

POETRY



Brigitte Oleschinski

62 **Mission Impossible**

A Trip to the First International
Poetry Festival in Indonesia

Ranjit Hoskote

68 **Looking for Anchorage,
and Not in Alaska Alone**

REVIEWS

Stefan Weidner

72 **Saying the Unspeakable**

A New Story by Atiq Rahimi

Bettina Prato

73 **Earning the Right to Watch**

Susan Sontag's
"Regarding The Pain of Others"

Stefan Weidner

75 **A Pinch of Afghano-Centrism Please**

Nicolas Bouvier's Travels in Afghanistan

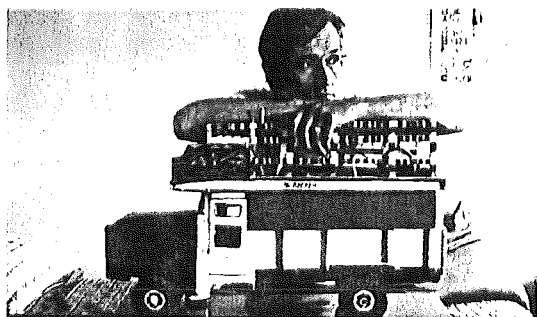
Michael Thoss

77 **Khaled Hosseini's Novel
"The Kite Runner"**

Stefan Weidner

78 **The Swallows of Kabul**

Yasmina Khadra's New Novel



80 **Alighiero Boetti
and Afghanistan**

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Jens-Uwe Hartmann

Buddha's Forgotten Country

The History of Buddhism in Afghanistan

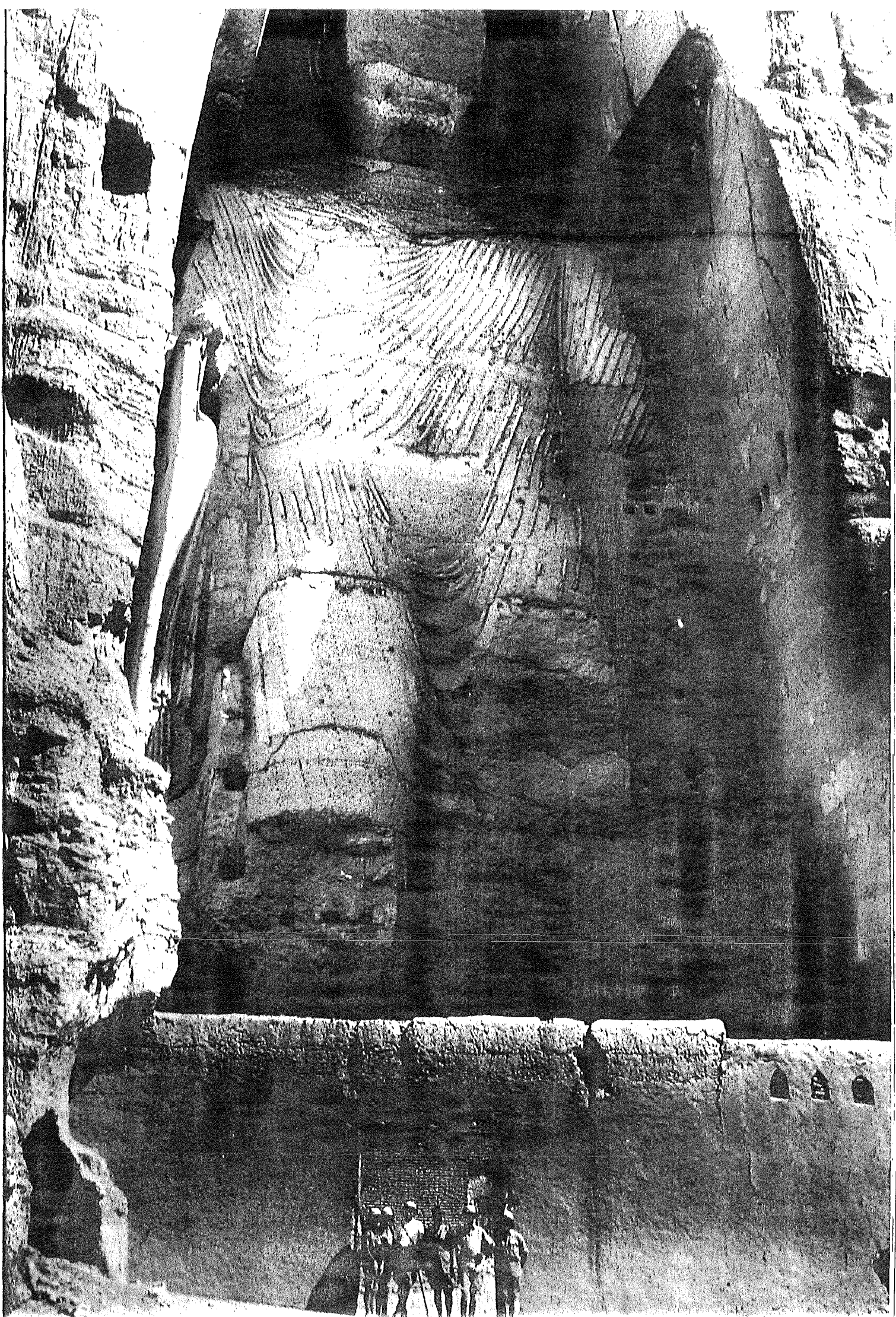
Afghanistan was always a completely Islamic country'. This view was held almost everywhere until recently and hardly anyone paid any attention to the fact that other religions must have existed there before Islam was established. The fact that Buddhism was one of those religions was basically only known to people interested in the history of Afghanistan or of Buddhism, or to the few travellers who chanced upon Buddhist monuments when moving through the country. However, two and a half years ago, in March 2001, when the Taliban set about getting rid of the two monumental statues of the Buddha in Bamiyan Valley, the general public across the world suddenly became aware that Islam was by no means the only religion which had shaped Afghanistan. As is so often the case, only the irreversible loss of part of our cultural legacy made its existence widely known. The blowing up of the Buddhas probably brought about the opposite of what those responsible intended – and one can even be pleased about that. Nevertheless, it is no consolation for the irrevocable destruction of two cultural monuments of global significance. All the current ideas about reconstructing the two Buddhas seem to me to be of dubious value. These doubts arise because there are much more urgent problems to be solved in today's Afghanistan than the recreation of two stone sculptures, no matter how helpful these monumental figures might one day be in promoting a revival of tourism.

