The visual heritage of Afghanistan

Photographs which tell of the times before the turmoil in Afghanistan are practically non-existent. Radical ideologists targeted the cultural roots of the country in the past decades and destroyed millions of images to make space for their own beliefs. Today, after thirty-five years of war, exile, collateral and intentional destruction, the country lacks a visual heritage with which it can display the achievements of the past to younger generations: something which is worth protecting; something on which a positive national identity can be based upon; moments of pride.

Dominic Wirz, Anke Schürer-Ries and Paul Bucherer-Dietschi

1 (left):
Mullah in Kandahar, 1907 (K20).

Phottheca Afghanica (www.phototheca-afghanica.ch)
First, in 1978, communist activists burned all the pre-revolutionary photographs, which were seen as remains of a bourgeois past. Then, from 1996 onwards, religious fundamentalists hunted down all images of living creatures as they considered this sort of representation to be blasphemous. This is why the project *Phototheca Afghanica,* initiated and maintained by the Swiss Afghanistan Institute, plans to make approximately 5,000 mostly unique historical photographs from Afghanistan publically accessible in the next few years. The aim of the project is not only the physical safeguarding of old photographs and related documents, but also to create awareness of the rich cultural heritage of the country and to make use of this knowledge for the reconstruction of Afghanistan and its society. For this reason, the photographs and the relevant descriptions have to be accessible for research, as well as for the general public, by exhibitions, publications, via internet or on CD.

The primary source for *Phototheca Afghanica* is the institution's own image archives which comprise approximately 50,000 photographs. In addition to the visual materials, the archives also contain important written documents that were entrusted to the institute by private persons and other institutions. The oldest available images date from 1869 and document the visit to India by the Afghan Amir of the time. As mentioned above, the pre-1978 photographs have almost all been destroyed in their country of origin. So, even recent photographs stored at the institute in Switzerland are of a similar historic value as old ones. The overall significance of the institute's visual collection cannot be anticipated at present, as many of the collections that have found their way to Switzerland have not yet been catalogued.

The Swiss Afghanistan Institute
The Swiss Afghanistan Institute (SAI), officially registered as *Stiftung Bibliotheca Afghanica,* is a politically and religiously neutral institution. Over a period of 35 years, the institute made its mark by systematically researching and documenting Afghan history and culture.

From October 1998 to March 2007, Paul Bucherer, head and founder of the SAI, curated the *Afghanistan Museum in Exile*. The objects for this museum were transferred to Switzerland by the Taliban to be salvaged from al-Qaeda's destructiveness.

Moreover, the SAI is engaged in cultural rebuilding on the spot; old photographs from its archives provide the basis for reconstruction of historic buildings and other structures. For instance, the institute's archive could be of assistance in reconstructing the Giant Buddhas of Bamiyan with the help of the only existing high-definition stereo-photogrammetric shots in the world. Other photographs kept at the SAI were previously used to restore the famous Moghul garden *Bagh-e Babur,* the buildings of the Afghan National Gallery and the Afghan National Museum, and even the oldest parts of the former Royal – now Presidential – Palace.

Due to such references, and international reputation strengthened by years of experience, the Swiss Afghanistan Institute became a rich source of images and photographic collections on Afghanistan. Today, organisations such as the Afghan Ministry of Culture, the Afghan Ministry of Education and the Swiss Department of Culture are numbered among the Institute's most prominent partners and donors.

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Preservation and identification of the visual materials
So far, selected collections have been scientifically identified, and currently comprise approximately 5,000 photographs. The vast cultural richness in the photographs, as well as the manifold interdisciplinary relations, soon became obvious as the identification proceeded. The visual documents raise questions of historical, cultural and political significance, including questions of media relevance and regarding the history of technological development.

In a first step, the basic archival work includes the conservation of the photographs, the digitisation and long-term preservation. Even more important, the identification done by the Afghanistan Institute serves as a necessary prerequisite to make the above mentioned interpretative connections. The scientific importance of the images lies in the possibility to analyse them according to chronological and geographical criteria, the producer of the images and the subjects and details in the images. It is, however, a major concern of the institute to create a systematic corpus of images as a point of departure for further research questions. For this reason, the *Phototheca Afghanica* will gradually be made available online. The first 400 images and accompanying data are accessible via an online platform (www.phototheca-afghanica.ch).

