

SPOILS OF WAR

Excavating the underground trade in Buddhist antiquities

By *Shahan Mufti*

The auction catalogue is 134 pages long and weighs a full pound. Its cover is glossy and thick, and its pages are sharp-edged enough to deliver a nasty paper cut. There are photographs within of the nearly two hundred Asian objects on auction: ancient clay pots, ceramic dishes, weapons, and miniature paintings. There is also a vast selection of sculptures. Some are wrathful gods, their bronze teeth clenched in vengeance, while others are more peaceful, with serenely drooping eyelids. Christie's expects the afternoon to bring in more than \$3.5 million.

In the viewing gallery, security guards in black suits stand at every corner. Glass display cabinets line the walls, each attended by a pretty young woman in a black pencil skirt holding a walkie-talkie. In front of me, a graying, heavily bejeweled couple is waiting to examine lot 112: a head of Lord Buddha.

The stucco head, which has been ripped off its torso, is anticipated to fetch between \$15,000 and \$20,000. It has been impaled on a thin shaft, and Lord Buddha's eyes are half shut. The nose is angular and impressive, the lips are curled at the edges, and the crumpling earlobes have left some powdery

Shahan Mufti is writing a book on the religious and cultural roots of modern Pakistan. His last article for Harper's Magazine, "Persian Gulf View," appeared in the February 2010 issue.

white debris on the pedestal. The violence done to the sculpture is stunning. (There are many heads of Lord Buddha on display in the viewing gallery—I count nearly thirty—and many larger sculptures in various states of amputation, including a four-foot-tall Maitreya with both arms hacked off at the elbows.)

Lot 112 was likely made between the third and fourth centuries A.D. in the ancient kingdom of Gandhara, whose ruins litter the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. How exactly the head ended up in the viewing gallery at Christie's Manhattan branch, along with a good many other Gandharan treasures, is anybody's guess. At some point, Lord Buddha's head was procured by Julian Sherrier, a British dealer who has fought legal battles in both India and the United States over his dubious holdings. Now Sherrier has decided to liquidate a large part of his collection—and the head awaits a new owner.

As two o'clock approaches, I join the trickle of people walking upstairs to the main auction floor. I enter the grand space and take a seat along the back wall. Next to me, three older men in suits are conversing in a cacophony of Euro-accented English. They have several catalogues among them and are spitefully dissecting them.

"He is asking six million dollars for this pair," one of the men says, pointing

to a page in a private gallery's catalogue, "but I think it's a fake!" The other two gasp audibly and they all begin talking at once about the scandal of it all. The group falls silent when a tall man walks over and vigorously shakes their hands. "So this is where the big money's sitting, huh?" he says, his voice full of loud American charm. "Should I just give up and go back home?" The men laugh uncomfortably.

It is soon obvious that the two hundred or so chairs in the hall are not enough. A sizable crowd spills out the door, and security men herd people away from the entrance, mumbling about a fire hazard. At ten minutes after the hour, a handsome man in a dark suit approaches the auctioneer's dais and gives it several firm taps with his gavel.

The chatter instantly ceases. "Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen," he announces in another unplaceable European accent. "Welcome to Christie's."

After he rattles off a few details about sales tax and pickup locations, the bidding begins. All across the floor, paddles are flying into the air. Hundreds of telephone and Internet bids pour in. Lord Buddha's head eventually sells for \$43,750, much higher than the estimate. A small Gandharan coin goes for \$4,375 to paddle 178, and a seated Maitreya—one of the rare specimens in full possession of his limbs—

fetches six figures. When the auction ends three hours later, Christie's has handily beaten its own estimate, with more than \$6 million in sales.

