

IS THERE A MODEL OF SUCCESS IN AFGHANISTAN?

After 30 years of war, 10 years of Western intervention, billions and billions of dollars in foreign aid, April Gow asks has anything flourished in Afghanistan?



Before and after photos of the central building which received a UNESCO Asian Heritage Award of Distinction this year

A CULTURAL NGO called Turquoise Mountain based in the center of the Old City of Kabul, established in 2006 by HRH The Prince of Wales and HE President Hamid Karzai, is a remarkable story of rebirth, renewal and even financial success in creating jobs and contributing to the national economy.

Drawing from **Afghanistan's** proud history, the name Turquoise Mountain evokes that of the great indigenous Afghan capital of the Middle Ages, the city of the Turquoise Mountain, destroyed by Genghis Khan in 1216 and lost to history. Its only surviving monument is the magnificent Minaret of Jam in Ghur province.

Londoners will have the opportunity to see firsthand the stunning achievements of talented and resilient Turquoise Mountain artisans – both men and women – that give Afghans and the international community pride in what has been achieved in seven short years. The ground-breaking exhibition entitled, *Ferozkoh: Tradition and Continuity in Afghan Art* is currently running until 23 February, 2014, at Leighton House Museum in Kensington. The exhibition is a highlight of both the **Qatar UK 2013** Year of Culture and the Nour Festival.

This significant exhibition, which has travelled to London, is the result of an outstanding collaboration between the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA) in Doha, Qatar and students and teachers from Turquoise Mountain's Institute for Afghan

Arts and Architecture, in Kabul, Afghanistan. It is a striking exhibition that represents dramatic social change.

The exhibition comprises 18 pairs of objects of which half are historical artifacts from the MIA collection. These artifacts come from four great dynasties with connections to Afghanistan: the Ghaznavids, Timurids, Mughals and Safavids. The other half of the works were created specifically for the exhibition by Turquoise Mountain artists and artisans in response to the historical objects.

For this unique project, artisans based in Kabul were invited to MIA in Doha to view and handle pieces from its unique collection. The visit was the beginning of a dialogue between past and present, the richness of tradition and the vibrancy of modern Afghanistan, a theme that the head of the Qatar Museums Authority, HE Shaikha Mayassa bint Hamad Al-Thani, was keen to support.

Shoshana Clark Stewart, CEO of Turquoise Mountain, commented, 'The exhibition has transformed the Afghan artisans who created these pieces; it gave them direct contact with one of the greatest collections of Islamic Art in the world and a challenge to create to a quality not seen in Afghanistan in their lifetime. These artisans represent hundreds who work with Turquoise Mountain at the Institute for Afghan Arts & Architecture, which trains the next generation of artisans and is rebuilding the country's craft industry.'

Its inhabitants had to climb over collapsing walls to enter their homes due to six feet of piled high rubbish, which had not been collected since 1947

Curated by MIA's Dr Leslee Michelsen, a specialist in the arts of medieval **Iran** and Central Asia, Ferozkoh's unifying theme is the preservation and continuity of the traditional arts of the Islamic world – in both themes and materials – in the present day, and the role of education in both transmission and translation.

This echoes the wider remit of Turquoise Mountain, established in 2006 at the request of HRH The Prince of Wales and HE President Hamid Karzai to breathe new life into Afghanistan's unique art, crafts and architecture. Rory Stewart, a former British Army officer turned diplomat and academic, was asked to initiate the project. He was already well known for his 6,000 mile walk from Iran to **Bangladesh**, across Afghanistan in 2002. His aim was to create a cultural, educational and economic hub in the historic Old City of Kabul known as Murad Khane.

This part of Kabul is the heart of the capital of Afghanistan and was once a crossroads of civilisations. It inherited the traditions of **India**, Persian and Central Asia, blending them to form unique and rich traditions of artistic expression which were famous throughout the region. By 2006, they were all but gone due to three decades of recent conflict which led to extreme poverty and nearly destroyed the crafts industry.

Today, an MP from Penrith and the Borders, serving in the House of Commons, Rory Stewart speaks with passion about finding the master woodworker, who at 72 years old was selling vegetables in the market, with no students and no markets. Much of the Old City was deep in rubbish, with few basic services and historic buildings collapsing. It was clear the Afghan people needed skills, jobs and a renewed pride in their nation. Over the past seven years something of a miracle has taken place in Murad Khane. It started with the establishment of the Institute of Afghan Arts & Architecture to train the next generation of artisans, including women, across its schools of Woodwork, Calligraphy & Miniature Painting, Jewellery & Gem-Cutting and Ceramics. The omnipresent ruin of the Old City had to be addressed in the process, as its inhabitants had to climb over collapsing walls to enter their homes due to six feet of piled high rubbish, which had not been collected since 1947.

Enter Rory Stewart and his small crew of western volunteers

and hired Afghan workers, in a hands-on effort to excavate over 30,000 cubic meters of rubbish. Sanitation, electricity and water infrastructure were laid under stone-paved streets in the Old City. With this initial success, additional community needs became apparent and a primary school and health clinic were established.

Private donors from the **US** and **UK** originally made the project possible, with USAID and the Qatari and Canadian governments coming into the equation in 2008. Shoshana

Clark, a graduate in Astrophysics from Williams College, Massachusetts, arrived as a volunteer in 2006 after time with Teach for America and a Boston Charter School. Clark took over the running of Turquoise Mountain in 2009 when Stewart was invited to teach at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

Today, over US\$2.5 million in traditional Afghan arts and crafts have been sold around the world through online sales and retailers in New York and London such as Kate Spade and Monsoon. UNESCO awarded the project an Asian Heritage Award of Distinction in 2013.

Turquoise Mountain artisans have formed their own small businesses and are training apprentices. The resulting increase in production capacity is the motivating factor to create a social enterprise from the non-profit model to support increased sales. In March 2013, HRH The Prince of Wales visited the *Ferozkoh* exhibition in Doha at the Museum of Islamic Art, highlighting the achievements of these young artisans.

The Institute for Afghan Arts and Architecture in the restored Murad Khane serves as the driver for the continued regeneration of the historic Old City and the crafts industry. With skills training, job creation and demand from international markets, there are signs that the revival of the arts, design and crafts industry will become an important part of the national economy in the future. Turquoise Mountain is a highly visible symbol of cooperation between Afghanistan, the international community and the artisans, students and families who live and work in the Old City. The future success of this seven-year-old institution rests on continued partnership and support.

The beginning of a dialogue between past and present, the richness of tradition and the vibrancy of modern Afghanistan



Miniature Painter

HRH The Prince of Wales and HRH The Duchess of Cornwall viewing the exhibition at the Museum of Islamic Art, Doha, Qatar