



The Spirit of Afghanistan: Tradition and Renewal through the Arts

By Ann W. Norton

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Today's war-torn Afghanistan has complex origins, with many tribal cultures contributing to its identity. An important crossroad of Central Asia for many centuries, the region now known as Afghanistan has followed various religions and witnessed interacting artistic traditions. Trade routes, blurred borders, and the nomadic life have helped bring about rich cultural exchanges, while tribal affiliations have maintained specific customs and identities within groups.

Afghanistan is again a country in transition. As a result of decades of war, thousands of people, particularly women and children, have been wrenched from their normal existence and scattered throughout refugee camps—many in neighboring countries. A large percentage of men and boys have been removed from their families, often never to return, adding yet another layer of tragedy to a now-dysfunctional society.

The arts of Afghanistan help tell the story of this country in the process of radical change. Some traditional crafts have been lost, while works evolving from recent wars reflect the results of constantly living with conflict. One traditional craft, carpet weaving, has produced a particularly poignant, war-related art form. By the mid-1980s, in response to the 1979 Soviet invasion and ensuing years of war, Afghan weavers began designing carpets that included tanks, planes, helicopters, and weapons (Figure 1). The traditional geometric borders often give way to repeated war-related images. Some war carpets actually depicted known buildings or monuments (Figures 2 and 3). The pre-Islamic hero Rustam has been seen combined with helicopter motifs. After 9/11, carpets even made reference to American involvement in Afghanistan, including images of the Twin Towers (Figure 4). Rarely, the destruction of the two great, fifth-century Bamiyan Buddhas has been referred to in more recent carpets. This can be seen in the upper portion of Figure 5, which shows the Bamiyan Hills with no colossal Buddha figures. The woven inscription speaks of their destruction. The lower part of this well-crafted carpet depicts the Sun-God in a horse-drawn chariot. The inscription states that the Sun-God appeared behind the head of one of the Bamiyan Buddhas. This was true, except that it had been a fresco, now lost. This famous marble image was excavated from a Zoroastrian temple in nearby Khair Khaneh and was in the Kabul Museum until it was severely damaged soon after 9/11.

Traditional carpet designs that show no signs of war have also been woven throughout the conflicts. The nonprofit organization ARZU has worked with a select group of gifted weavers to create high-quality, nonwar carpets that can be sold to the world market through its website. The name "Arzu" means "hope" in Dari. It was founded in 2004 and continues to help bring sustainable income to many poor Afghan families. The signature "hope" design is actually a reintroduction of the famous Pazyryk carpet, dating to around 500 BCE (Figure 6).

American businesswoman Connie K. Duckworth, founder and chief executive officer of ARZU, states on its website:

Arzu Studio Hope supports the reconstruction of Afghanistan by empowering women, their families and their communities. Income [generating] opportunities support sustainable economic development, instill personal worth and build gender equality.

The high-quality offerings from ARZU weavers range from traditional to contemporary designs. Some reflect tribal or Turkmen patterns, while others are woven in the style of well-known modern designers (Figures 6, 7 and 8).

In March 2007, I was fortunate to visit Kabul with a Women's Delegation Reality Tour of Global Exchange. We were able to see firsthand the revival of the arts, as well as meet with many Afghans helping in the renewal of their country. In the old city of Kabul, we observed the remarkable Turquoise Mountain Project, which is working with artists to bring back local handicrafts such as wood-carving, calligraphy, ceramics, and jewelry (Figure 9). The entire project has been established through the vision and generosity of HRH Prince Charles of Wales and Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai. Like ARZU, Turquoise Mountain Arts has a website that helps reach a worldwide audience.





The Turquoise Mountain Project was established in 2006. Its website states:

The organization built the Institute for Afghan Arts & Architecture and regenerated the Murad Khane neighborhood of Kabul's Old City, including 65 traditional buildings, water supply and electricity, a clinic and a primary school. Over the past five years it has employed more than 500 students, teachers, engineers, architects and construction workers.

The name of the project reflects Afghanistan's glorious past. Turquoise Mountain (Firuzkuh in Dari) was the capital during the Ghorid dynasty (1157–1202). Ogodei, a son of Ghengis Khan, destroyed the city in 1220–1222, leaving only the great Minaret of Jam.

Turquoise Mountain Arts is contributing immensely in promoting the production of quality, handmade Afghan crafts. The organization employs teachers, who in turn pass along their knowledge and skills to a younger generation. In reviving the arts industry of Afghanistan, Turquoise Mountain Arts helps build national pride while also developing a vocation and income for hundreds of families. Through its website, it is becoming better-known worldwide and is selling its products in a global setting.

