

**UNAMA:** How did you first become interested in Afghanistan?

**Michael Barry:** I first went as a child, in 1963, as a guest in a Kabul family with close friendly ties to my own family. The country, with its rich history, deep cultural pride, and many political challenges and humanitarian challenges, has fascinated me ever since. Afghanistan has not only been a theatre of some of the world's most terrible ideological battles over the last thirty years, and a place for grim strategic conflicts over the last two centuries, it has also been a centre of flourishing cultures that have offered us some of the most glorious manifestations of ancient Central Asian and then Islamic civilization, indeed of all human civilization, as we should not forget. Directing international attention to this country's past great contributions to mankind is to help us all look at this particular country and its people with a cultural respect that, unfortunately, is often lacking throughout today's world. Surveying the country's achievement helps us realize that not only do we, as foreigners, have something to bring to this country, but also that we, as foreigners, have ourselves much to learn from this country. Often forgotten is that in the Islamic age alone, especially between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, the land that would become known as Afghanistan nurtured some of the world's greatest intellectual and artistic endeavours : to mention only the philosophy of al-Bêrûnî, the poetry of Firdawsî and Nâsir-i Khusrô and Sanâ'i, Jâmî and Nawâ'î, Rahmân and Khushhâl, and the paintings of Bihzâd. Improving public awareness of such cultural riches helps enhance this nation's dignity and sense of self-worth both in its own eyes, and also in the eyes the world. Both these approaches must be stressed.

**UNAMA:** What is the significance of Herât, in particular, to Afghan culture?

**Michael Barry:** Between the years 1405 and 1510, with a long afterglow extending into the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, it is safe to say that Herât was probably the single most creative centre in all Islamic civilization. Take the year 1492, the pivot in world history, and, as it happens, the date of the death of the poet Jâmî of Herât, universally regarded as the last supreme writer in the Persian classical literary tradition, and also a major philosopher in the Arabic language as well. In January of that same year, Ming China stood at the zenith of its power, Islamic civilization collapsed in Spain but surged with the Ottomans as far as the Danube, and in October of that same year, Columbus reached the opposite shore of the Atlantic, carrying the Spanish flag and with it European power into a new world. But in that same year 1492, in the Islamic world, the rulers of Istanbul, Tabriz and Delhi all looked upon Herât as their absolute model of civilization, to its architects and painters as guides for outstanding beauty, to writers like Jâmî for their cultural inspiration. To quote the words of Bâbur, King of Kabul (in the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Mughal Persian rendition of the original Chaghatai Turkish), penned after his visit to Herât in 1506 shortly after the death of Herât's Sultan Husayn Mîrzâ Bâyqarâ :

[“Zamân-i Sultân Husayn Mîrzâ `ajab zamânê bûd, az ahl-i fazl-ô mardom-i bê-nazîr, Khurâsân, ba-takhsîs shahr-i Harî, mamlûw bûd. Har kas-râ, ba-har kêrê kih mashghûlî bûd, himmat-ô gharaz-i û ân bûd, kih ân kêr-râ ba-kamâl birasând. Shu`arâ : yakê Mawlânâ `Abd-ur-Rahmân-i Jâmî bûd, kih dar `ulûm-i zâhir-ô bâtin dar zamân-i khwudash ân miqdâr kasê nabûd. Shi`ri û khwud ma`lûm ast. Janâb-i Mullâ az ân `âlîtar ast, kih ba-ta`rif ihtiyâj dâshta bâshad”] : “Sultan Husayn Mîrzâ's time was a marvelous time. Khurasan, especially the city of Herât, was filled with people of talent and extraordinary persons. Everyone who had an occupation was determined to execute his job to perfection. Among them was Mawlana Abdur-Rahman Jami. In esoteric and exoteric there was no one like him at that time. His fame is such that it is beyond need of description” (Wheeler Thackston translation).

I have found in my various researches that it is impossible to write seriously about Islamic art generally, especially in terms of calligraphy and painting, without a deep study of the master scribes and painters of Herât in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. It would be as absurd to discuss the significance of Islamic art, without taking into account the specific contributions of the 15<sup>th</sup>- and 16<sup>th</sup>-century school of Herat and notably those of three artists of the rank of Mîrak, Shâh-Muzaffar, and Bihzâd - himself so closely linked to the spiritual influence of Jâmî -, as it would be

to write about the history of European art, without taking into consideration what was accomplished in Florence, in exactly the same period, in the generations of Donatello, Botticelli and Leonardo da Vinci. Indeed the role of Herât, in Islamic civilization, is in many ways an equivalent to that of Florence in Western civilization. It has been a cultural fountainhead. So whenever I have written on various aspects of Islamic art, I have been drawn back to attentive study of the paintings produced in Herât's workshops, and also to the literature and philosophy written in Herat. For the mystical writings of Jâmî, in particular, help us to understand the intricate symbolic meaning of the paintings of Herat.