The anonymous attendees quietly filter out of the auction hall, and as the numbered paddles are returned, it is impossible to track the winners. A short bald man in an ill-fitting tweed jacket, who was casting nervous glances at me all afternoon, noting my seat among the wealthy collectors, approaches me. We shake hands, and he awkwardly introduces himself as a Pakistani antiquities dealer. He gives me a business card: "If you like to do business sometime, I have many special items." His eyes dart left and right, and before I can say a word, he has disappeared into the crowd at the door. The card lists a phone number and address in Yokohama, Japan. There is a New York City phone number scribbled in red pen on the back.

Owning a piece of another culture's heritage seems to feed some primordial urge. I had felt it in the auction room. It was more than just greed or the excitement of acquiring a beautiful object. To possess Lord Buddha's head, or even a bit of antique small change, is to control a part of the civilization that created those objects. I wondered whether the only way to truly understand this impulse is to trace such artifacts back to their source—to observe them being pried loose from their native lands. And today, perhaps the best place to see that happening is Gandhara.

The Gandharans were a sophisticated people who had the misfortune of living among the Central Asian mountain ranges that have for millennia been in the path of various invading armies. Alexander the Great, far from the first of these invaders, arrived around 330 B.C., one hundred and fifty years after the Buddha's death. The Greeks



came to Gandhara to subjugate it—but they also brought with them a powerful tradition of devotional sculpture, which would long outlast their tenure as occupiers.

The Gandharan artisans who chiseled the Buddha's image into living rock created the earliest-known physical representation of the philosopher king. They also produced thousands of sculptures in schist, stucco, terra-cotta, and marble, and carved intricate narrative reliefs chronicling the Buddha's life. In the process, they created a unique style of sculpture that melded the aesthetics of Greece and Central Asia.

By 50 B.C., the Greeks were gone, having been pushed out by the Parthians. In subsequent centuries, many more conquerors passed through Gandhara. The White Huns of Central Asia attacked from the north; South Asian peoples invaded from the

east, the Sasanians from the west; later, the Mongols pillaged the region, and various Muslim armies wreaked further havoc. The Gandharan civilization, and much of its art, was consigned to the rubble of war.

Conquering armies have always looted. At the turn of the first millennium A.D., the army of Mahmud Ghaznavi returned to its South Asian stronghold with legendary spoils from its periodic raids across the Indus. Napoleon's troops ransacked their way across Europe, and when the emperor stood with his troops at the gates of Rome in 1797, he wrote: "We have now all that is beautiful in Italy, except a few objects that remain in Turin and Naples."

Colonialism gave the pillagers of Western Europe a second wind. Spanish conquistadors took the Aztec gold; the British established their flagship museum in London and stocked it with precious souvenirs from Benin, Egypt, Ghana, Greece, and India. These badges of conquest were

ostentatiously displayed, and their value could never be measured in mere pounds and shillings. After all, they informed empires of their own greatness.

Takht Bahi is a small town in northwest Pakistan. It lies at the center of the wide and green flatland of the Peshawar Valley, the cradle of Gandharan civilization. The Hindu Kush range rises to the north, the Himalayas to the east, and the Safed Koh range wraps around the west and south, forming the border with Afghanistan. The Kabul River runs eastward through the plains, bringing water to tobacco and sugarcane fields.

I was standing on a ridge outside town, near the ruins of a Buddhist monastery where you can still find the face of Lord Buddha carved into the crumbling walls. Along with a scattering of other visitors, I had climbed up to watch the sun set. Most of my com-

panions were locals. Some, however, were refugees—among the thousands who had poured into Takht Bahi, themselves just a fraction of the more than a million Pakistanis driven from their homes in the mountains by their nation's clash with the Taliban. In the valley below the monastery, I saw a lake of blue-green tents: a U.N. refugee camp. Militants had begun quietly slipping into the inevitable chaos of the camps, and only a few days earlier, police had arrested five suspects.

There was no question that war had once again come to Gandhara. The hills of the Waziristan tribal areas, where the CIA is experimenting with a new era of robotic warfare, were to my left. Islamabad, the capital, besieged by Islamist militants, was behind me. And to my right, a few valleys to the north, the Pakistani army was battling the Taliban forces that had overrun parts of the Swat Valley. That was where I was headed.

