

National Gallery of Art

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ANCIENT AFGHAN TREASURES TO TOUR UNITED STATES IN 2008
EXHIBITION ORGANIZED BY NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY AND NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART IN COOPERATION WITH NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFGHANISTAN, KABUL



A folding gold crown from one of the six graves of Bactrian nomads discovered at Tillya Tepe in northern Afghanistan in 1978. The crown, dating from the first century A.D. and wrought of solid gold, was collapsible for easy transport by the ancient nomads. This item will be on display as part of the exhibition

Afghanistan: Hidden Treasures from the National Museum, Kabul organized by the National Geographic Society and National Gallery of Art, in cooperation with the National Museum of Afghanistan, Kabul. ©Thierry Ollivier / Musée Guimet

Washington, D.C. —A traveling exhibition of extraordinary archaeological treasures from the National Museum of Afghanistan,

Kabul, will begin a 17-month tour of the United States in spring 2008, it was announced today by the National Geographic Society and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

"Afghanistan: Hidden Treasures from the National Museum, Kabul" will explore the rich cultural heritage of ancient Afghanistan from the Bronze Age (2500 B.C.) through the rise of trade along the Silk Road in the first century A.D. Strategically located on the commercial routes between China and India in the East and Europe in the West, Afghanistan was at the crossroads of civilizations in Central Asia.

Exhibition Tour

The exhibition will premiere in the United States at the National Gallery of Art from May 25 through Sept. 7, 2008. Among the nearly 230 works on view in the East Building will be artifacts dating back more than 4,000 years, as well as gold objects from the famed Bactrian hoard, a 2,000-year-old treasure cache discovered in 1978 but hidden from view until 2003. Plans are being finalized for the exhibition to travel to the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The exhibition is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

The artifacts are on view at the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam through April 20, 2008, and were previously on display at the Musée Guimet in Paris and the Museo di Antichità in Turin, Italy. The exhibition is being reorganized for the U.S. tour, with an accompanying catalog to be published by National Geographic Books.

Exhibition Partners, Curator and Grant

"We are delighted to partner with the National Gallery of Art and the National Museum of Afghanistan in bringing these rare and precious items to the United States," said Terry Garcia, National Geographic's executive vice president for Mission Programs. "Our goal is to introduce this unique collection of objects to a broad audience and raise awareness and understanding about the little-known ancient cultures of modern-day Afghanistan. We also want to tell the heroic story of the Afghans who risked their own safety to hide and protect these treasures."

The works of art are from collections belonging to the National Museum of Afghanistan, Kabul. The gold objects from graves excavated at the northern site of Tillya Tepe were long thought to have been stolen or destroyed during the years of conflict in the region. In August 2003 Afghan president Hamid Karzai surprised the world when he announced these treasured gold artifacts had been located intact in the presidential palace bank vault in Kabul, more than 25 years after they had vanished from public view. The find was chronicled in the December 2004 issue of National Geographic magazine.

"Afghanistan has always been the heart of Asia," Said Tayeb Jawad, Afghanistan's ambassador to the United States, said. "Afghanistan's centrality in the Silk Road created a rich mosaic of cultures and civilizations. Although this mosaic was shattered by war and terror, both the spirit of the Afghan people and our cultural heritage survived. These priceless artifacts are a testament to the Afghan people and to the heroism of the brave and selfless Afghans who preserved and protected them. This exhibition is a celebration of Afghanistan as much as it is an expression of our appreciation for the global partnership between our ancient nation, the international community, and our friends in the United States."

"The National Gallery of Art has a long tradition of bringing works of exceptional quality and merit from other cultures and periods to the United States," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "We are very pleased to be working closely with National Geographic and the National Museum of Afghanistan, Kabul, to introduce the American public to these archaeological treasures, their history and their legacy." The exhibition at the National Gallery of Art is made possible by the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation.

Assisting the team of Afghan archaeologists who verified and inventoried the recovered objects were National Geographic fellow Fredrik T. Hiebert, who will curate the U.S. exhibition, and Carla Grissmann, a specialist of the collections at the National Museum of Afghanistan, Kabul.

"This exhibition is the culmination of many years of work by the Afghans. Without their courage and commitment, these objects

would not exist today," said Hiebert. "Having worked closely with Afghan officials since 2003 on the preservation and inventory of the objects, I am honored to be part of the effort to share these treasures with audiences in the United States and ultimately to enhance the understanding of Afghanistan's rich cultural heritage."

The National Endowment for the Humanities, which provided financial support for the inventory in Afghanistan, has granted a Chairman's Special Award for the U.S. exhibition that will make possible a wide range of interpretive and educational materials.

The Exhibition: Drawn from Four Sites

The extraordinary selection of objects on display was unearthed in modern Afghanistan and attest to the region's importance as an ancient crossroads of culture and commerce, central to the exchange of goods and ideas from Asia to the Mediterranean along trade routes known collectively as the Silk Road.

