Heavy Damage Feared After Taliban Decree

Andrew Lawler

Two ancient Buddhas captured the world's attention last week, as Afghanistan's Taliban leaders began to carry out a decree to demolish all carvings and statues of animals and humans. The government-sponsored destruction extends even to artifacts from its own, Islamic tradition, as well as thousands of lesser known items that experts say combine Western and Eastern traditions in unique and irreplaceable ways. The Taliban, which few governments recognize as legitimate rulers, believes animal and human representations are antithetical to Islamic teaching.

Archaeologists are stunned by the decree's breadth. "It is a most enormous tragedy," says Norman Hammond, a Boston University archaeologist who worked in Afghanistan in the 1970s and has written about its treasures. Afghanistan's special archaeological heritage derives from its position as the ancient crossroads of Asia. Alexander the Great left behind artisans who built Greek-styled statues at cities such as Alexandria Oxiana, now Ai Khanum, on the Oxus River. Chinese caravans crossed Afghanistan's rugged terrain heading west. Buddhist influence seeped in from India to the southeast, and Islam swept the region from the west. The result was often a rich blending of styles. A Kabul Museum collection of panels from the first century, for example, show clear Mediterranean, Chinese, and Indian influences.

The two giant Buddhas, which stand 37 and 54 meters high in the sandstone cliffs of Bamiyan and date from the third and fifth centuries, have become symbols of the new policy. But the decree apparently also would cover objects in the Kabul Museum, such as a 1000-year-old copper dish bedecked with mythical animals and a Koran quotation. Hammond also fears the worst for frescoes in Islamic-era palaces at Lashkair Bazar and at Ghazni, which includes a building decorated with a stone frieze.

How much of the Kabul collection was intact even before last week's decree is unclear, however. The museum, closed to Westerners for years, already has been severely damaged and at least partly looted.

The Taliban leaders so far have rejected pleas by the United Nations to rescind the decree and have mocked offers by museums such as New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art to rescue smaller objects in danger. "I ask Afghans and the world's Muslims to use their sound wisdom," Taliban chief Mullah Mohammed Omar was quoted as saying on 4 March on official radio. "Do you prefer to be a breaker of idols or a seller of idols? Is it appropriate to be influenced by the propaganda of the infidels?"

As Science went to press, the destruction of the Buddhas had begun. Government officials also boasted that two-thirds of the thousands of offending objects had been smashed. Nevertheless, a special envoy from the United Nations was trying to broker a solution, and other Islamic nations expressed outrage over the decree.

CREDIT: UNESCO