

AFGHANISTAN

HIDDEN TREASURES

The Exhibition

What visitors will discover in the exhibition are objects drawn from four archaeological sites that reveal Afghanistan's longstanding connections with many regions of the world.

Gold vessels from a Bronze Age cache discovered at **Tepe Fullol** hint at the inhabitants' early trade relationship with Mesopotamia. Stone sculptures from the Greek outpost of **Ai Khanum** show the influence of various artistic styles, while painted glassware imported from Roman Egypt confirms that **Begram** was an important trading centre 2,000 years ago.

The Bactrian Hoard, a fantastic collection of more than 20,000 gold ornaments, was unearthed in 1978 from a nomad burial site at **Tillya Tepe**. The objects' unique blend of Greek, Roman, Persian, Indian, Chinese and Siberian influences makes this one of the most significant discoveries in the history of archaeology. About 100 exquisite gold pieces, many embellished with turquoise, pearls and other gemstones, are on display at the Museum of Civilization.



Crown, gold, 100 B.C.E. – 100 C.E. © Musée Guimet / Thierry Ollivier

In addition to these treasures, the exhibition features short films and maps of ancient cities, trade routes and modern Afghanistan. A documentary produced by the National Geographic Society and narrated by Khaled Hosseini, the Afghan-American author of *The Kite Runner*, explores ancient Afghan culture, the history of these collections and their dramatic rediscovery.

Note: There is more information on the four sites in the attached backgrounder *Archaeological Sites*.

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The Story Behind the Exhibition

The story of how these irreplaceable artifacts and works of art were hidden, then rediscovered, is worthy of a spy novel. The gripping tale of human courage and international cooperation that ultimately saved them adds a dramatic dimension to the exhibition.

In 1979, Afghanistan was thrown into a period of chaos. Since that time, the country's inhabitants, its infrastructure and cultural heritage have suffered immense harm. Therefore, it is something of a miracle that a significant portion of this treasured legacy of artifacts survived over the past three decades.

The story behind this exhibition begins in 1978 as political instability threatened the country. A group of dedicated museum staff and government officials resolved to protect the precious contents of the National Museum of



Afghanistan from looting and destruction. They risked their lives to secretly transfer thousands of artifacts and works of art to secure hiding places in the Ministry of Information and Culture, and in the Central Bank vault under the Presidential Palace. They locked the doors of the vault with seven keys, which they then distributed to seven trusted individuals.

In 2003, the government revealed the hiding place and, with some effort, assembled the keepers of the keys. At last, the vault could be opened and its dazzling contents revealed. A team of local and international experts witnessed the historic occasion, including National Geographic Society Fellow Fredrik Hiebert and Russian archaeologist Viktor Sarianidi, whose team had excavated the Tillya Tepe site in the 1970s.

Soon after, Afghanistan announced to the world that the Bactrian Hoard and other precious artifacts had been recovered, and assembled an international team to catalogue, preserve and exhibit the collections.

Hair Pendants, gold and garnet, 100 B.C.E.– 100 C.E. © Musée Guimet / Thierry Ollivier

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Crossroads of Civilization

Afghanistan can rightly claim to be a crossroads of civilization, a place that has historically brought together people from many different cultures.

Afghanistan owes much of its colourful history to a geographic twist of fate. Situated strategically on the cusp of Central Asia, China, the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East, the area is a natural gateway between East and West. For millennia, it has found itself directly and inevitably in the path of empire builders, conquerors, merchants, pilgrims, missionaries and nomadic tribes.

Northern Afghanistan was part of an extensive trading network at least 4,000 years ago. In time, that network evolved into the Silk Road, the fabled collection of trade routes that stretched from China all the way to the Mediterranean. These routes linked faraway cities, settlements and oases, acting as an efficient conduit for commerce and culture.

At its peak, around 300 B.C.E. to 200 C.E., the Silk Road brought an unprecedented variety of goods to and through Afghanistan. Silk and lacquerware from China, carpets from Persia, ivories from India, bronze and glassware from the Roman Empire, horses from the Eurasian steppes — all were transported by caravan and traded along the way by merchants. As these commodities changed hands, so too did knowledge, ideas and artistic trends.

The extent of cultural exchange triggered by commerce is obvious in the artifacts in the exhibition. For example, many of the luxury goods retrieved from the ancient storerooms of **Begram** can be traced to Egypt, China and points in between. Other items, made locally for export, hint at how craftspeople in northern Afghanistan absorbed foreign influences and created their own unique style.

Finally, the dazzling Bactrian Hoard unearthed from nomads' graves at **Tillya Tepe** reveals an intriguing fusion of multiple influences. The eclectic blend of Greek, Roman, Persian, Indian, Chinese and Siberian styles reflect the nomads' extensive contact and interaction with other ancient civilizations. More importantly, it shows how cultures that interact can enrich one another by inspiring new forms of creativity.