Drawn from four archaeological sites, the works of art from the collections of the National Museum of Afghanistan, Kabul, are the sole property of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

The earliest objects in the exhibition, from Tepe Fullol in northern Afghanistan, are fragmentary gold vases dated between 2500 B.C. and 2200 B.C.

The second group of archaeological finds, from the site of the former Greek city Ai Khanum in a region that was conquered by Alexander the Great, reflects the Mediterranean influence in the region between the fourth and second centuries B.C. The works include Corinthian capitals and bronze, ivory and stone sculptures representing Greek gods, as well as images of Central Asian figures carved in a Hellenistic style.

Items of trade from the third site, at Begram, date from the first century A.D. and include elaborately carved Indian ivory reliefs used as decorative elements on furniture and ivory statues, as well as vases, bronzes and painted glassware, many imported from Roman, Indian, Chinese, and East Asian markets.

The fourth group consists of some 100 gold objects from among

those discovered in 1978 at Tillya Tepe in northern Afghanistan, dating from the first century A.D. The site contained jewelry and gold ornaments from the graves of six Bactrian nomads. On view will be an exquisite crown, as well as necklaces, belts, rings, and headdresses — most made of solid gold with insets of semi-precious stones such as turquoise and garnets. Many of the Bactrian objects reflect local artisans' distinctive blend of motifs known from Greek, Roman, Indian, and Chinese art.

Exhibition Materials, Catalog and Programs

The NEH Chairman's Special Award granted to the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco in partnership with the National Geographic Society is supporting the development of a variety of interpretive and educational materials and enhanced exhibition content.

Through text panels, short films, an audio tour and educational materials, visitors to the exhibition will learn of the cultural significance and historical context of the works of art and the link between ancient and contemporary Afghanistan. Visitors also will gain insight into how the artifacts survived the recent decades of war and chaos and will learn the stories of heroic Afghans who risked their lives to save these and other national cultural treasures from destruction during Soviet occupation and Taliban rule.

A fully illustrated exhibition catalog, edited by Fredrik T. Hiebert and Pierre Cambon, and published by National Geographic Books, will describe and explain the objects, the archaeological excavations, the cultural exchange along the Silk Road, and the rediscovery of these treasures in 2003. The book will feature more than 300 color and archival images. Contributors include Paul Bernard and Viktor Sarianidi, the original excavators of Ai Khanum and Tillya Tepe respectively.

A comprehensive Web site hosted by www.nationalgeographic.com will be augmented by a National Gallery of Art Web feature at www.nga.gov. The National Geographic site will include a virtual tour, downloadable podcasts and interactives illustrating details of the artifacts and relating stories of key figures of the period, such as Alexander the Great.

For teachers, students and families, National Geographic will create

educational lesson plans developed in partnership with host museums. The National Gallery of Art will offer special family programs related to the exhibition.

Exhibition curator Hiebert will give the opening-day lecture at 2 p.m. on Sunday, May 25, 2008, in the East Building Auditorium of the National Gallery of Art. Both the National Gallery of Art and the National Geographic Society will present a variety of additional exhibition-related programs and concerts; details will be announced at a later date.

National Geographic Society

The National Geographic Society is one of the world's largest nonprofit scientific and educational organizations. Founded in 1888 to "increase and diffuse geographic knowledge," the Society works to inspire people to care about the planet. It reaches more than 300 million people worldwide each month through its official journal, *National Geographic*, and other magazines; National Geographic Channel; television documentaries; music; radio; films; books; DVDs; maps; school publishing programs; interactive media; and merchandise. The Society has funded more than 8,700 scientific research, conservation and exploration projects and supports an education program combating geographic illiteracy. For more information, visit nationalgeographic.com.

National Gallery of Art

Masterworks by the most renowned European and American artists await visitors to the National Gallery of Art, one of the world's preeminent art museums. The Gallery's collection of more than 116,000 paintings, drawings, prints, photographs, sculpture, medals, and decorative arts trace the development of Western art from the Middle Ages to the present. Created for the people of the United States of America by a joint resolution of Congress accepting the gift of Andrew W. Mellon in 1937, the Gallery today includes the original neoclassical West Building designed by John Russell Pope, the modern East Building designed by I.M. Pei, and a 6.1-acre Sculpture Garden. Temporary special exhibitions spanning the world and the history of art are presented frequently. Guided tours, audio tours, lectures, concerts, family programs, and films are also offered. Educational resources for all ages are available through the Gallery's

Web site.

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets at Constitution Avenue NW, and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. For information call (202) 737-4215 or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176, or visit the Gallery's Web site at www.nga.gov.

General Information

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Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 x 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

For additional press information please call or send inquiries to:

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