

TRACKING DOWN MISSTOLEN THE NATIONAL MUSEUM

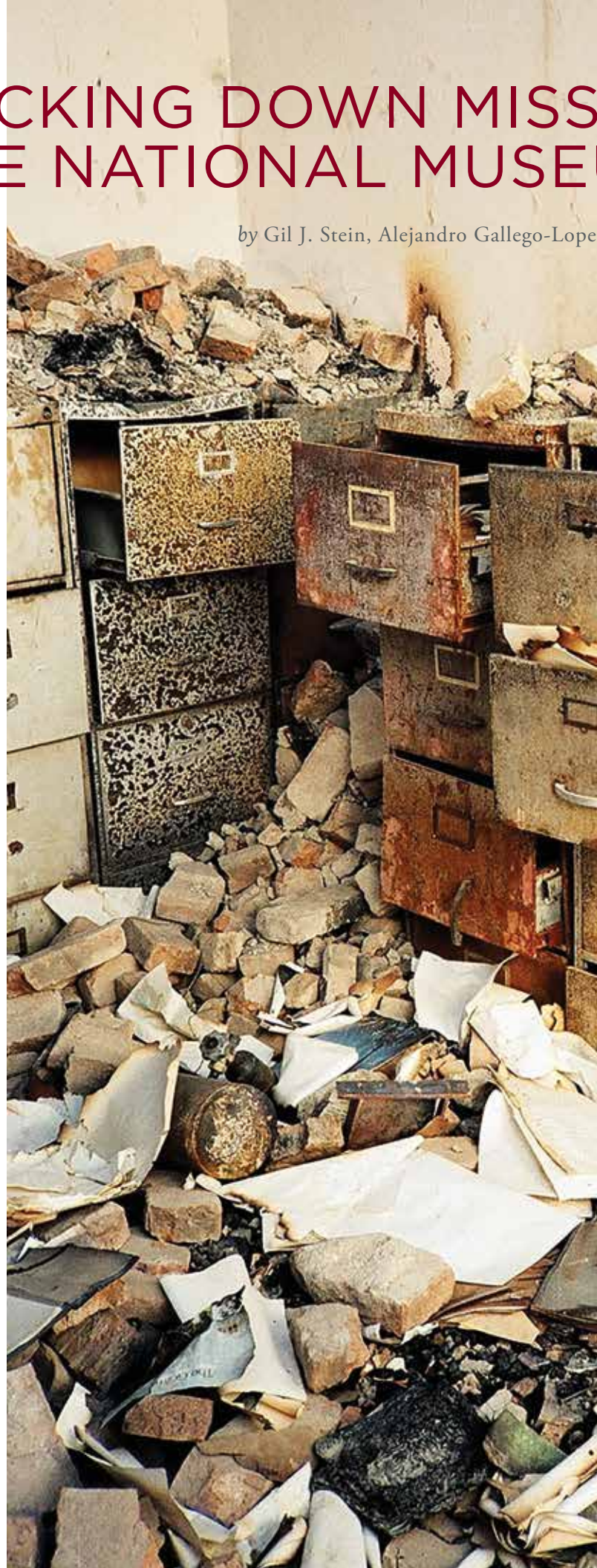
by Gil J. Stein, Alejandro Gallego-Lopez

The international illicit trade in antiquities is a multi-billion-dollar criminal enterprise that thrives in the shadows. Trafficking survives and is so profitable because for the most part law enforcement, heritage professionals, art dealers, and collectors have no idea what antiquities have been stolen, from where they have been stolen, and how many have been stolen from any given museum or source country. Without this information, even if the looted antiquities can be interdicted and the smugglers or dealers arrested, they cannot be convicted, and the objects generally cannot be repatriated to the places from which they were stolen. Accurate information thus becomes one of the most important and necessary tools for the preservation of cultural heritage.