The following overview of the preliminary online series highlights the perspectives that could evoke further research and co-operation concerning the photographic collections.

Photographic testimonials between destruction, decay and oblivion
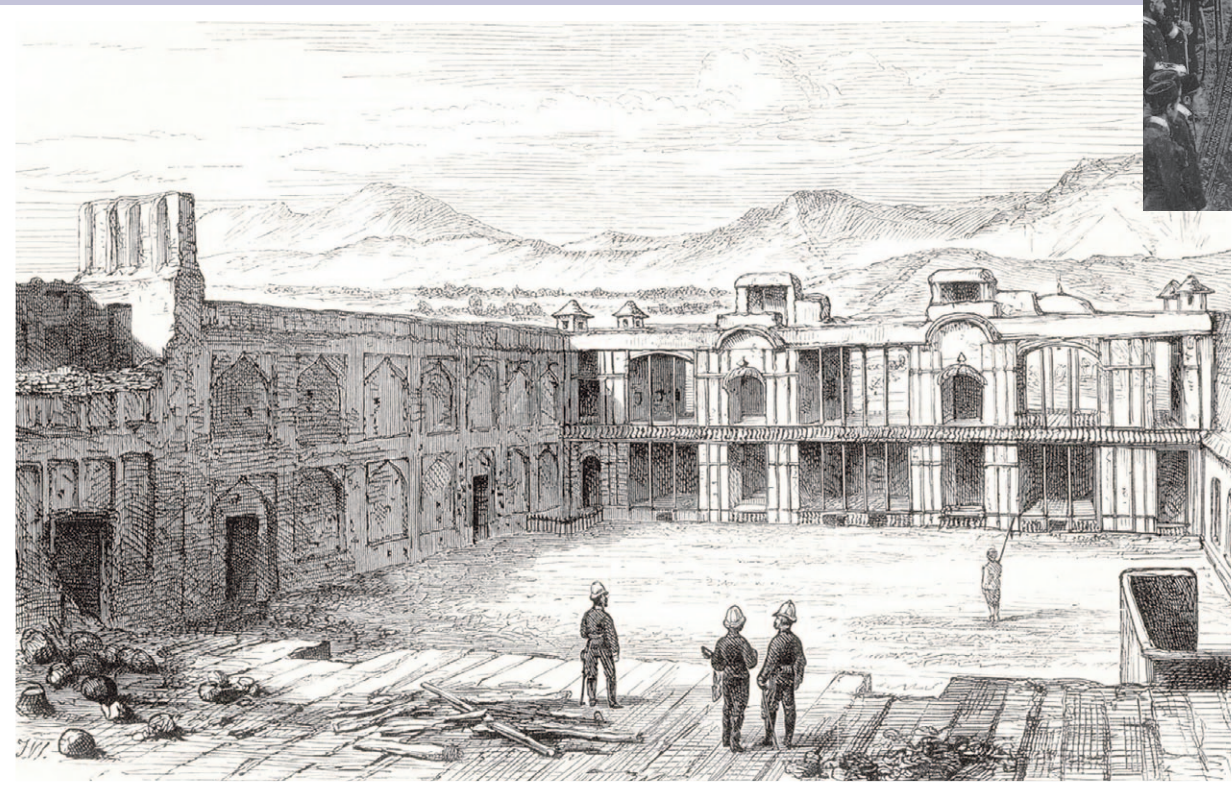
2 (top):
British Residency
1879, b/w print
(RE 068).

3 (middle):
Amir Habibullah
Khan, ca 1910,
b/w print (vH-84).

4 (bottom):
Interior of the
British Residency,
looking south
(ILN 1879-2, p.577).

Sample collection 1: The Second Anglo-Afghan War,
1878–1880
The photographic collection of the British Royal Engineers is
an informative example for interdisciplinary research. The Royal
Engineers were first given the possibility to photograph military
action on Afghan territory during the second Anglo-Afghan
war. The photographs – thus the expectations toward the new
technology – were intended to supplement the conventional
documentary options. Up to this point it had been the officers'
duty to draw sketches and plans of important stations of the
journey and events. These types of documents were sometimes
not very accurate, and so the *Photograph School of the Bengal
Sappers & Miners,* instructed by the Royal Engineers, were
subsequently given the possibility to prove themselves in 1878.