This current trip was an invitation from the American Institute of Afghanistan Studies here to discuss with Afghan audiences through lectures, and unique slides, some of the wonderful things that I have been able to discover regarding these extraordinarily important paintings now scattered throughout world collections, but which were created by Herât's masters during a period of some 150 years. This is not to forget that Kabul also, under Bâbur's son Humâyûn in the 1540s and 1550s, hosted a galaxy of brilliant painters including disciples of Behzad like Mîr Musawwir of Badakhshân and his gifted son `Abd-us-Samad, both of whom later went on to found the so-called "Mughal" school of art in India. Thus for a generation, Kabul, too, shone as a centre of civilization from which India received its models, until Humâyûn permanently shifted his court from Kabul to Delhi in 1555.

But throughout those long centuries from the beginning of sultan Mahmûd's reign in Ghazni in AD 998, until that fateful decision by Humâyûn to leave Kabul in AD 1555, cultural developments in the country's four great historic cities of Ghazni, Balkh, Herât, and finally Kabul, enriched the course of all Islamic civilization, from Turkey all the way to India. Seljuk [Saljûq] culture, Ottoman culture, Safavid culture and Mughal culture all drew much of their inspiration from the Afghan region's statesmen and philosophers, poets, architects and painters.

Pakistan's national poet Iqbâl has famously said that Afghanistan is Asia's heart. This has always been true in Islamic times. But going back to pre-Islamic times, one can see that cultural influences have indeed extended from what is now Afghanistan throughout the vast region between the Bosphorus, the Ganges and the East China Sea, or, in reverse, have fruitfully met on Afghan soil.

One of the greatest challenges for cultural studies today is to show audiences, both in Afghanistan and abroad, that no unbreachable wall existed between the ancient Buddhist world, and the Mediterranean-centred world of the Greeks and Romans. Buddhist culture in fact flourished so magnificently on Afghan soil – the monuments still abound - that it not only spread to China, but also permeated many aspects of the civilization of western Asia and the Mediterranean. The cross-fertilization of multiple cultural currents, in Western Asia and the Mediterranean, in turn nourished the soil in which Islamic civilization later took root and flourished. Islamic civilization should never be regarded as some sort of separate entity from the rest of the human family. Its literature, philosophy, science and art combined many ancient legacies in a new and brilliant synthesis. Al-Bêrûnî, writing in 11<sup>th</sup>-century Ghazni when Islamic learning reached a peak of intellectual achievement, scanned with tremendous respect the heritage of the ancient Greeks, the ancient Jews, the ancient Babylonians, the ancient Iranians, the ancient Indians, as so many mighty currents converging in the extraordinary libraries of the sultanate, contributing to make him such a universal genius in astronomy, mineralogy, mathematics, linguistics, taking the experience of all the human family known to him into his scientific scope.

There have been many times when what has happened in Afghan history has proved of planetary importance, including, unfortunately, some truly major wars. Periods of cultural flowering on Afghan soil have moreover usually coincided with the rise of wealthy and frankly predatory empires. The conquests of Sultan Mahmûd in India are what helped make al-Bêrûnî's researches into Sanskrit literature and wisdom so practically possible, of course – we could hardly explain the appearance of a such masterpiece of profound comparative philosophical and cultural study as al-Bêrûnî's "Investigations into Indian Civilization", or "Kitâb Tahqîq mâ li-l-Hind", without

taking into account the often violent political context of the sultan's many successful raids that extended the Ghaznavid empire from Isfahân to Lahore.

But it is also refreshing to dwell on some moments in Afghanistan's history which have been mainly significant for the entire human family's cultural enrichment, without having to focus on battles. The golden age of Herât between 1405 and 1510 is such a moment. Herât's prosperous sultans, to be sure, inherited the fruits of their terrifying ancestor's conquests. Samarqand's emir Tîmûr-i Lang, known to the West as "Tamerlane", nailed together his empire between 1370 and 1405 in bloody conquests from Ankara to Delhi, mainly at the expense of Muslim rivals.

