Death of the Great Buddha

Words fail me to describe adequately my feelings of consternation and powerlessness as I see the reports of the irreversible damage that is being done to Afghanistan's exceptional cultural heritage (Matsuura, *Agence France-Presse,* 2 March 2001).

What happens when a community decides that a whole past culture and its arts are taboo? That there is a religious prohibition on the creation of certain kinds of images, ranging from representing a deity to representing any living form? That this ban must be retrospective, and is in force for both the artist and the observer? One solution, employed by both the present-day Taliban and the early Christian iconoclasts, is a wave of destruction aimed at cultural purification that destroys all vestiges of past and present image making.

The term iconoclasm (*Eikonoklasmos* – image-breaking) is most closely associated with eighth- and ninth-century Byzantium, when Imperial edicts condemned all forms of religious representational art and ordered their destruction throughout the empire. According to the iconoclastic conciliabulum held in Constantinople in 754 CE, 'the unlawful art of painting living creatures blasphemes the fundamental doctrine of our salvation' and the artist, in fashioning 'that which should only be believed in the heart and confessed with the mouth', is guilty of 'a double blasphemy'; moreover, 'those fall into the same blasphemy who venerate the image, and the same woe rests upon both'.

The decision of the synod was to declare that there should be rejected and removed and cursed out of the Christian Church every likeness which is made out of any material and colour whatever by the evil art of painters (Iconoclastic Council 754).

This was hardly the first incident of culture-wide destruction of religious or even secular art and certainly not the last. The Islamic invasion of Iran in the seventh century had resulted in a similar wave of destruction, mainly focussing on illuminated manuscripts, and may well have influenced the Byzantine movement. The Puritans in seventeenth-century England were equally savage in their attempts to eradicate religious images, while nineteenth-century missionaries worldwide rejoiced in the overthrow of idols. None of these people, however, had the communications networks, the technology of destruction or even, perhaps, the consuming zeal of the Taliban of Afghanistan.

At the beginning of March 2001 we watched in horror the televised footage of the death of one of the world's great cultural icons, the dynamiting layer by layer of the world's tallest Buddha figure, the 55 metre high Great Buddha of Bamiyan. The defaced but still powerful figure had been one of the most compelling examples of the Gandharan/ Bactrian style of the early centuries of the Common Era.

Modern Afghanistan encompasses much of the old realm of Bactria, a major centre of Central Asian culture. Believed to have been the cradle of the Zoroastrian religion, Bactria became one of the satrapies of the Iranian Achaemenid Empire in the sixth century BCE when it was subjugated by Cyrus the Great, forming the empire's easternmost province. Its importance lay as much in its role as a trading nexus, linking India with the still unofficial Silk Road to China, as in its ability to provide the empire with timbers, furs, lapis and turquoise. In the fifth century BCE, following an attempted uprising, Bactria was forcibly settled with the Ionian Greek subjects of the Achaemenid Persians.

In 328 BCE, during the Persian conquest, Alexander the Great added Bactria to his Hellenised empire, and after his death it continued to evolve a Phil Hellenic culture, making use of Greek script and Greek-style coinage, and creating sculptures in the Hellenistic style in centres such as Begram and Ai Khanoum (Boardman 1994).

Bactria remained within the Hellenistic world, first as a satrapy of Seleucid Iran, and then, from 256 BCE as a separate kingdom following the revolution of Diodotus I. Cut off from Iran by the rising Parthian kingdom, it was finally overrun by nomad invaders about 130 BCE and shortly after incorporated into the Kushan kingdom of North India. The Kushans, who established a summer palace in Bactria, styled themselves *Phil Hellene* on their coinage, adopted Buddhism, and encouraged the development of the distinctive Buddhist art of Gandhara. Where earlier Buddhist art had been largely non-representational, the Kushans adopted a new iconography that fused the Hellenistic art of Bactria with traditional Indian and even older Persian elements to form a distinctive imagery that would spread along the Silk Road routes as far as China and Japan (Pugachenkova 1994).