A second phenomenon has also contributed in recent years to renewed awareness of Afghanistan's Buddhist past, and this too is certainly connected with civil war. For about ten years now Buddhist manuscripts from Afghanistan have been on offer on the Western and Far Eastern art markets. Initially these were probably chance discoveries, possibly in former cave-monasteries in which combatants or civilians had sought refuge. Unfortunately, more precise information about the origins and discovery of these manuscripts is not available to date. Specialists quickly recognised how sensational these finds were when the first manuscripts reached the Western market, and talk of 'The Dead Sea Scrolls of Buddhism' was soon doing the rounds. This was enthusiastically taken up by the English-language media and many press stories ensured that news of the new manuscripts spread far and wide.

Prices rose rapidly and considerable sums are now paid for such manuscripts – with the outcome that fresh supplies continue to reach the West and Japan by way of Pakistan. Opinions are understandably divided. On the one hand, any increase in knowledge that can be derived from manuscripts relating to the history of Buddhist writings and of Afghanistan is to be welcomed. On the other, the precise circumstances of discovery remain unknown, meaning that irreplaceable data is lost for historians. They would very much like to know where a manuscript originated, whether it was discovered in a former cave-monastery or in a *stupa* (a Buddhist grave monument), whether it was found in isolation or together with other texts, and much besides. All such information would tell us something about religious life in Afghanistan over a thousand years ago, but up to now we only have the manuscripts themselves and lack information about where and how they survived for over a millennium.

How did Buddhism come to Afghanistan? The political creation we today associate with the name 'Afghanistan' is relatively recent. It is not founded on any linguistic or cultural unity that can look back on a long history. In the past, the area comprising today's state was usually divided into several kingdoms. That was already the case in the pre-Christian centuries, although we do not know much about this period. The first relatively certain contact with Buddhism can be dated around the third century B.C. At that time the Maurya dynasty was establishing the first major empire in India, the north-west of which also included Pakistan and parts of modern Afghanistan. This dynasty's most important ruler, Ashoka, had inscriptions prominently displayed throughout his empire, and the most westerly of these were discovered in Kandahar. Characteristically, these inscriptions were not in any Indian script or language; they had been translated into Greek and Aramaic, utilising the Greek alphabet. This shows that Ashoka's empire reached as far as a region where Greek was obviously a *lingua franca* and used for administrative purposes. This Greek influence had arrived with Alexander the Great, who advanced as far as India in 327 – 326, extending his empire into