After six years of the Oriental Institute's cultural heritage preservation work at the National Museum of Afghanistan (or NMA), we are finally able to combine modern information technology and the limited available written records to reconstruct for the first time a partial, but still accurate, list of the objects that were either stolen or destroyed during the Afghan Civil War of 1989–1995 and the subsequent period of Taliban rule. This archaeological detective work makes it possible for law enforcement to identify, recover, and repatriate these newly documented looted artifacts.

Archaeological looting and the illicit antiquities trade flourish in conflict zones, and in areas with the difficult security conditions that emerge with the breakdown of state institutions and civil society. Afghanistan has been shattered by thirty-eight years of continuous war starting with the Soviet invasion and occupation from 1979 to 1989, and continuing with the civil war that followed the Soviet withdrawal, as rival Afghan resistance groups fought for control of the country from 1989 to 1995. The civil war ended with the victory of the Taliban and their rule over most of Afghanistan from 1995 to 2001. This was followed by the American-led invasion of 2001 and the subsequent period of counter-insurgency, which has continued up to the present.

Object registration records at the National Museum of Afghanistan destroyed in the civil war of 1989–1995. Photo courtesy of Jolyon Leslie and the National Museum of Afghanistan.



ING TREASURES FROM UM OF AFGHANISTAN

z, Michael T. Fisher, and Fahim Rahimi



The National Museum of Afghanistan (NMA) is the single most important repository of cultural heritage in that country, but sadly, its collections were devastated during the Afghan Civil War. An estimated 70 percent of the objects in the NMA collections were looted or destroyed, while 90 percent of the object registration records were burned. From 2012 to the present, the Oriental Institute has been working with support from the US Department of State to develop a bilingual English-Dari computer database and conduct the first-ever full inventory of the objects that still survive in the NMA. The database is now 99.9 percent complete and documents 135,899 pieces, comprising 44,985 separate inventory records.

One of the most important benefits of the inventory is that by specifying precisely what objects are present in the museum, we can for the first time start to determine what artifacts are missing. For example, one of the most important objects in the NMA is the second-century CE Surkh Kotal Inscription 4, whose twenty-four incised stone blocks are one of the earliest surviving inscriptions in the Bactrian language. We inventoried each of the blocks in the inscription and assembled a photo mosaic. When we did so, we were able to see that three of the twenty-four blocks were missing, and had almost certainly been looted from the museum. From this beginning, we started a systematic assessment of the NMA's losses by comparing the inventory against the records that had survived the civil war.

There are several limitations on our ability to specify all of the objects missing from the museum. First, the NMA never had a complete inventory before the civil war, so we lack a comprehensive baseline for comparison. The few available catalogs are highly selective and incomplete, focusing only on the largest and most beautiful objects. Finally, the many coins in the NMA were only recorded in the most general counts by time period and/or site, without individual records. As a result, we can only provide a *minimum* estimate of the number of "missing" objects; the real number is almost certainly much larger. The objects we describe as "missing" are either "looted" or "smashed by the Taliban." In the first stage of our work to assess the NMA's losses, we examined two large samples of artifacts: sculptures or art objects, and coins.