Weeks before I arrived in Pakistan, the Swat Museum in Saidu Sharif had been damaged when a suicide bomber hit a nearby security checkpoint. Afterward, the museum, which houses one of the largest collections of Gandharan art in the world, was shuttered, and I was traveling there to see the damage for myself. Here in Takht Bahi, almost exactly halfway between Islamabad and Swat, I had stopped to check out the ruins—and maybe, in the shadows of this old Buddhist monastery, encounter some historic art uprooted by war.

I hired a guide and told him I was serious about buying antiquities. He said he knew a few people. And so one day we drove to the edge of town, where he asked me to stop the car and wait for him near a row of small shops.

I watched him through the windshield as he chatted with a group of men. One of them walked back to the car with my guide and slid into the back seat. "He sells," my guide said, pointing to the man. Zafar, as he introduced himself, was young, and freshly shaven except for a thick black mustache. He spoke decent Urdu with a thick Pashto accent. He also had only one functional eye—the right one was glazed over white—and this gave his otherwise unthreatening demeanor a sinister edge.

"What do you have?" I asked.

"Whatever you like," he said.

We drove down a side street and into a dusty clearing along the edge of a tobacco field. We parked and strolled down a series of narrow alleys until we reached a colony of small houses. The large metal door to Zafar's house opened onto a living room big enough for a game of ping-pong. The walls were decorated with photos and magazine cutouts showing the Masjid al-Haram in Mecca and some sculptures of the Buddha. An elderly man, Zafar's father, was seated on the soft rug in the middle of the room. I shook hands with him. The old man was excited to hear I had come all the way from Islamabad.

"We do business with many people in Islamabad," he chirped. "Welcome!"

Zafar brought out a pot of bitter green tea and a platter of sugarcoated almonds. Before long, I was on the floor with my feet stretched out, leaning back on a hard round pillow, feeling perfectly at ease.

"So what is it that you'd like?" Zafar began.

"I'm wondering if there is anything coming out of Swat," I said.

"There's always things coming out of Swat. Are you looking for something in particular?"

"I like the stone stuff."

The father muttered in Pashto at the son, who got up and went outside. "Many people in the village, these young boys you see outside, they work for us," the old man said. "They'll go and dig and dig till they find something. Then they bring it to us. That's what we have. Some of it's good. Some of it, not so much. But it's all sellable. There will be respected buyers like yourself, but the rest we can sell locally in Peshawar. I've been doing this my whole life. You've made the right choice coming to me."

Zafar returned with two woven plastic-fiber bags. He pulled a life-size brick-colored head from one bag, tossed it between his hands like a basketball, and placed it on the rug in front of me. I picked it up and examined it, tracing the intricate facial features and the elaborately carved turban. The nose was badly damaged, but still, the head was beautiful. Whose hands had made this? How many hands had touched it since? How many centuries of war and peace had these lifeless eyes witnessed? "It's

beautiful," I said, trying to control my sudden desire to own it.

The son reached over and took it from my hands. "It's a fake. I just pulled it out of the oven last week. I buried it for a few days to get the dirt in good. It turned out well, don't you think?"

He briefly inspected his handiwork before putting it back in the bag. He then removed a small forearm of gray schist from the other bag. The forefinger and thumb were delicately touching at the tips. "This is from a real Buddha," he said, handing it to me. "This is a Swat piece." He waited a few moments. "This one I can give to you for eight thousand rupees," meaning approximately a hundred dollars.

As we sipped our tea, the father told me that the war in Swat had been good for them. "There's been a lot coming out in the past month. We're cutting down on making much ourselves. The originals are much better business. Of course, if you're interested in getting something made, we're taking orders."