*The Big Buddha of Bamiyan, 1931
Photo taken from Bérénice Geoffroy-Schneiter's book: "Ghandara"
With kind permission of Knesebeck Verlag, Munich.*



the Punjab. His campaign left no lasting traces in India itself and Alexander's empire began to disintegrate after his death, but the Greek cultural influences remained a dominant element in the Eastern states which then came into existence. The most easterly Greek town we know of today was excavated in the 1960s by a team of French archaeologists in the far north of Afghanistan – at Ai Khanum on the Amu Darya. The influence of Greek and later Roman culture persisted for centuries, and after the start of the new millennium made a wonderful contribution to the emergence of Buddhist art. We will turn to that in a moment.

Under Ashoka, Buddhism in India seems to have blossomed initially, so it is to be assumed that political stability and the associated long-distance trade also favoured extension of order to the north-west of the empire. However, sure signs of this expansion are only known from the first century B.C., particularly in the form of dated inscriptions. Dateable evidence only becomes more prolific in the post-millennium centuries, particularly through donor inscriptions, in which the names of individual Buddhist sects may appear. Buddhism experienced an enormous upsurge when a large new empire was established in the north-west during the first century A.D. A migrant people from Central Asia, whose origins are not entirely clear, seized power in Bactria (an old empire incorporating the north of Afghanistan with Balq as its capital). Its rulers belonged to the Kuchana tribe, which gave its name to both the dynasty and the empire. They succeeded in continually expanding their sphere of influence, which eventually incorporated Afghanistan, Pakistan, large parts of northern India and areas of Uzbekistan, and reached far into Central Asia. Political stability once again favoured long-distance trade. One of the most important trading routes was the 'Silk Road', a network of commercial connections which at its height linked the capital of the Roman Empire in the West with that of the Chinese Empire in the East. Several branches to the south joined the Indian sub-continent to this East-West axis, and one such connection also led through Afghanistan. However, these trading routes were not only used by merchants. Buddhist monks travelled through Pakistan and Afghanistan and then on the Silk Road, firstly to Central Asia and finally to China, spreading their religion wherever they went.

Buddhism obviously flourished under the Kuchanas. The first monasteries were built, frequently endowed by members of the ruling dynasty, and *stupas* were erected. This dynasty's most important representative, Kanishka, who according to current knowledge acceded to the throne in 125 A.D., appears in historical sources as an outstanding patron of Buddhism. That was certainly part-

ly true. The oldest depiction of the Buddha known to us is on the obverse of a coin showing Kanishka. On the other hand, coins also demonstrate that the Kuchanas clearly pursued a very even-handed policy with regard to religion, promoting all the faiths represented in their empire.

Political stability favours trade, and trade then generates a flourishing economy, which enables the provision of a viable basis for craftsmen and artists as well as representatives of the various religions. This laid the foundation stone for Gandhara art. Gandhara was originally the old name for the region around Peshawar. It was however subsequently applied to a considerably larger artistic area characterised by a relatively unified style. Indian art scholars today use this designation for a region comprising parts of Afghanistan, the northern part of Pakistan, and the extreme north-western corner of India. For centuries the Buddha had been represented by symbols such as a footprint, rather than being depicted figuratively. This period is termed the 'anti-iconic' phase of Buddhist art. Under the Kuchanas, however, the first figurative depictions of the Buddha were simultaneously produced in northern India and Gandhara. In northern India artists based their work on Indian precedents, creating a unified form of representation. In Gandhara, however, artists took the still-present forms of Greco-Roman art as their model, thereby creating that unique synthesis of Western forms and Indian content which has become world-famous as 'Gandhara art'. For portraying the Buddha they used the Greek god Apollo as a model, for secondary figures other Greek gods such as Hermes or Fortuna, and for Bodhisattvas, an exceptionally important category of mediators of salvation, depictions of Roman youths. This art was famously and particularly impressively exemplified by the sculpture at the Hadda monastery (not far from Jalalabad), which was extensively restored a while ago but is now said to have been completely destroyed in the recent upheavals. The specific formal character of Gandhara art did not only influence India, modifying representation of the Buddha that originated there. It was also transmitted to Central Asia by way of the Silk Road, and then on to China, becoming the basic model for all East Asian Buddhist art.

