

Stone carvers defy Taliban to return to the Bamiyan valley

Afghan students learn the centuries-old skills that carved out the giant buddhas blown up by extremists



Afghans learning the skills of stone-working in the Bamiyan valley, where the Taliban blew up two giant buddhas in 2001.

Emma Graham-Harrison in Bamiyan

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Under perfectly carved niches that once held dozens of small buddha statues, the purposeful tap of chisel on stone echoed over the Bamiyan valley for the first time in centuries.

Twelve young Afghans had gathered to take the first tentative steps back towards a stone-working tradition that once made their home famous, at a workshop in a cave gouged out as a monastery assembly hall more than 1,000 years ago.

The cave-hall was part of a complex built around two giant buddhas that loomed

serenely over Bamiyan for about 15 centuries - until the Taliban government condemned them as un-Islamic in early 2001 and blew them up.

"I was interested in this course because I want to restore our culture," said Ismael Wahidi, a 22-year-old student of archeology at Bamiyan University, who set aside more conventional studies for a week to learn how to turn a lump of stone into a sculpture. "If you want to destroy a people, you first destroy their heritage and history."

The workshop, held just a few metres from where the larger buddha's face was once carved from the cliff face, aimed to reintroduce stone-carving to the valley by showing that creating basic pieces is easy, even if mastery takes years.

Under the guidance of Afghan, American and German artists, the group picked the stone they would shape from some of the rich seams of marble, quartzite and travertine [a form of limestone] that thread through the local mountains, foothills of the Himalayas. Then they set to work, with chisels forged by local blacksmiths from the suspension springs of old cars. "We wanted to give young people the idea that it is possible to do stone carving with what you have here," said Bert Praxenthaler, a sculptor and conservationist who has been working on the valley's monuments for several years, including stabilising the niches that once held the buddhas.

The Bamiyan valley is pockmarked with hundreds of caves that were once part of sumptuous monasteries, packed with statues and lavishly painted with frescoes. This rich artistic heritage was funded by centuries of taxes on caravans passing through what is now an isolated backwater, but was once a wealthy and important stop on the silk road.

"There must have been at least 2,000 years of sculptural tradition," said Praxenthaler. "Even excavating the caves is a kind of architectural sculpture. It was not just hacking holes into the cliff but also shaping the rooms, and they are quite extraordinary."

That tradition was probably killed off around 1,000 years ago, Praxenthaler said, when the valley was conquered by Mahmoud of Ghazni, a leader whose epithet suggested little interest in figurative art. "Anyone who calls themselves the 'destroyer of idols' probably wouldn't support further stone carving," Praxenthaler said.

Sculpture has remained largely off limits in Afghanistan because of strict Islamic prohibitions on idolatry. Depictions of any human or animal are strongly discouraged in art, and calligraphy, floral and geometric patterns dominate the country's more recent cultural heritage, from the majestic minaret of Jam, to mosques and monuments in cities such as Kabul and Kandahar.

"As you know, extremists often make propaganda about idols. But this is our heritage, not something religious," said 20-year-old Abdur Rahman Rosta, one of the student sculptors. He added that that in Bamiyan itself the sculptors were feted. The valley's people suffered badly under the Taliban, and have little sympathy for their hardline views, and Bamiyan has remained one of the most peaceful places in Afghanistan as

insurgent violence spreads elsewhere.

The provincial governor came to a small ceremony unveiling the sculptures, and picked up a chisel herself as musicians played in a niche that once held the cave's largest statue - and might perhaps one day hold another.

"During this course we realised we had much more ability for working with stone than we could have imagined, and we understood we can do so much more," said Jawed Mohammadi, a 20-year-old history student at the university, who used the week to chisel out a human face. "The buddhas were destroyed, but maybe we can build them again."

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