



Scott Eells for The New York Times

A restored Buddhist statue at the National Museum of Afghanistan, which is mounting its first exhibition in 13 years. One of 14 life-size wooden statues from Nuristan on display, below.

## Afghan Art, Rescued and Patched

By CARLOTTA GALL

KABUL, Afghanistan — The newly repaired National Museum of Afghanistan opened its first exhibition in 13 years in December, a display of life-size pre-Islamic idols smashed by the Taliban three years ago and 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 headdresses, 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



Hirani Yasai for The New York Times

in Nuristan's high valleys. In addition to the ancestor effigies, others represent the pantheon of gods once worshiped by the local people, said Professor Max Klimburg, director of the Afghan-Austrian Society and an expert on the Kafirs of the Hindu Kush mountain range.

There are also elaborate carved wooden bedposts that depict embracing, seated couples with legs entwined. Remarkably, they escaped the attention of the ax-wielding Taliban.

The statues were packed away in the early 1990's while civil war threatened 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 Professor Klimburg, who donated a number of his own discoveries from Nuristan to the museum in the 1970's. A large

male bust he found in 1971 and 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, when 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 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," Ms. Hamraz said, smiling. "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 I.S.A.F., arrived in Kabul.

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