

Securing the past for the future

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WHEN YOU UNDERSTAND where you come from and the environment around you, you can take the future into your hands and contribute to a better destiny. This environment and its value systems are decisively influenced by the cultural heritage of a particular society. For this reason, the Swiss Federal Office of Culture (FOC) supports the preservation and disseminating of cultural heritage in all its forms as testimonials of human experiences and pursuits for future generations.

To FOC, cultural heritage comprises not only monuments and works of art. This heritage also includes mobile cultural assets, such as the findings of archaeological excavations, objects of ethnological or scientific value, rare manuscripts, rare books, furniture, coins, as well as archives that include audio, photo and film collections. Alongside these tangible objects, the FOC also advocates the preservation of intangible cultural heritage; for example, forms of expression of living cultures, such as legends, dance and theatre, music, rituals, festivities, craftsmanship, knowledge and others. Switzerland boasts a stunning example for a multi-faceted institution for the protection of cultural heritage of one specific country: the Swiss Afghanistan Institute. It has been making a significant contribution to preservation of cultural heritage in different fields. The 'Afghanistan Museum in Exile' in Bubendorf, initiated on the request of several Afghan groups in 1998, was a temporal safe deposit for archaeological and ethnographic cultural assets. In 2007, at the behest of the Afghan authorities and with the approval of UNESCO, 1423 objects, which had been entrusted to and held in trust by the institute, were repatriated to Kabul. The FOC as well as many other institutions and private persons supported this initiative.

Increased awareness for the importance of photographic documentation in the past decade brought about the need to understand its cultural importance. It became obvious that not only the physical preservation to avoid decay and loss of the original photograph itself is important. However, an in-depth understanding and description of its content is necessary in order to transmit contexts and relationships depicted in the photograph to future generations.

Based on this conclusion, the FOC supports the project 'Phototheca Afghanica', of which a first selection will be accessible online from July 2012. The images presented and extensively described are a treasure trove for the mediation of the cultural heritage of the war-torn country and society of Afghanistan. Subsequently, the project can serve as a vessel for the advancement of cultural identity and self-awareness of all Afghans, today and in the future.

Thanks to the incredible development in digital recording and communication during the last decade, it becomes possible today to provide such images of cultural and historic value not only to the visitors of such collections, but also to the general public, which creates an additional possibility of exchange of cultural assets. Switzerland harbours a number of photographic collections of historical importance concerning Asia. These collections are partially well-preserved, but not yet fully identified and described. Up till now, scientific research of photographs focussed mainly on technical aspects and/or photography as a work of art. Further research on its cultural values and context is a necessity and has still to be developed.

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Queen's Palace in Bagh-e Babur, Kabul.
3a (above):
In the 1920s (GV 64).
3b (middle):
After destruction, 2002 (PB 2002-631).
3c (below):
After reconstruction, 2008 (PB 2008-10).