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Archaeological Sites

The precious artifacts in the exhibition were unearthed from four important archaeological sites in what is now northern Afghanistan:

TEPE FULLOL

When farmers discovered a burial cache here in 1966, they brought to light the earliest evidence that the Oxus civilization, an ancient culture, occupied an area that extended into Afghanistan.

Artifacts uncovered at Tepe Fullol reveal the wealth generated by trade in precious materials found locally, such as gold and lapis lazuli. The exhibition includes fragmentary gold bowls decorated with bearded bulls, a design that reveals artistic links to distant Mesopotamia, and shows that Afghanistan was already part of a far-reaching commercial and cultural network 4,000 years ago.

AÏ KHANUM

This Greek outpost, founded in the fourth century B.C.E., was once Greece's easternmost outpost in Asia. Here, Mediterranean and eastern traditions melded into a distinctive style. Aï Khanum was invaded and destroyed by nomads in around 145 B.C.E.

French archaeologists began excavating the well preserved site of Aï Khanum in 1964. In 1979, the site became a battleground. It has been looted repeatedly since that time. The exhibition features surviving artifacts that show a strong Greek influence, including a Corinthian capital, stone sculptures and a gilded silver plaque depicting Cybele, the Greek goddess of nature.



Gobelet, painted glass, 100 – 200 C.E.

© Musée Guimet / Thierry Ollivier

BEGRAM

Two thousand years ago, the city of Begram was a bustling commercial centre along the Silk Road. During archaeological work in the 1930s, two sealed storerooms were discovered. Their excavation yielded a cache of luxury trade goods such as bronzes, ivories, ceramics, glassware and lacquerware imported from as far away as the Mediterranean, India and China. Artifacts in the exhibition illustrate the diversity of cultures that converged in Begram: a painted glass goblet from Roman Egypt depicting the harvesting of dates; three ivory statuettes of an Indian goddess standing on a makara (a creature that is part crocodile, elephant and fish); and a bronze mask of Silenus, companion of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine.

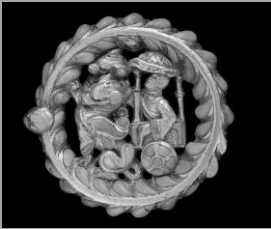


Ornament in the Form of a Ram, gold, 100 B.C.E. – 100 C.E.
© Musée Guimet / Thierry Ollivier

TILLYA TEPE

Tillya Tepe (“Golden Hill”) was discovered in 1978. This is the source of the famous Bactrian Hoard, a treasure trove of more than 20,000 gold ornaments unearthed from the graves of six mysterious nomads buried around the first century C.E. The artisans of these ornaments had absorbed and reinterpreted elements of other traditions they had encountered during their travels, resulting in a unique artistic style that reflected Greek, Roman, Persian, Indian, Chinese and Siberian influences. For this reason, the stunning collection is considered one of the most significant discoveries in the history of archaeology.

Many of the ornaments are made of solid gold and embellished with semiprecious stones such as turquoise from Iran, and carnelian and garnets from local mines. About 100 of the most spectacular pieces are on display, including necklaces, belts, rings, an elaborately constructed crown and two exquisite pendants depicting a “Dragon Master” holding two mythical creatures in a scene known to both ancient Persian and Siberian art.



TILLYA TEPE

Boot Buckle
100 B.C.E.–100 C.E.
This buckle illustrates the encounter of peoples, ideas and beliefs. The teardrop-shaped turquoise stones are typical of northern Afghanistan workmanship, although the scene of chariots being drawn by dragons is foreign to the region.



AĪ KHANUM

Sculpture Fragment
About 150 B.C.E.
The use of clay and plaster in sculpture was a major legacy of the Greeks to Central Asia. The soft, full features of this figure resemble those of Classical Greek sculpture.

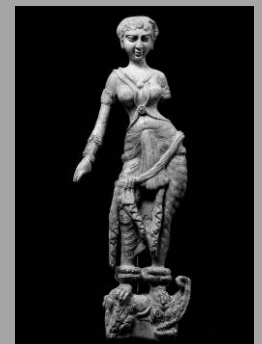


TEPE FULLOL

Fragment of a Bowl with Bearded Bulls
2200–1900 B.C.E.
A parade of humanized bulls decorates the exterior of this bowl. The bearded bull was an important motif borrowed from distant Mesopotamia.



CHINA



BEGRAM

Statuette of Woman Standing on a Makara
1–200 C.E.
The woman may represent the Indian river goddess Ganga, whose mount is the mythical makara — a creature that is part crocodile, part elephant and part fish.