Bamiyan, about 280 kilometres north of Kabul, was a major caravan halting place for travellers, merchants and monks on the Silk Road. Here it was that Buddhist monks over a period of around four hundred years carved out a labyrinth of niches, passages, porches and galleries in the rock-face overlooking the valley. Their most celebrated achievement, the two giant sculptural figures of the Buddha, the larger 54 metres high, the smaller, 38 metres, were hollowed out of the rock face.
After carving the body, the figures were draped with mud-plaster on ropes and, when dry, were painted in bronze colour. The magnificent Buddha heads were sculpted in stucco, painted in gold and fitted in place between the massive shoulders. The cells for monks and worship-halls around the two sculptural figures numbered more than a thousand [and are] decorated with wall murals, medallions and decorative motifs (Dhamija, *The Pioneer,* 9 May 1997).

First described by the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Xuan Zang in 632 CE, the Buddhas survived Islamic conversions, Mongol invasions, and the indifference of centuries until March 2001 when, in accordance with a decree issued by Taliban militia supreme leader Mullah Mohammad Omar on 25 February 2001, the Taliban militia finally reduced them to rubble and shadow.

United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan had appealed to the Taliban leadership not to carry out the edict, saying that the UN General Assembly 'has repeatedly called on all Afghan parties to protect the cultural and historic relics and monuments of Afghanistan, which are part of the common heritage of mankind' and asking them 'to abide by their previous commitments to protect Afghanistan's cultural heritage in general and the two great Buddhist sculptures in Bamiyan in particular' (*Agence France-Presse*, 28 February 2001).

The edict also elicited protests from cultural, educational and government institutions worldwide, including ICOMOS (the International Council on Monuments and Sights) and ICOM (the International Council of Museums), which launched an international appeal on the first of March. Philippe de Montebello, Director of the Metropolitan Museum in New York, even offered to 'come with experts at our own cost and in collaboration with them [the Taliban] take pieces that are obviously portable and preserve them in the Met' (*Agence France-Presse*, 28 February 2001). Islamic Iran

offered to buy the relics and move them to safety, with a promise to return them whenever the Afghans wanted.

But no amount of international protest could sway the Mullah. 'The breaking of statues is an Islamic order,' he told the Pakistan-based Afghan Islamic Press. 'I have given this decision in the light of a fatwa of the ulema [clerics] and the supreme court of Afghanistan. Islamic law is the only law acceptable to me' (*Agence France-Presse*, 28 February 2001).

Nor was the much-publicised destruction of the Great Buddha and its almost equally huge companion figure an isolated incident of contemporary iconoclasm, but rather an internationally vivid, in-your-face gesture, publicising an orchestrated campaign of nation-wide destruction that, with theme and variation, has been ongoing since the Taliban began their fundamentalist crusade. Since 1994 numerous sculptures and calligraphic images in Kabul, Heart and other Afghan cities have been routinely destroyed. In Bamiyan, home of the anti-Taliban Islamic Shiite group, Hezb-e-Wahadat, the smaller of the two Buddhas had already been beheaded by an over-enthusiastic Taliban commander following the bombing of the province in September 1998.

Neither are non-human images exempt. Just days earlier another Taliban commander had ordered the destruction of the mid-twentieth-century great eagle of the Ismaeli sect in Darra-I-Kiyan, arguing that the making of a statue of any living being is a form of idolatry (*The Frontier Post*, 6 September 1998).

From the latest archaeological find to the last remaining objects in the bombed and looted Kabul museum, all representational images are now subject to the 'decision of the supreme court of the Islamic Emirate [Taliban] that all statues around Afghanistan must be destroyed' (*Agence France-Presse*, 28 February 2001). With iconoclasm as their official god-sanctioned policy, Taliban militia have been fanning out across the country on a mission of destruction more technologically sophisticated and violently determined than any Puritan or Byzantine iconoclast could have imagined.

