The Restoration of the Kafir Effigies of the National Museum of Afghanistan

The National Museum, which once owned an art collection of great renown (mainly of Buddhist and Islamic origin), housed additionally ethnographic objects from different parts of Afghanistan. Leading show pieces among them were wooden figures, many of them nearly life-size, from Nuristan, a region located in the Hindu Kush mountain range and formerly known as Kafiristan. The figures, representing ancestors or deities, had originated under the "Kafirs of the Hindukush" who had not been Islamized before the end of the 19th century when the Afghan army subdued them.

Kafiristan or "Land of the Kafirs" was the name of a region high up in three southern valley systems of the Hindu Kush area, located in the northeast of Afghanistan. The region's name derived from a derogatory expression applied to its inhabitants who had succeeded in
holding on to their non-Islamic belief systems and traditions, and who were therefore called "Kafirs" or "heathens". It was only in 1896 that they were Islamized. The then ruler of Afghanistan, Abd ur-Rahman, had decided on the military invasion of the region after the 1893 agreement on the border between then British India and Afghanistan. This had made him also the ruler of Kafiristan. As the "light or enlightenment of Islam" had then been brought into the region, it was renamed into "Nuristan" - "Land of Light".

The military conquest led to the destruction of the temples and the effigies of deities as well as of the very numerous ancestor figures. There survived only several small clan temples with the original figural decoration of their posts, and some 32 figures, which were brought to Kabul as trophies. Fourteen of them entered the collection of the Kabul Museum, four were given to French museums in Paris (Musée Guimet and Musée de l'Homme), and the rest disappeared. Several other statues entered the Kafir collection at a later stage, among them those in the large Nuristan collection of Dr. Max Klimburg, who had undertaken extensive field research in the 1970s. On his recommendation this collection was donated to the National Museum by the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany in October of 1978 (see Klimburg 1981)

Most of the Nuristan collection had survived the plundering of the Museum during the civil war in Kabul in 1993 and 1994. However, it then fell victim to the Taliban, who chopped up the effigies when in March of 2001 their
leader, Mullah Omar, ordered the destruction of all the statuary in the country. The fragments of the Kafir effigies were carefully kept and later photographed piled up against a wall inside the Ministry of Information and Culture (see p.2). In 2003 the staff of the Kabul Museum, guided by its director, Mr. Omar Khan Masoudi, started with the restoration project. At the same time the Austrian-Afghan Society proposed a project of restoration to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Austrian Government. The project was approved, and then, in November of 2003, Dr. Klimburg, the President of the Society, and Mag. Giovanni Rindler, an excellent Austrian/Italian sculptor and restorer, undertook a brief fact-finding mission. On that occasion, much of the preparatory work was done by allocating the wooden fragments to each of the fourteen dismembered figures. By then three effigies, among them the two most impressive figures shown above (p. 2), had already been restored by the museum staff.

Working during the whole month of May of 2004, Mag. Rindler succeeded in the restoration of all the fourteen figures. In most cases the effigies were fully pieced together and touched-up to hide the cracks and small holes resulting from the Taliban axe blows. He was assisted with great dedication by the museum experts who were given much professional advice in general and in particular in handling more complicated tasks - such as replacing missing parts, as long as such repair work is justifiable.

In his work description Mag. Rindler emphasizes the technique of slow approach by checking first on the fit of the different pieces. If necessary, they were then carefully made to fit. After the pieces had been glewed together, cracks and holes were filled with splinters or paste made of the same wood and often also stained in order to hide them.

Dr. Klimburg documenting the work
All the 14 figures of the collection existing in the 1950s (see Edelberg 1960) have thus survived fully restored with the exception of some which lack a few parts. However, of the five standing effigies which had been given to or acquired by the Museum more recently - three figures among the fourteen restored by Mr. Rindler, and another one seen in the depot - one is missing. It is the massive male bust discovered by Dr. Klimburg in Waigal in 1971 (Klimburg 1999, pl. 709). The two posts featuring images of deities from clan temples in Parun, which had been acquired by a Kabul Museum expedition in the autumn of 1976 (Klimburg 1981, p.157), were spared the Taliban onslaught.

One of the restored 14 figures is an ancestor effigy from the Kalash Kafirs in Chitral (Pakistan). It had been sawed into two pieces for facilitating its illegal export from Pakistan, and it was confiscated at the Kabul airport before being flown out. Both halves of the figure had survived (see the illustration of the upper half on p. 3)

It is thus with great pleasure that the Austrian-Afghan Society herewith presents its contribution to the re-establishment of the world-renown collections of the National Museum of Afghanistan, also known as the Kabul Museum. This was made possible by funds provided by the Austrian Government which is convinced that help in the preservation of antiquities is an important aspect in the rebuilding of war-shattered Afghanistan. There is full support of the Kabul Museum's motto: A nation stays alive when its culture stays alive.

Bibliography