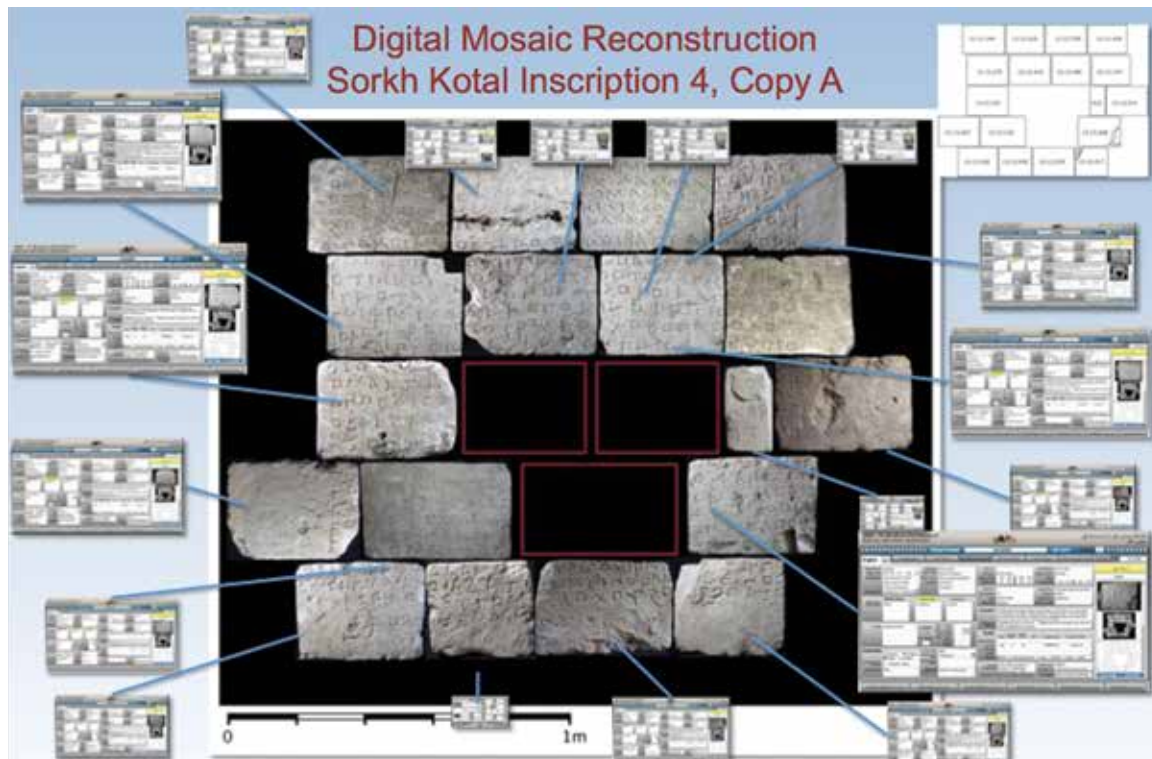


Photo mosaic of the twenty-four stone blocks in the Surkh Kotal for Bactrian inscription. The three rectangles outlined in red indicate the three inscription blocks that are missing from the Museum. Photo courtesy of the National Museum of Afghanistan and the Oriental Institute partnership.

We used three main sources for baseline data on the pre-war collections of the NMA: the museum guide by Nancy Hatch Dupree, Francine Tissot’s UNESCO-sponsored catalog of selected art objects in the NMA collections, and the archive of photographs of NMA objects recorded in the late 1950s by American photographer Josephine Powell. If an object was present in the pre-war records, but not located by our inventory database, then we know that object was either stolen or destroyed.

Before the civil war, the NMA had about 30,000 coins from five main ancient coin hoards, along with a large number of miscellaneous Islamic and Hunnic coins from a variety of sources. Our inventory allowed us to count how many coins had survived from each site. When we compared the pre- and post-war numbers for each numismatic class, we found that only 12,000 of the pre-civil war coins had survived. On this basis we determined that roughly 18,000 coins, or 60 percent of the NMA’s numismatic holdings, had been looted.