But Shâh Rukh's transfer of the seat of the Timurid empire to Herât in 1405 inaugurated a century of cultural glory centred in the oasis, where the princes protected mysticism, architecture, astronomy, calligraphy, poetry and painting – for which they were admired from Turkey to India and are now most remembered in the world. Indeed King Bâbur in Kabul remarked in 1507, when his Timurid princely cousins were overthrown in Herât, that Sultan Husayn Mîrzâ Bayqarâ (r. 1469-1506) and his sons lost power because Husayn was too preoccupied with art, culture, and courtly pleasures, to fight his enemies: ["chûn masal-i Harî shahrê ba-dast-i û ûftâd, kârash shab-ô rôz ghayr az `aysh-ô `ishrat chîzi dîgar nabûd... lâ jaram tâ raft nawkar-ô wilâyat-i û kam shud-ô ziyâd nashud] : when a city like Herât fell to his possession, he did nothing night and day but revel and carouse... Consequently, as time passed, his retainers and realm dwindled instead of increasing."

But that is also why, as Kabul's King was moved to add: "[Harî-râ ... dar rub`-i maskûn ân-chunân shahrê nêst-ô dar zamân-i Sultân Husayn Mîrzâ, az tasarruf-ô takalluf-i Mîrzâ, zayb-ô zaynat-i Harî yakê ba-dah, balkih bîst, taraqqî karda bûd :] Herât ... had no equal in all the world, and during Sultan Husayn Mîrzâ's reign had been adorned and decorated ten, nay, twenty times over."

Herât in the age of Sultan Husayn Mîrzâ Bâqarâ boasted poets and spiritual leaders of the rank of Jâmî and Amîr `Ali-Shêr Nawâî. These people were at the fountainhead of a culture which, when it spread to India, became known as Mughal civilization. But in addition, at this time, Herât produced a school of painting which we can now recognize not only for its extraordinary technical refinement, but also for its symbolism and spiritual depth, equal to the greatest philosophy and poetry of Herât. These paintings are not simply decorations, but profound mystical meditations around the same spiritual subjects, like the symbolic love between Laylî and Majnûn, as the verses of Jâmî. Among Herât's painters, Kamâl-ud-Dîn Bihzâd (1465-1535) most especially acquired fame, respect, even veneration from Istanbul to Delhi, as a true Sufi master himself, or "maz'har-i badâyi`-i suwar-ô muz'hir-i nawâdir-i hunar, nâdiru-l-`asr, sâfi-i i`tiqâd, sâlik-i mahabbat-ô widâd, Ustâd Kamâl-ud-Dîn Bihzâd ast : the manifestation of the wonders of icons, he who makes manifest the marvels of art, himself the Marvel of the Age, pure in mind, a wayfarer along the ways of love and endearment (= as a mystic), such is Master Kamâl-ud-Dîn Bihzâd", in the words of Jâmî's disciple, the chronicler Khwândamîr, writing in 1522.

Bihzâd became the model artist of his civilization, not just because he drew pretty pictures, but because he was recognized as a painter versed in his culture's literature and steeped in its spiritual depth, capable of organizing the most complex poetic motifs into perfect and striking visual patterns – like the Tree of Life sprouting from the Fount of Life, and depicted as a chinâr or plane-tree in autumn with multicoloured leaves, bowing in reverence before Majnûn as the manifestation or "tajallî" of holiness. The time is coming now for us to look at the art of Bihzâd with the same universal respect that we have for the works of a Botticelli in Europe, or a Sesshû in Japan: to mention two master painters who were his contemporaries in the West and in the East. Behzâd is a part of world culture, this has to be brought forward.

**UNAMA:** During a lecture in Paris in early 2001 you were somewhat pessimistic about the future of Afghan art and handicrafts. What are your feelings now?

**Michael Barry:** Actually, despite many reasons for grief, we have some grounds for hope. Since 1978 we have seen much destruction of art, yet at the same time new opportunities are being

revealed. Modern methods of reproduction henceforth make it possible to bring to the attention of Afghans everywhere the marvellous hidden details of the delicate paintings of Bihzād, whose originals now preserved in Cairo, London, New York and Boston must be kept almost in utter darkness to prevent their colours from fading. Moreover archaeologists are bringing out from under the ground new Afghan Buddhist antiquities that, in a sense, almost compensate us for what has been destroyed. Haddah has been ravaged, Bamiyan has been blown up, and yet Mis-i`Aynak has just been uncovered.

