slam but actu helped West find a g lead. Knowing dummy h