He reached deep into his tunic pocket and pulled out playing-card-size photos of artifacts. As I leafed through the stack, he pointed to a cupboard in the corner. "If you want something in this size, give us two weeks and we can have something ready. Maybe ten thousand rupees."

"How would I transport it?" I asked.

"We can arrange a *dubba*," he said, referring to a minivan. "It'll fit in the back and you can drive with it to Islamabad."

I hesitated. "What if I want to take it out of the country?"

He seemed delighted at my entrepreneurial spirit. He held his thumb to his ear like a telephone and said, "One phone call and we clear you through customs. Guarantee." I wanted to make sure that this old man sitting in a shantytown in Takht Bahi was securing me safe passage out of Pakistan.

"And what about at the other end? In New York, London?" I asked.

He scrunched his eyebrows and held out one palm, in a gesture often seen in the Buddhas of Gandhara. "You'll have to plan that yourself."

Prior to World War II, it was relatively easy to move antiquities across international borders. And during the

conflict itself, the belligerents plundered one another's art and relics without reservation. The Third Reich established a special department "for the seizure and securing of objects of cultural value." The Americans and Soviets looted from Germany toward the end of the war. In the Far East, the Japanese stole as many as 100,000 pieces of art from Korea alone.

After the war, things changed. The Allies proposed that all looted European artworks be returned to their places of origin. The task was too big to complete with any degree of efficiency, and the European powers were determined to retain the art taken from their colonies. Finally, in 1954, the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict was signed by forty-eight countries at The Hague (the United States waited until 2009 to ratify the treaty). The agreement conferred protected status on all "cultural property." Invading armies were henceforth made responsible for ensuring that no cultural property—including art, monuments, and objects from archaeological and historical sites—was harmed or removed.

With governments largely out of the art-stealing business, the trade moved into private hands. Individuals with wealth and means began amassing vast collections of looted art. To stanch the flow, the United Nations in 1970 established the Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. This agreement stated that objects that had already been removed (the word "looted" wasn't used) from their place of origin could be traded. From that point forward, however, nothing could be taken without government approval.

None of these conventions have been treated very seriously by anyone, anywhere. A vivid demonstration came in 2003, when the Iraqi National Museum in Baghdad was ransacked. As thieves carried off some of humanity's most ancient artifacts, American soldiers stood by and watched, unsure of their responsibilities.

Perhaps their confusion had something to do with the United States' reluctance to sign the 1954 convention. In any case, the episode prompt-

ed the Department of Defense to train soldiers in the protection of antiquities and cultural sites. And in 2009, the Iraqi government announced that 632 antique objects looted from the museum in Baghdad had been recovered and returned by the United States. Another 542 pieces were returned a year later. Of the fifteen thousand artifacts that were stolen, at least half remain missing, presumably moving from one private collection to the next.¹

How such artifacts made their way into the hands of dealers and collectors is, of course, a key question. The military reports released by WikiLeaks last summer contain at least half a dozen references to antiquities being found in the hands of insurgents in both Afghanistan and Iraq, cheek by jowl with large caches of arms and explosives. This confirmed a long-standing suspicion that the sale of antiquities to the West was helping to fund the militants.

Ancient art now crisscrosses the globe via clandestine networks of individual dealers and organized-crime syndicates. The market for illegal antiquities is estimated at between \$2 and \$6 billion a year, and the merchandise often travels by the same routes as narcotics, illegal arms, and—according to Robert Puffer, an American antiquities dealer who has worked with U.S. security agencies in Pakistan—even nuclear material.

War, needless to say, is always a boon for the trade.

As I continued north toward the Swat Valley, I made a short detour to the town of Lund Khwar to meet with a man named Ali Muhammad Khan. He had, I was told, once worked at the National Museum of Pakistan, and was responsible for the excavation and protection of all archaeological sites in the country. I drove past thick foliage on the jeep trail, honking at cattle, until I finally reached Khan's house. He invited me into a humid and darkened living room to talk. A fan hung motionless from the ceiling. "I'm sorry,

¹ The initial 632 items returned by the United States went missing when the shipment arrived in Iraq. They were eventually found at the offices of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in September 2010.