Right now I am involved in recovering from libraries and museums and private collections all around the world as complete a record as possible of everything that was painted, or inscribed in the most beautiful calligraphy, in the marvellous Islamic manuscripts created in Herāt and Kabul in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Through excellent reproductions on large panels that we can place on permanent public view in Kabul and Herāt, and also in publications and ultimately on line, it will become possible for all Afghans to discover these extraordinary works of art in a way that only princes and the original painters could see them five hundred years ago. And through reproductions, nobody will any longer ever be able to hurt this art, because all you one would be doing would be trying to smash an image in a mirror.

**UNAMA:** You mentioned discovering the colour blue while in Afghanistan.

**Michael Barry:** That is when I first saw the domes of Mazar-i-Sharif floating like magic bubbles over the city, with all their variations of blue under the shifting light of day – for a mosque’s dome is a symbol of the heaven. Blue, in fact, is a colour that much of the world today can very much associate with Afghanistan, especially when they call one of blue’s most beautiful sky-like shades by the name “azure” in English, which is “azur” in French, “azzurro” in Italian, “azul” in Spanish.

That Western word, “azure”, originally comes from the name of the site in Badakhshān in northeast Afghanistan called “Lājward”, where the stone “lājward” was first found and mined many thousands of years ago. In ancient times, the stone was considered so precious that caravans carried it as far as Egypt, where samples have been found going back to 1350 BC in the tombs of the Pharaohs, as one of the most valuable jewels that an Egyptian monarch could carry with him into the afterlife. When Islam united so much of the ancient world from India to Spain, the gem became known in Arabic as the *hajar lājward*, “the stone of Lājward”. Spanish Christians in the 12<sup>th</sup> century translated this word into Latin as “lapis lazuli”, which tried to represent the Arabic and literally means “stone of Lājward”. This term has survived in all Western languages for the stone in particular. But the second part of the term just became the common Spanish word for blue, “azul” – from which derive French “azur”, Italian “azzurro” and English “azure”. So much of the world today is actually using the name of an Afghan village to describe one of the most beautiful nuances of the colour blue. In the workshops of Herāt in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, the “lājward” stone, reduced to powder and rinsed in linseed oil, provided the rich deep blue used to illuminate the margins of the Holy Koran, as the precious colour most worthy, along with gold, to adorn the Sacred Book. The artists reverently called it also the “sang-i Sulaymān”, the “Stone of Solomon”.

**UNAMA:** Given your anthropological background, how do you see the situation in Afghanistan today?

**Michael Barry:** When we look at the current problems of Afghanistan and often feel such sorrow, it helps to look back in history to the last time when Afghanistan’s cities were truly still prosperous as major centres of trade, crafts, literature and science, and commanded attention as sites of universal cultural importance. I think we have to go all the way back to the middle of the 16th century to see that. Kabul, Kandahar and Herāt were then still crossroads of the caravan trade along the inner Asian land routes. Since much of the world’s trade still flowed through these cities, learning, poetry, art, philosophy and science flourished there too. But we can almost take King Humāyūn’s decision to transfer the seat of his rule from Kabul to Delhi in the year 1555 as a cruel symbol. By then, the European naval powers were diverting world trade to the maritime lanes of the Indian Ocean. By the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, while India still prospered from European trade, the inner Asian lands, and Afghanistan in particular, were left economically

bankrupt. The Afghan region's prevailing cultural norm in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries became one of warlike poverty – proud and independent, to be sure, but in dire economic straits. The Afghan kingdom's founder in 1747, Ahmad Shâh, was indeed able to secure much Indian wealth, but through war, even outright plunder. But 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century international political and strategic rivalries between the Russian and British empires reinforced Afghanistan's isolation, hence fundamental bankruptcy. The building of modern road links to Afghanistan's neighbours in the 1960s briefly allowed the country to breathe, but wars and pressures have certainly resumed since, with terrible consequences. Lasting prosperity, with attendant high cultural flowering, will return only when international trade again flows freely through Afghan cities.

As long as you have hostile confrontations on all sides of Afghanistan, the country will remain in an almost suffocated state of siege. But the moral resilience, keenness to learn, and cultural sensitivity and creativity of so many Afghans, in the face of such grim odds, never cease to amaze.

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