The Afghanistan Institute processed this photographic
collection together with Brigadier Woodburn, he himself a
former Royal Engineer. It may be of interest to note that John
Burke, a famous professional photographer, had accompanied
the expedition too. One could maintain that Burke, already
in 1886, was practising 'embedded journalism'. He was able
to pursue his photographic work under the protection of
the British troops and in return he assisted the Photograph
School with creative and technical advice.

While Burke's photographs were commercially successful,
the military photographs remained undiscovered in private
albums, official documentation or had disappeared into state
archives as confidentially classified material. Deprived of their
classification, the photographs almost lost their worth as
contemporary documents. Often the context needed for an
appropriate interpretation of the photographs was missing.

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Today, due to the work done at the Afghanistan Institute,
the photographs can be read as visual documentation of
the troop movement again. In co-operation with Brigadier
Woodburn, and with the help of military maps and reports,
the institute succeeded in recovering a chronological order,
naming the places and identifying key personalities shown
in the photographs. Now the collection tells us how the
army advanced into the embattled country, crossed rivers,
received the Amir and his delegation, and coped with the
daily challenges that life in a foreign country brought with
it. The identification process also made it possible to draw
parallels to the reports in the press. An interesting aspect
was the comparison of the official military photographs and
the exaggerated engravings that were based on the sketches
done for *The Illustrated London News* by William Simpson,
who accompanied the troops moving toward Kabul as
a war correspondent for some time.

However, although some unknowns are being solved,
the process has also raised some questions. For example,
questions about the technical and aesthetic conditions
of war photography of the time, as in the case of the Royal
Engineers who were assisted by Burke; or those concerning
the social meaning of the photographs for a colonial power
such as Britain; and what about the media implications
regarding different forms of realisation through photographs,
or engravings based on sketches; and of course questions
of cultural correlation.

Photographic technology was unknown to the Afghans
in 1878. Brought to the colonies from metropolitan Europe,
photography was only known by sight in Afghanistan.

The act of taking a photograph reflected to some
degree the polarity of domination and subordination.
Just as the photographs of the British documented the
land and its peoples, it also reflected the colonial gaze.

Sample collection 2: photographs as an expression
of Afghan self-representation
The series *Souvenirs d'Afghanistan* gives evidence of an
idiosyncratic variation of cultural interdependencies.
The series – based on works by Afghan artists only – was
composed and edited by the Afghan ambassador in Paris in
1924. In those days, the recently independent Afghanistan was
an unknown actor on the diplomatic stage; few governments
had established diplomatic ties with the oriental country
at the time. Consequently, little was known about the country
itself, and therefore the ambassador considered it his duty
to introduce Afghanistan to his guests and acquaintances.
The *Souvenirs d'Afghanistan* was given away as a keepsake,
comprising 51 high-quality prints of Afghan scenes assembled
in a booklet, each photograph printed on postcard-paper.

There's no doubt that the editor, the Afghan ambassador,
had always born the distribution factor in mind, and that
he had anticipated the circumstances of the reception in
Europe. To demonstrate the country's status as a modern
and up-and-coming nation, photographs corresponding to
a European sense of 'modernity' were selected. Interestingly,
the propaganda focussed on technological progress. In par-
ticular, the collection comprised shots of buildings, cars, and
bridges. People were hardly shown, and if so, they belonged
to the royal household and were dressed in Western apparel.

The visual heritage of Afghanistan *continued*

Towers of knowledge

Phototheca Afghanica also aims to reach the Afghan people; images are an important method to convey values, especially in a semi-literate society, as it still exists in Afghanistan. The people's interest in authentic historical images – and thus the need to provide access to further photographs – has been demonstrated by a travelling exhibition called *Towers of Knowledge*. The exhibition consists of five separate units, so-called 'towers', each summarising a particular part of Afghan history. Showing images of former personalities and historic buildings, the travelling exhibition was designed to reach the Afghan public, especially children and young people. Therefore, sixty-eight copies of this exhibition – two for each of the thirty-four provinces of Afghanistan – are currently circulating through 11,000 schools.