The future of Afghanistan's children was a concern of our entire Global Exchange delegation. Seventy percent of the children are malnourished, and most have had little or no schooling over the war years. We visited a school in Kabul operated by Afghans4Tomorrow (A4T), a nonprofit started in the late 1990s by Afghan Americans—many who had been refugees—to rebuild their country. The students at the school were mainly girls, and a few disabled boys—all very poor, and many had been refugees. A4T started enrolling boys after its other school in Wardak Province, south of Kabul, was partially burned by religious extremists, mainly because it was only educating girls.

The goal of these schools is to educate students to reach the equivalent of tenth grade so that they can move on to government-supported schools. In the meantime, these young people are studying the basic academic foundations, English, and learning crafts like embroidery and sewing (Figures 10 and 11). Some students may be learning a future means of livelihood; others are moving on through higher education. Because of continuing safety concerns in Wardak, boys attend the school there, and girls are educated at home schools. The girls are also being trained in basic health care skills with the hope that they will eventually be employed as support personnel for medical professionals.

ASCHIANA operates a more business-oriented schooling program, supported by the French Embassy. While the students learn such subjects as English, computer science, and crafts, they also spend time selling gum or phone cards or shining shoes on the streets. A children's bank, run by and for the street children, is connected to the school. The "head" of the bank in 2007 was a fourteen-year-old boy who had been sent to India to learn about money-lending and other bank operations through a similar children's bank there (Figure 12).

A grim reminder of the ongoing threat of landmines is the artwork found in most schools and public areas and in the Landmine Museum, Kabul. Actual mines are displayed in a glass case or on a large printed cloth with images of mines for all to see (Figures 13 and 14). Even with some 1,300 workers now helping to "de-mine" Afghanistan, it is thought that it will take twenty years to clear the present mines. Meanwhile, the many prosthetic "artifacts" seen in the Kabul Orthopedic Hospital are sad reminders that people of all ages continue to be killed or maimed by war's far-reaching results.

Even though the war in Afghanistan has not completely ended, there are many signs of hope, as we see Afghans share their knowledge and talents with the younger generation. Infrastructure has been so damaged throughout the country that it will take time to rebuild in many areas. Slowly, the fields of education, medicine, agriculture, and industry must become strengthened, as well as a new workable government. Meanwhile, the arts and crafts industry is indeed helping rebuild the pride and image of the culture, as well as a present and future livelihood for entire families. Foreign aid and expertise is often vital in this respect, as seen in nonprofit organizations like ARZU and Turquoise Mountain Arts. The fact that these two programs have evolved websites and the ability to sell to a global audience shows how technology plus human dedication and compassion can go far to help heal the wounds of war in this modern era.



Websites

Afghans 4 Tomorrow—www.afghans4tomorrow.org. This nonprofit, nonpolitical humanitarian organization is dedicated to the development of Afghanistan.

ARZU—www.arzustudiohope.org. This international NGO uses private sector practices to help Afghan women weavers break the cycle of poverty through artisan-based employment.

ASCHIANA Foundation—www.aschiana.org. Using a term meaning “the nest,” this NGO supports and educates street-working children and their families.

Global Exchange—www.globalexchange.org. Dedicated to promoting social, economic, and environmental justice since 1988, this nonprofit organization envisions a people-centered globalization.

Turquoise Mountain Arts—www.turquoisemountainarts.org. This program is regenerating Afghanistan’s traditional arts and historic areas, creating jobs, skills, and a renewed sense of national identity.

More Than Warmth—www.morethanwarmth.org/testimonials.html. More than 500 quilts have been distributed since More Than Warmth began in 2007, representing approximately 5,000 children, as witnessed by this testimonial on the website from an Australian woman:

Judith Biondo Meeker has also demonstrated that craft is a marvelous way to build world peace and provide children with a means of understanding and responding positively to the world around them. . . . In workshop after workshop, Judith introduces American schoolchildren to an area of the world where people their own age are suffering from poverty, war, natural disasters, or traditions of child enslavement . . . By making these quilts, these children realized they could make a genuine difference, and this provided them with hope and a sense of connectedness.

Ann W. Norton received her BA from Mount Holyoke College and her graduate degrees from New York University’s Institute of Fine Arts. She also holds a diploma in Jungian Psychology from the C.G. Jung Institute for Jungian Psychology, Zurich. She is Professor of Humanities in Art History and an Asian Studies Advisor at Providence College. Norton has curated numerous exhibitions and has lectured widely in her specialty, which is Art after War and Cultural Trauma. She visited Afghanistan in 2007 and Mongolia in 2010 to research contemporary arts as examples of renewal. Resulting exhibitions included *The Spirit of Afghanistan: Carpets of War and Hope* (University of Connecticut, 2009) and *The Arts of Outer Mongolia* (Providence College, 2010).

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