

Ancient Afghan artifacts go on display

The Associated Press

LONDON — The British Museum’s latest exhibition displays ancient artifacts in gold, glass, stone and ivory from Afghanistan, a country whose fortune, and curse, has long been to lie at a crossroads of cultures, traders, artists and armies.

That these objects have survived for thousands of years is remarkable. That they have survived the last three decades of Soviet invasion, civil war, Taliban vandalism and continuing conflict seems little short of a miracle.

The items in this touring show, whose London leg was opened by Afghan President Hamid Karzai, were thought lost in the destruction of the National Museum of Afghanistan in the 1990s. In fact, they had gone underground, hidden away just before the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 by museum staff, who kept the secret, despite personal risk, during the years of Taliban rule.

“Many times they brought forces to the National Museum (to ask) ‘Where are these artifacts?’” said Abdul Wasey Fer-oofi of Afghanistan’s institute of archaeology. “We said, ‘We don’t know.’ Nobody gave answers to anybody about where these objects were.”

Seventy per cent of the museum’s artifacts were wrecked or looted during the post-Soviet chaos or destroyed by the fundamentalist Taliban, who demolished much of the country’s pre-Islamic art in the belief that it was idolatrous.

But two years after the Taliban regime was toppled by a U.S.-led 2001 invasion, Karzai announced that six safes full of objects had been found in an underground vault in the grounds of the presidential palace. When archeologists and museum curators cut into the cases with circular saws, they found a treasure trove – 22,000 gold items from a 2,000-year-old nomadic burial ground, some of which form the climax of the current exhibition.

“Being in that bank vault was like being in Tut’s tomb,” said National Geographic Society archaeologist Fredrik Hiebert, who spent two years cataloguing the treasures and still bubbles with enthusiasm for the find. “It was all unexpected. I had been among the ranks of scholars to say, ‘These things are lost.’”

Museum staff, who hadn’t seen the items in years and were uncertain of their fate, were ecstatic to find they had survived.

“All of a sudden,” Hiebert said, “the Afghans realized that they themselves had saved their cultural heritage.”

The exhibition of that heritage features artifacts from four remarkably different ancient societies, all found within the borders of modern-day Afghanistan – a Bronze Age farming civilization, a classical Greek city, a Silk Road palace and a nomads’ cemetery.

They attest to the vast range of influences on the strategically located Central Asian land.

One room features artifacts from Ai Khanum, a Greek city in what is now northern Afghanistan, complete with houses, temples, a gymnasium and an amphitheatre. Founded by a general of the Macedonian conqueror Alexander the Great in 300 B.C., it was a piece of Greece on the steppe, whose relics include sundials, the heavy tops of Corinthian columns and a statuette of the hero Heracles.

Also on display are treasures from China, India and the Roman Empire, hidden 2,000 years ago at Begram – present-day Bagram, site of a major U.S. air base north of Kabul. Archeologists are still debating whether it was the warehouse of a merchant moving goods along the Silk Road or the treasures of a palace, hidden for safekeeping during an invasion.

The most dazzling artifacts are also the most surprising, because they belonged to nomadic steppe dwellers who otherwise left few traces of their civilization.

Uncovered in 1978 at a site aptly known to locals as Tillya Tepe, the Hill of Gold, were 22,000 golden objects – crowns, daggers, bracelets, amulets, earrings and bowls – inside the graves of five women and a man from the 1st century A.D.

Adorned with a cross-cultural mix of symbols – Persian lions, Greek heroes, Indian swastikas – they are, Hiebert said, “an art we had never seen before in Afghanistan, a true Silk Road art.”

“It was the first window on a whole new culture,” he said. “Unfortunately, that window closed suddenly in 1979.”

The motto of the Afghan National Museum is “A Nation Stays Alive When Its Culture Stays Alive,” and the exhibition reveals what a difficult process that can be.

The show opens with a small stone statue from the Greek period of a naked boy. Already damaged when it was dug up in 1971, it was restored and put on display in the museum. It was decapitated by the Taliban before being restored and put on display again – headless but proud.



New excavations in Afghanistan remain hampered by war and the huge challenge to national reconstruction.

“Archaeology,” Hiebert noted, “is not the highest priority.”

The Kabul museum has been restored with the help of international donations. It also receives a share of income from the exhibition, which has already toured Europe and North America – but has gained a new postscript in London.

