

Carpet diplomacy

Afghanistan's contemporary history is complex and contains so many diverse narrative threads that it is hard to tie them together. However, as **Ben Evans** explains, a newly-woven Afghan carpet is one reason why the country's traditional arts have become Washington DC's standout exhibits

Until 29 January 2017 'Turquoise Mountain: Artists Transforming Afghanistan', is at the Freer|Sackler Galleries in the US capital. Turquoise Mountain is a British charity, founded ten years ago by Rory Stewart (now an MP), at the suggestion of Prince Charles and ex-president Hamid Karzai.

For Julian Raby, director of the Freer|Sackler, the exhibit offers the chance to do something new, as he told the *Washington Post*: 'I would like to see this as part of a global change in the museum field. I think many museums tended to have cryogenic displays with these dead voices, in the mistaken belief that we're being objective. This exhibition will feel very different.'

Turquoise Mountain's Country Director Scott Liddle tells me that the show represents a new start for many people. It presents the work of artisans in five areas: jewellery, calligraphy, woodwork, ceramics and carpet weaving. For the Afghan artisans it offers an important opportunity to show the US public another side of their country, especially since both the charity and exhibition have received significant funding from USAID.

For the Afghan carpet industry, the *Afghan History Carpet* (2) helps connect past and present through designs associated with Baluch, Turkmen, Arab, Uzbek and Hazara tribes, but in a contemporary palette. 'The intention was always to create one spectacular piece that tells the history of Afghan rug



1

The Turquoise Mountain project is an extraordinary example of success and innovation in development, illustrating how culture can play a key role in social and economic change

Julian Raby, Director of the Freer|Sackler Galleries of Art, Washington

weaving but also helps to tell a story about another side of contemporary Afghanistan that speaks of beauty, craftsmanship, creativity and heritage. The carpet, at 17.5 square metres and with twenty-five colours, was made in three months so it shows what can be done in Afghanistan. We hope that it will make rug makers want to come and work in Afghanistan.'

Liddle continues: 'the ultimate aim is to increase the volume of

Afghan artisan carpets being made and exported so that we are creating jobs and improving people's incomes.' Thus the *History Carpet*, designed by Erbil Tezcan of Wool & Silk Rugs, is a key element of the exhibit. In the next five years, Turquoise Mountain aims 'to create 5,000 new jobs directly in the value chains of the different crafts.' Rug weaving is the second biggest employer in the country and carpets are the largest licit

export. 'Any plan for economic growth and employment in Afghanistan must include a serious contribution to carpet making. Uniquely in Afghanistan carpets allow development to reach remote communities across the whole country.'

While many of the objects made by Turquoise Mountain artists represent traditions associated with specific places – glass in Herat, ceramics in Istalif, metalwork in

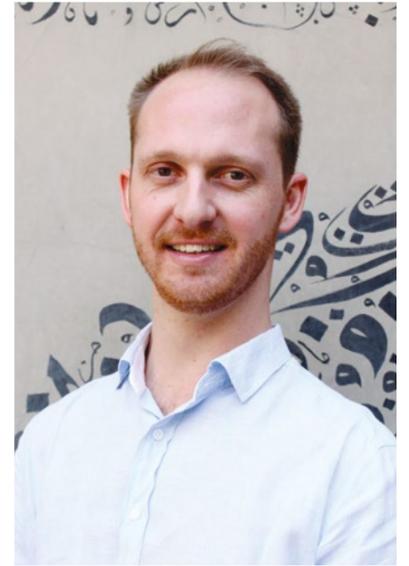


2

1 HRH The Prince of Wales, Julian Raby, Director of the Freer|Sackler Galleries and Shoshana Stewart, CEO of Turquoise Mountain

2 *The Afghan History Carpet* designed by Erbil Tezcan of Wool & Silk Rugs, New Jersey currently on display at the Freer|Sackler Galleries in Washington DC

3 Scott Liddle, Country Director, Afghanistan, Turquoise Mountain



3

Ghazni – carpet weaving is a craft that can access all parts of the country and has many different skills involved.

Liddle hopes the exhibition will lead to more companies wanting to make rugs in Afghanistan: Turquoise Mountain are well placed as intermediaries to help make this happen. 'We are the reliable respondent on the ground. We want to increase the number of partners with whom we are working, and we have the resources to help with product development and sampling – we pay for the first samples. It is important for people to know that Afghanistan can offer them a full service with its own washing and finishing facilities.'

While Turquoise Mountain does not sell carpets (98% of proceeds go straight to the artisans), it can use its influence to help others create and sell carpets and other Afghan crafts. Global connections allow it to secure commissions where small Afghan companies cannot, and Liddle hints that they would love to develop a project that draws attention to the Afghan pedigree of some important early carpet fragments in Kuwait's al-Sabah Collection, seen in Friedrich Spuhler's *Pre-Islamic Carpets and Textiles from Eastern Lands* (HALI 179, 2014, pp.42-43).

By placing it in the centre of the US capital's cultural life, many threads of Afghanistan's historical and contemporary stories are beginning to be plied together in such a way that we need not be surprised by what appears in the future.