'If people say these are not our beliefs, but only part of the history of Afghanistan, then all we are breaking are stones,' claimed Mullah Mohammad Omar on 27 February 2001 after issuing the decree (*Agence France-Presse*, 28 February 2001). His decision contradicted his earlier edicts protecting non-Islamic artefacts and set loose his army of zealots on a war of destruction that included everything from antiquities to children's dolls. Immediate international reaction ranged from the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art's offer to preserve the relics, to a special envoy from UNESCO demanding that the destruction cease; from an international petition circulating on e-mail, to the declaration by the Shahi Imam of the Fatehpuri mosque, along with other leading Islamic clerics, that the destruction of the statues was 'un-Islamic' and 'an act of cultural genocide' (*Agence France-Presse*, 28 February 2001). All of the many international appeals have been ignored.

Reflecting the centrality of the Bactrian region in international trade, Afghanistan and its museums have been unusually rich in artefacts of extraordinary grace, beauty and significance in the history of Central Asian arts. Over the centuries, under Persian, Greek, Kushan Indian and Islamic rule, local artisans and merchants created rich and varied art for both trade and local markets. The famous headless statue of the Kushan emperor, Kanishka (ca 128 CE) was discovered in Afghanistan in the 1950s and was one of the few objects to survive the 1990s in Kabul Museum. Kushan sites such as Begram

reflected the wealth and sophistication of the country with their treasures of Indian ivories, Chinese lacquers, Roman bronzes and Alexandrian glass (Pugachenkova et al. 1994).

While Buddhism remained the principal religion of the region until at least the seventh century CE, when Islam began to make its presence felt in Central Asia, Bactria, like neighbouring Sogdia, another major trading area, was noted for its religious tolerance and openness. Zoroastrian, Hindu, Buddhist, Mazdaean and even Nestorian elements have been identified in the urban arts of the region, along with jewellery that reflects the shamanism of the associated nomadic cultures.

Under Islam the country continued to flourish, creating objects and architecture of extraordinary beauty, from the Ghaznavid dynasty bronzes to the glorious fifteenth-century minarets of Herat, one of the great centres of Islamic miniature painting.

Afghanistan's archaeological sites are many and incredibly rich. They include palaeolithic sites in Badakhshan and Balkh provinces; the Hellenistic city of Ai Khanoum and the inscriptions of Kandahar; the rich nomad burial mounds of Tillya-tepe; Begram, the old summer capital of the Kushan empire; Buddhist sites such as Hadda and others reflecting the complex interactions between cultures and beliefs of this great trading region up to and including the Islamic cultural flowering under the late tenth-century Ghaznavid dynasty. All are now equally vulnerable to plunder and destruction (Dupree n.d.).

It seems no time at all since protests were pouring in regarding the illicit sale of Bactrian antiquities to international dealers and collectors. Zoroastrian vases, Graeco-Bactrian coins, the glorious Begram ivories, Kushan Buddhas – in all some 70% of the collection – were stolen from Kabul Museum between 1992 and 1994. The building repeatedly changed hands as rival factions fought for control of the city, looting as they went. Many of the bronzes, large frescoes and works on paper were reduced to slag and rubble during a rocket attack in 1993. Stolen pieces have turned up in the illicit antiquities markets of Quetta and found their way into international collections. Several of the second-century CE Begram ivories were purchased by a Bond Street dealer and donated to the Musée Guimet in Paris (Harding, *Guardian*, 17 November 2000).

From a fifteen thousand year old sculptured limestone pebble representing a human face to Achaemenid coins and Ashokan edicts; from the treasures of Ai Khanoum, the easternmost Greek city yet discovered, to nineteenth-century wooden ancestral figures from Nuristan; from Gupta sculpture to Ghaznavid ceramics; the incredibly rich collections of Kabul Museum have disappeared into the voracious antiquities market. Perhaps the saddest and most disquieting aspect of this tragedy is that one can only hope they have fallen into kindly hands, unlike the 30% that remained, or the several pieces bought back and returned to the indifferent hands of the Afghani government.

But nothing will ever restore the two Buddhas of Bamiyan, those two great exemplars of consummate art and faith. All we can do is to try and take a Buddhist perspective and think that perhaps it was time for those artworks to pass out of the world – *anisa*, *dukkha* and *anatta* – Buddha would teach us to let go.