The final room of the exhibition displays delicately carved ivory inlays, showing scenes of bare-breasted women, exotic animals and mythical beasts that adorned Indian-made furniture built 2,000 years ago.

Like so much else, the ivories were missing and presumed lost, but were recently purchased by a London dealer who handed them back to Afghanistan.

They have been restored by British Museum experts and after the exhibition closes will be returned to the Kabul museum.

British Museum director Neil MacGregor said they were a fitting close to the exhibition’s story of “creation, of exchange, of destruction and recovery.”

“We wanted,” he said, “to end on a note of hope.”

“Afghanistan: Crossroads of the Ancient World” is at the British Museum in London until July 3.

Online: www.britishmuseum.org

Top: A visitor looks at a 1st century AD gold crown discovered in the tomb of a nomadic woman in the Tillya Tepe archaeological site in northern Afghanistan, on display in an exhibition called Afghanistan: Crossroads of the Ancient World, at the British Museum in London. Above right: Among the 200 objects is this Roman Egyptian enameled glass goblet discovered in Begram, Afghanistan. Above left: Afghan President Hamid Karzai opens the exhibition. AP photos

Timmy’s ramps up healthy choices with smoothie

The Canadian Press

TORONTO — Tim Hortons will soon begin serving up smoothies in Canada as it attempts to shoulder its way into a trendy and growing but fragmented market for the healthy crushed-fruit drinks.

The restaurant chain that made its mark on the Canadian consciousness with the less-than-healthy combination of coffee and doughnuts plans to add pre-blended, mixed berry and banana strawberry fruit smoothies to its menu.

“Canadians are snacking more and they are looking for healthier snacks, so for us it’s a big business opportunity to launch smoothies in Canada,” said Dave McKay, marketing director for beverages at Tim Hortons.

“It’s an opportunity to bring what is more of a niche product right now and really make it mainstream.”

There’s tremendous opportunity to grow Canada’s small and fragmented smoothie market, in which a number of players such as Booster Juice, American coffee giant Starbucks and Canadian chain Cultures compete, said Robert Carter, an expert with the NPD Group.

Research by NPD, which tracks



Tim Hortons fast-food outlets will be adding pre-blended, mixed berry and banana strawberry fruit smoothies to its menu.

CP photo

the habits of restaurant-goers, found that no one restaurant chain among those currently offering smoothies has captured more than 26 per cent market share. However, the market has grown every year in the past five years, and increased by eight per cent last year alone, Carter added.

Relative consumption is small – about 42 million smoothies per

places,” Carter said.

Tims has been testing smoothies in five Canadian markets for a year and has already introduced them into stores in the U.S., where the market is more robust.

“Smoothies in the U.S. are more developed as a category, so we wanted to be there,” McKay said.

McDonalds and some of the biggest fast food chains in the U.S. have recently introduced smoothies as part of a move toward making over the greasy image of fast food restaurants into grown-up, health conscious dining establishments.

Coffee, including specialty coffee drinks like mochas, has been a major driver of business for McDonald’s. Now Burger King, Subway and Wendy’s are putting more emphasis on their coffee selections and revamping their breakfast offerings.

McDonalds Canada spokesman Louis Payette said the Canadian division is keeping a close eye on the response to smoothies in the U.S. and other parts of the world, but has no plans yet to add them to its Canadian menu.

That gives Tim Hortons a jump on at least some of its competitors as demand for healthy eating options at fast food restaurants is ex-

pected to grow in the coming years, according to a November study by the NPD Group.

As many as 20 per cent of Canadians who frequent fast food restaurants are looking for healthier food choices and are prepared to pay much more for them, according to a recent Angus Reid survey commissioned by Tims.

Those consumers looking for healthy foods are willing to pay as much as 13 per cent more than what they pay for less-healthy options. Smoothies topped the list of consumer wants.

Meanwhile, only five per cent of Canadians said they are consuming at least the seven to 10 daily servings of fruit and vegetables recommended by the Canada Food Guide.

Nearly 50 per cent of respondents said they are not getting enough fruits and vegetables because its difficult to find on-the-go options.

And more than a quarter said they don’t have time to buy and prepare fruits and vegetables.

Tims 10-ounce smoothie will cost \$1.99 and contain 130 calories, zero grams of fat and a full serving of fruit. Customers can add yogurt for 70 cents, adding another 30 calories.