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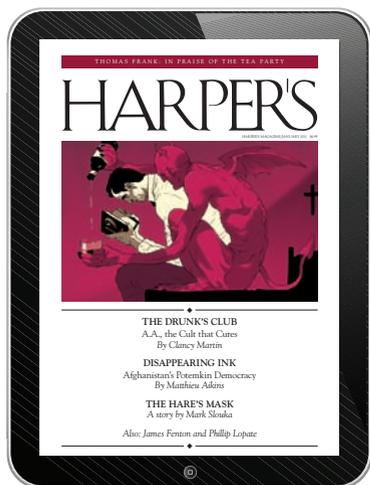
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the power's been out for hours," he said, snapping at one of his servants to get us some Pepsi.

Khan took over at the National Museum as head of archaeology in 1989. The Soviets had just left Afghanistan, and the civil war that followed their exit had begun. Both benign and profiteering lovers of ancient art of the Persian, Zoroastrian, and Gandharan cultures took great interest in the conflict. The Kabul Museum, for example, had housed thousands of artifacts representing more than five millennia of Afghan history. In 1989, says Khan, it was slowly being cleaned out: "The dealers were showing collectors the Kabul Museum catalogue as a menu."

Peshawar, the largest frontier town in Pakistan, became the central trading post for looted Afghan antiquities. Pakistani traffickers made millions cutting deals with buyers in New York City, London, Zurich, Tokyo. "From Peshawar," Khan said, "these things were going in more directions than we could know."

The purchases were hardly confined to the criminal underground. In blatant violation of both international conventions and its own laws, the Pakistani government bought hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of Afghan antiquities—on the pretext of protecting them. And that was just the official business. Benazir Bhutto, who was then prime minister, was an avid collector, as was her husband, Asif Ali Zardari. Under her watch, some of Pakistan's senior officials, including the interior minister, built up formidable collections of Afghan artifacts. Far from being shy about it, these high-profile Pakistanis openly displayed their treasures to international dignitaries and journalists.²

It was also during this period that the trade in Gandharan antiques became inextricably linked to the Afghan opium trade. In some instances, hollowed-out relics were packed with drugs and shipped internationally. "It was the same people running it," Khan

²More recently, Zardari, who is now president of Pakistan, was indicted in his own country for smuggling eight boxes of antiquities intercepted at Heathrow Airport in 2007. The case was dismissed by a loyalist Pakistani court in 2008, just months before Zardari became president.

told me. "Some even said this stuff was more valuable than heroin, so why wouldn't they trade it?"

Predictably enough, the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 gave the illicit trade yet another boost. As the fighting spilled over into Pakistani territory, the heart of Gandhara was once again engulfed by war. The robust trade in Afghan antiquities was now augmented by a fresh supply of Gandharan treasures from Pakistan.

As they did in Iraq, American officials have tried to make amends. In 2007, Ryan Crocker, the former U.S. ambassador to Pakistan, returned thirty-nine stolen Gandharan artifacts, including a rare sculpture of a fasting, emaciated Buddha, in a highly publicized ceremony in Islamabad. The objects had been intercepted at Newark airport as they arrived on flights from London and Tokyo, and were estimated to be worth several million dollars. Their return, Crocker said, was a sign of America's "true respect for the profound cultural heritage of Pakistan."

I asked Khan what he thought about the efforts of United States and Pakistani law enforcement to bring these artifacts back to the country. He was skeptical, and also suspected that some of the returned artifacts were fakes. During his tenure at the National Museum in the 1990s, he said, he had a brush with the "high levels" of leadership in Pakistan.