In this art Indian and Greco-Roman elements were merged, giving rise to a fascinating and autonomous new style. The situation was obviously very different with regard to Buddhist literature, as can be seen more clearly today. Over the past ten years several thousand fragments of Buddhist manuscripts have reached the West and Japan. None of these manuscripts contains a date, but the development of writing makes it possible to show that they were produced between the first and the

eight centuries A.D. With just one exception all these fragments are written in Indian languages and scripts. This shows that in the realm of literature Buddhism did not seek to adapt itself to local conditions, for instance by translating works brought from India into local languages, as was the case in China and Tibet. The oldest fragments probably date back to the first half of the first century, just at the beginning of the new millennium. This is absolutely sensational. Afghanistan can now lay claim to having preserved not only the



Buddha performing the miracle of Sravasti. 4th Century B.C. Reproduction from Bérénice Geoffroy-Schneiter's book "Gandhara". With kind permission of Knesebeck Verlag, Munich

oldest Buddhist manuscripts, but also the oldest existing manuscripts containing works in an Indian language. Until now that eminence belonged to remnants of manuscripts discovered by a German expedition a hundred years ago along the Silk Road in Central Asia, but these are between one and two centuries more recent than the new finds from Afghanistan. This latest discovery involves metre-long rolls of birch bark. They are inscribed in Kha-

roshti, an Indian language which is written from right to left. It was used in the north-west of the Indian sub-continent for some centuries before and after the new millennium, and was then taken over during the Kushana empire as an administrative language. It completely vanished soon after that empire fell. These rolls were probably found near Jalalabad, where they may have been 'buried' inside a large pot. Birch-bark dries out over the course of time, becoming extremely brittle, so a very elaborate restoration process was necessary before the manuscripts could be unrolled and made readable. This was carried out by specialists from the British Library in London where the discovery is now being stored.

Decipherment of these rolls revealed that they were exclusively devoted to the preservation of specific works of Indian Buddhism. This is highly significant since these works were previously believed to be lost. However, neither these rolls nor more recent manuscripts, which were written either on birch-bark or Indian palm leaves, contain any information revealing more about the history of Buddhism in this region. Our picture of

the history of Buddhism in Afghanistan thus remains extremely fragmentary. We basically continue to be dependent on evaluation of archaeological evidence. Nevertheless, they do show us that Buddhism must have received exceptional support at least for a time. The 53 metre Buddha at Bamiyan was the largest such statue in the world and considerable funds were required to create this work. Bamiyan lay on the trade route linking the Silk Road with India and will have profited considerably from this commerce, but we know nothing about the monks who lived in the monastery caves around the two large Buddhas, the religious festivals and rituals held there, or the number of believers who visited these monuments.

However, there is one unique document, a kind of eye-witness account, which does preserve some information about Bamiyan and Buddhism in Afghanistan. Between 629 and 645, a Chinese monk called Xuan Zang undertook a pilgrimage to holy Buddhist sites in India and wrote a kind of travel diary recording places, distances, and special aspects. He travelled from China on the Silk Road towards the west, and then followed the route south by way of Bamiyan and Peshawar to India. He describes Bamiyan and admires both the great Buddha and the religious seriousness of the people there, a characteristic which he thinks distinguishes them from their neighbours. Elsewhere, however, Xuan Zang notices phenomena indicating that Buddhism is starting to decline. There may have been economic reasons for this. Buddhist monks are forbidden to work and are thus dependent on material support from an associated community. So if political upheavals lead to loss of affluence, a religion like Buddhism quickly gets into difficulties. The important factor is that this decay obviously got under way long before Islam arrived in Afghanistan. The popular cliché that the militant advance of Islam led to the destruction of Buddhism everywhere from Afghanistan to northern India is in no way true. Instead there are many indications that economic and probably also religious factors initiated a decline a long time earlier. It has not yet been possible to put a precise date on when Buddhism came to an end in Afghanistan, but the general assumption is that it gradually vanished during the 8th or 9th century. That view is confirmed by dating the most recent Buddhist manuscripts from Afghanistan as originating in the 8th century. So Buddhism helped shape culture and history in the Hindu Kush for around a thousand years, and – as we discover today, with great enthusiasm – it did after all leave behind far more, and far more important, testimony in Afghanistan than would have been thought possible just a few years ago.

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