The project was commissioned by the Afghan Ministry of Education in 2008 and opened in July 2010 at the German High School in Kabul. It was devised by the Swiss Afghanistan Institute and financed by the governments of Germany, Liechtenstein, and Switzerland. The first exhibition turned out to be a real attraction as students started to take pictures of the historical photographs with their mobile phones. Even President Karzai was deeply moved when he looked at the first prototype of the exhibition.

5 (left): One of the *'Towers of Knowledge'* – The photographic collections of the Swiss Afghanistan Institute as a cradle of history (PB 2009-05-689).

6a (above): Summer residence of Amanullah Khan (SdA 3-47).

6b (below): Summer residence of Amanullah Khan, October 1991.

As the progressive King Amanullah sought to avoid any impression of a state of underdevelopment, Western fashion was important to him. Historical sources report that it was explicitly forbidden to wear traditional attire at court. Many different photographs bear witness to the Afghan adoption of Western customs.

From this point of view, the collection *Souvenirs d'Afghanistan* serves as a prism, refracting both an Afghan particularity of photo art and an Afghan perception of (Western) 'modernity'. On the one hand, the scientific importance of this collection is manifested in the aesthetic contrast that the Afghan photographs enunciate, in comparison to European images. On the other hand, the photos document former heydays, for instance by showing magnificent buildings that have been reduced to rubble since then. In close co-operation with the French Afghanistan expert May Schinasi, the history of some of these buildings could be retraced, which shows baffling parallels to the facades of British buildings of that time, as observed in photographs from *The Illustrated London News*.

Sample collection 3: A German ambassador behind hostile lines

The collection of the German ambassador, Werner Otto von Hentig, tells a completely different story. In 1915, his expedition to and through Afghanistan ended in "one of the most adventuresome undertakings you have probably ever heard of", as the *Berliner Illustrirte* reported in 1918. Up to this time, the country at the Hindu Kush had been sealed off from the outside world by Great Britain. During the First World War the German emperor, Wilhelm II, ordered an undercover diplomatic and military expedition to the Afghan Amir Habibullah Khan, suggesting an attack on British India. Therefore, von Hentig travelled to Kabul, keen to learn about the country, and open-minded as a petitioner always has to be.

Meanwhile, photographic technology had made some progress, which allowed von Hentig to take photographs more spontaneously. Von Hentig's collection, however, yields another remarkable difference compared with the British collection: due to von Hentig's good relationship with his Afghan hosts, they provided him with prints from the Amir's own photo studio. The lion's share of the collection originates from this photo studio and was assembled from the archive of Mahmud Tarzi, who was the editor of the first illustrated weekly journal in Afghanistan *Serâj ol-akhbâr* (in English, 'The Great Light'). These photographs are among the very earliest Afghan images that have been preserved to date. They embody the Afghans perspective of their own country, expressing the upcoming interdependencies between an Asiatic culture and European technology.

A race against time: few witnesses to history remain

At the age of at least 94, Werner Otto von Hentig personally handed over his archive to the Swiss Afghanistan Institute (SAI). The photographs are considered to be significantly important to Afghan history. Furthermore, the detailed explanations provided by von Hentig's notes and oral anecdotes were an unusual blessing for the researchers when identifying the photographs.

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This example illustrates how witnesses to history are crucial for the SAI's work with historical photographs. Destroyed monuments and buildings – as well as personalities – often cannot be identified and localised unless someone is alive who is able to recall what and who is shown in the pictures. The SAI counts on those witnesses to history every time its own archive and its own experience reaches certain limits. In view of a further cultural rebuilding, the preservation of knowledge will be crucial to the re-establishment of Afghanistan's heritage.

Besides the scientific aim to document the visual heritage of Afghan history, at present the photographs provide the young generation with access to the pre-war life of Afghanistan. Each photograph shows a fact, a building, a landscape, or a detail on a piece of clothing; what counts for Afghan people is the fact that an element of the old tradition, a moment of former Afghan life, has survived as a testimony of an otherwise unimaginable world.

This, too, is a reason why the homepage of the *Phototheca Afghanica* is designed not only to meet scientists' needs, but to also provide access for a broader audience interested in its own lost achievements, or its parents' and grandparents' world.

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