"We caught a big shipment of Gandharans in a crate, packed in with furniture," he recalled, "and we brought it all back to the museum for safekeeping while customs investigated. A few days later I get a call from the son of—let's say, someone important—and he makes an offer. He says if I lend him one of the pieces for one week, he would return it without a scratch. And of course he offered me money for this rental."

Khan knew that the artifact would be stolen and a fake returned to the museum. The truth would never come out, and the real piece would have another chance to make it out of the country. He refused.

"I never joined the racket, and look at where it's landed me," Khan said, glancing up at the motionless fan. It was sweltering in the house, so we walked out to the porch to finish our Pepsi. I thanked Khan and told

him I was hoping to make it to the Swat Museum.

"The road is closed a few miles up north," he said. "I don't think the military will let you pass. They're being very strict." He looked me up and down. "You could try, but what is the point? You're not going to find anything there. It's been all cleaned out!"

I stood dumbstruck.

"No, no, not the Taliban," he said, sensing my dismay. "It was the government." Khan meant this as good news, but I was not reassured. "They decided to clear out the entire museum. I think they've moved it to the museum in Taxila. You should probably check over there first."

I never made it to the Swat Valley. The road was indeed blocked by the military, and I was told that the Swat Museum was under lockdown. So I turned back and, as Khan had suggested, visited the museum in Taxila.

Taxila, once the capital of Gandhara, has a long history. Its name occurs in ancient Hindu religious texts and Chinese travelogues, and the Greek historian Arrian described it as "the largest town between the rivers Indus and Hydaspes." In the sixth century A.D., Chinese pilgrims who passed through the city reported it deserted. After that, Taxila was lost for more than a thousand years—until 1872, when an English engineer and lover of antiquities named Alexander Cunningham stumbled onto the ruins of the ancient city near the Punjab Plain.

The rediscovery of Taxila was a major archaeological event. Cunningham was no archaeologist—he was best known for leading the royal commission that drew the border between British India and Tibet. Still, he was probably the first Westerner to study the thousand-year-old sculptures in Taxila with a critical eye. Cunningham wrote that they "exhibit a boldness of design and a freedom of execution which no Eastern artist has ever yet shown." He also stated that they "owe all their beauty as well as all their truth of grouping to the teachings of Greek artists." The Buddhist sculptures and relics were promptly crated and shipped off to London.

Today, the British Museum's collection of Gandharan sculpture, the larg-

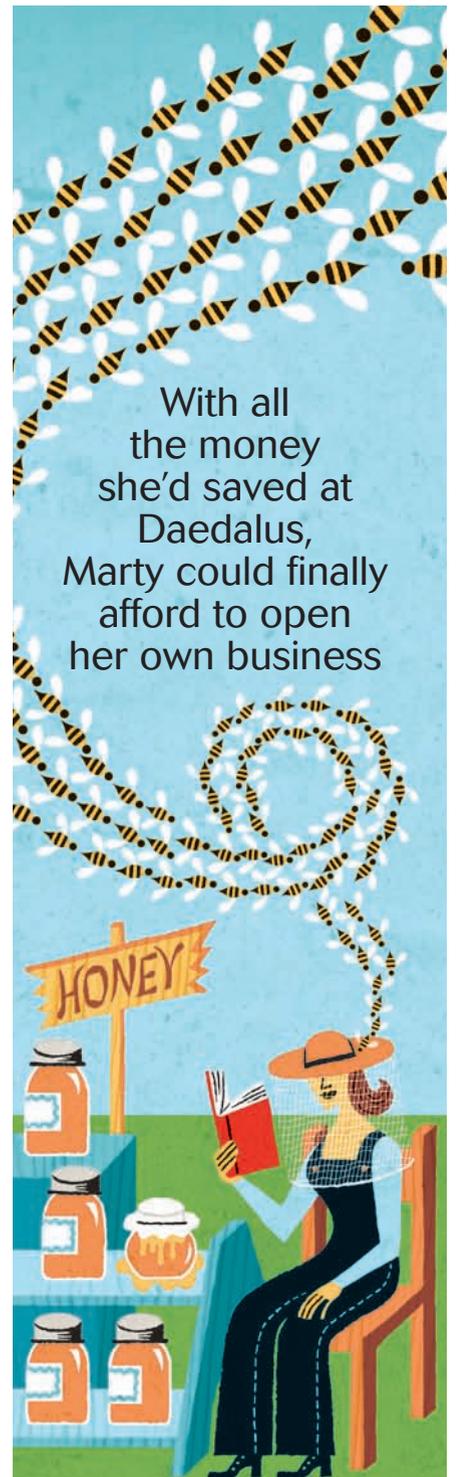
est outside Pakistan, owes much to Cunningham. A catalogue of Gandharan art published by the museum in 1996 lists 25 sculptures from his personal collection. Another 181 pieces can be traced to his excavations in northwestern Pakistan, including many from Taxila. Still, the catalogue does make a show of postcolonial contrition, alluding to the "chequered history of oriental collections" and insisting that "nothing exported since 1947 has been knowingly acquired."