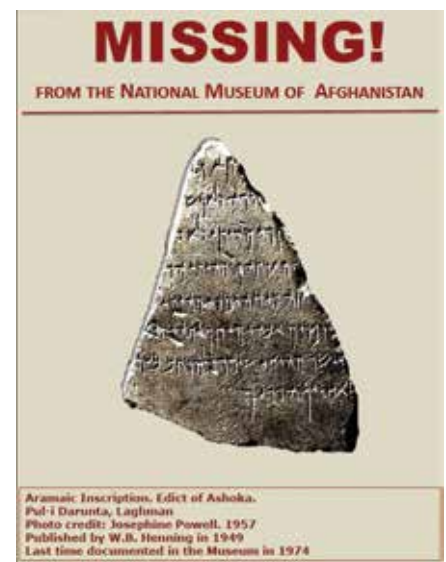
In parallel with the information on missing coins, the Francine Tissot catalog recorded information on 1,400 sculptures, carved ivories, and other art objects from before the civil war. Additional objects were identified as missing based on Nancy Dupree’s 1974 catalog of the NMA, and Josephine Powell’s photographs. We compared these pre-war sources against our database inventory records and determined that a minimum of 711 objects were missing — that is, 50 percent of all the objects listed in the pre-war catalog were either stolen or destroyed — in addition to the roughly 18,000 missing coins mentioned above.

Now that we have isolated the 711 missing sculptures and art objects, we are starting to combine the descriptions, registry numbers, and photographs to create a digital “wanted poster” for each of these objects. We plan to post this information a variety of high-exposure websites so that these objects can be spotted, and ideally recovered and repatriated. Although our efforts so far have been only partially successful, the most important outcome

is that we have been able to provide the first rigorous assessment of the NMA’s losses, and we have assembled precise data on 711 missing objects at a level of detail that makes it possible for them to be located and repatriated.

Our inventory and efforts to identify the objects missing from the NMA have taught us an important and sobering lesson. To safeguard collections (and help recover them if they should ever be looted), the most urgent priority for EVERY museum must be to carry out a digital inventory of all its holdings. The inventory must minimally include the description, digital images, registration numbers, and bibliographic references to any published records of the objects. We recommend that every museum inventory archive a back-up copy in at least one remote location outside the museum. The documentation procedures we have outlined here can help to recover the objects looted from the National Museum of Afghanistan and can contribute to ensuring the safety of these cultural treasures in the future.

Prototype of “Digital Wanted Poster” of a fragment from an edict of the early Buddhist Mauryan King Ashoka, found in Laghman region near Jalalabad, and currently missing from the National Museum. Photo by Josephine Powell, from the Josephine Powell Photographic Archive, Harvard University Sackler Art Museum (hcl.harvard.edu/libraries/finearts/collections/).



CELEBRATING GIL STEIN: 15 YEARS OF LEADERSHIP

On April 11, faculty, staff, volunteers, members, and friends celebrated Gil Stein's incredible fifteen-year run as director of the Oriental Institute. A catered reception was held in the Edgar and Deborah Janotta Mesopotamian Gallery, with university president Robert Zimmer and current Oriental Institute director Christopher Woods providing reflections highlighting Gil's leadership.

It is no exaggeration that Gil transformed the OI and is the architect for the Oriental Institute as we know it today. When you think of all the major milestones and accomplishments that occurred under Gil's leadership, many of which were his own initiatives, the list is truly remarkable. — Christopher Woods, director of the Oriental Institute

Among Gil's accomplishments were the installations of the East and West Galleries and Nubia, the initiation of the OI Special Exhibits programs, an increase of OI field projects, a growing of the mission of conservation and restoration during the darkest years of recession, the start of the post-doc program, the start of the Integrated Database project, the expansion of the volunteer and docent programs, and the hiring of half of the current faculty and most of the current OI staff. In addition to his role as director, Gil managed to conduct his own field projects in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq, while deepening the Oriental Institute and the University of Chicago's commitment to cultural heritage. At the center of Gil's hard work and passion has been the OI partnership Gil spearheaded with the National Museum of Afghanistan, a project he writes about in this current issue of *News & Notes*.

Gil came to the Oriental Institute in 2001 from Northwestern University, and his three terms as director are surpassed only by OI founder James Henry Breasted, who held the office a mere one and a half years longer. In July of 2017, Gil finished his third term as director and is succeeded by John A. Wilson Professor Christopher Woods. Gil is currently a professor of Near Eastern Archaeology at the Oriental Institute and in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, as well as the senior advisor to the provost for Cultural Heritage.