I battled maddening midday traffic, driving past fortified military-hardware factories on the historic Grand Trunk Road, and when I finally reached the Taxila museum complex, it inspired a deep spiritual calm in me. Bright green, manicured grounds surround the preserved ruins of the ancient city. A plaque at the entrance dedicates the museum to its founder, Sir John Marshall, who, like Cunningham, served as director of the Archaeological Survey of India.

I met with Abdul Nasir Khan, a curator at the museum who had previously worked in the Swat Valley for seventeen years. Together we walked the museum's galleries, looking at objects that had been dug from the very earth on which we were standing. Nasir Khan told me he had just been in a meeting with the local police. There had been a major Taliban attack only a few days earlier on a nearby ammunition factory, and the museum had also been put on alert. "We are talking about raising the boundary wall by a few feet and getting some barbed wire," he said, widening his blue-gray eyes.

Nasir Khan confirmed for me that the "Swat Museum operation" had in fact taken place. Late one night a few weeks before, a fleet of large flatbed trucks was driven to the Swat Museum and loaded with the entire collection. Covered with nothing but tarps, the antiquities were transported nearly 150 miles through steep mountain passes and deposited at storage units in Taxila. "There was war all around," he recounted, "and we didn't even have a military escort."

"We didn't have time to get to the reserve collection in the basement, but I'm pretty sure it's safe," Nasir Khan added, trying very much to sound convincing. He fell silent and was lost in thought for a moment. The museum



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had a few visitors, and next to us a young girl tugged at her mother and pointed to a life-size standing sculpture of Lord Buddha.

"Who's this, Mama?" she asked.

"It's Buddha. He used to live here a long time ago."

Nasir turned to me and said, "I have a son who's about the same age, and you know what I worry about? Pretty soon there won't be anything left to show him."

The fact is that looters are not the only menace to ancient relics. For years, militants in both Pakistan and Afghanistan have attacked pre-Islamic historical sites. Many private collectors in the West use this as justification for siphoning such artifacts away from their native lands. They often point to the Taliban's destruction of the colossal Buddhas at Bamiyan, in eastern Afghanistan, in 2001. Like many, I had long assumed that Mullah Omar had the massive sculptures destroyed because he hated them. It was a simple enough explanation, and it fit in with a centuries-old tradition of Islamic iconoclasm.

Some, however, suspect that the Bamiyan Buddhas might have been destroyed out of fiscal prudence. The Taliban was aware of the international demand for Gandharan art and may have considered the Buddhas too valuable to be left intact on a mountainside. The assault on the sculptures, conducted with explosives, tanks, and anti-aircraft guns, made for some shocking footage. But in the days that followed, as the world decried the Taliban's barbarity, tons of debris began arriving quietly in Pakistan's tribal areas from across the border with Bamiyan. Newspapers reported that local dealers were selling fragments in bulk, and that international buyers were biting.

One afternoon last spring, I paid a visit to a dealer named Carlton Rochell at his gallery space off Park Avenue in Manhattan. The gallery was perfectly sunlit that day, warming the half-dozen customers examining the ancient items on the walls. Rochell was selling off the private collection of Robert and Bernice Dicks, who, according to the catalogue, "were fortunate to collect

at a time when wonderful objects from India and the Himalayas could be readily found on the market." It was only the second day of the show, and Rochell said he had already sold two thirds of the collection. At least one piece had been snatched up by the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Rochell spent eighteen years at Sotheby's, establishing their Indian art department before beginning to deal privately in 2002. His is one of several galleries selling Gandharan art that have sprung up on Manhattan's Upper East Side during the past decade. Looking at the market, it's easy to understand why the field is becoming more crowded.

In the spring of 2002, Sotheby's was surprised to see a head of Lord Buddha, with an estimated value of \$30,000 to \$50,000, fetch \$234,000 after a bidding war. Encouraged, perhaps, by this Gandharan gold rush, the auction house chose a striking image for the cover of its catalogue a few months later: a Gandharan Buddha procured by a British officer in Peshawar in the nineteenth century. The top estimate for the piece was \$150,000—but the hammer fell at \$669,500, doubling the world record for Gandharan art sold at auction.

As the American military began its long campaign in what the diplomats like to call Af-Pak, Sotheby's issued a press release stating that the market for Gandharan art had "changed forever." The next year, the auction house broke its own record, when a Gandharan piece sold for \$736,000. One could hardly ask for a more precise correlation between the ravages of war and the dubious trade in cultural treasures.

Auction houses, of course, offer a glimpse into the public workings of the art market. But in a discreet location like Rochell's gallery, tucked away in a Manhattan apartment, museums and other institutional buyers will spend hundreds of millions of dollars on ancient art. The Brooklyn Museum, for example, owns many pieces from the Dicks collection. Rochell's other clients have their names inscribed in museums in Los Angeles, Houston, and Canberra. In the process, the primordial urge to own such objects is transformed into something else: they become dynastic tokens, each with its own pedigree of

connoisseurship and American wealth.

The idea of such a pedigree clearly excited Rochell. "Look at that Gandharan Bodhisattva behind you," he said, gesturing at a gleaming, two-foot-tall figure with one arm broken off at the elbow. "That's Mathias Komor," he explained, naming one of the godfathers of the trade in Asian antiquities, who, as a dealer, helped the Met build its collection in the 1960s. "You know, there's real history with some of these things."

A few weeks after my meeting with Rochell, I called Nasir Khan, the curator in Taxila. He sounded glad to hear from me and reported that he was still holding down the fort. There had been no attacks on the museum, he said happily, and for the time being there were no pending threats either. I asked him about his son, and he told me that they might visit Swat, which was long the most popular tourist spot in Pakistan, before the war.

A precarious order now holds in Swat. The Pakistani Army claims that "complete peace has been restored" to the area. The refugee camp with the blue-green tents in Takht Bahi has emptied out, and most of its occupants have returned home. The Pakistani tourism board has been encouraging people to visit the region in an attempt to revive the local economy.

Meanwhile, a million other refugees from the tribal areas have fled their homes, escaping American drones and Pakistani helicopter gunships, and setting up tents near Peshawar. The men and boys among them will look for any kind of work. Some will become drug mules, some will undoubtedly pick up a gun, and others will dig the earth in search of Lord Buddha.

This spring, as New York City's Asia Society unveils the largest museum exhibition of Gandharan art ever mounted in America, the Swat Museum remains closed. Its collection is still in storage in Taxila. The emaciated Gandharan Buddha and many of the items returned by Ambassador Crocker in 2007 have yet to be put on display, but Nasir Khan told me that he expected one of them to be the ceremonial centerpiece whenever the museum opens its doors once again. There is, at present, no date set. ■