



2021 PAUL MELLON LECTURE TO REFLECT ON CULTURAL HERITAGE IN AFGHANISTAN 20 YEARS AFTER 9/11

Digital Event Brings Together Dr. Omar Sharifi, Rory Stewart, and Shoshana Stewart To Discuss Future of Heritage After the Withdrawal of U.S. Troops

April 22, 2021, New York, NY – In March 2001, the colossal Buddha statues of Bamiyan Valley in Afghanistan were destroyed by the Taliban in an act that reverberated around that world. Just a few months later, the tragic events of 9/11 ushered in unprecedented policy changes in the U.S. and abroad as well as a devastating conflict in the Middle East. In the decades since, cultural heritage throughout the region has stood at the center of this turbulence, facing threats of targeted destruction, collateral damage due to armed conflict, abandonment, and neglect linked to the absence of maintenance.

As the U.S. prepares to withdraw all combat troops from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021, World Monuments Fund (WMF)'s annual Paul Mellon Lecture will explore the history and importance of cultural heritage in Afghanistan, critical preservation efforts over the past 20 years, and the impact the new political equilibrium may have on heritage sites. The event is part of a broader reflection throughout 2021 on the state of cultural heritage in the Middle East in the 20 years since 9/11.

This free digital event will bring together leading voices on the cultural heritage of Afghanistan, a nation considered to be the “crossroad of cultures” that has been shaped by centuries of exchange between civilizations. Moderated by WMF President and CEO Bénédicte de Montlaur, *Afghanistan: Cultural Heritage and the Forever War* will feature Dr. Omar Sharifi, Country Director at the American Institute of Afghanistan Studies (AIAS), who will provide insight into the relationship between culture, identity, and politics in Afghanistan today. Guests will also hear from British diplomat, author, explorer, and politician Rory Stewart, whose 2002 journey walking solo across Afghanistan is recounted in *The New York Times* bestseller *The Places In Between*. He will be joined by his wife and CEO of Turquoise Mountain Shoshana Stewart to discuss restoring Murad Khani and reviving its historic craft traditions. Placing the site on the 2008 World Monuments Watch, WMF partnered with Turquoise Mountain to bring awareness and enhanced protection to Murad Khani, one of the few surviving historic commercial and residential areas in the old city of Kabul.

“This discussion will explore ideas to protect cultural heritage in Afghanistan to prevent history from repeating itself,” said Bénédicte de Montlaur, President and CEO of WMF. “Twenty years after the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taliban, there is reason for concern for the future of the incredibly diverse cultural heritage of Afghanistan, which stands among the great treasures of humanity.”

The 2021 Paul Mellon Lecture *Afghanistan: Cultural Heritage and the Forever War* will take place Thursday, May 6 at 12:00 noon EDT. The public can register online at wmf.org/event/2021-Mellon-Lecture

Inaugurated in 2003, the Paul Mellon Lecture is supported by the Paul Mellon Education Fund and enables audiences to learn about critical issues in the field of cultural heritage. Past speakers include Kent Weeks discussing the challenges of tourism management in the Valley of the Kings, Egypt; Charles Dempsey on the history of the Carracci Gallery in the Farnese Palace in Rome; Anna Somers Cox on the impact of ever-increasing tourist numbers in Venice; and Iwan Baan, who offered the audience a glimpse into the intricacies of his photographic process, capturing culture with intimate detail and profound emotion.

Bénédicte de Montlaur, President and CEO of World Monuments Fund

Bénédicte de Montlaur is President and CEO of World Monuments Fund (WMF), the world's foremost private organization dedicated to saving extraordinary places while empowering the communities around them. She is responsible for defining WMF's strategic vision, currently implementing that vision in more than 30 countries around the world, and leading a team that spans the globe. Her background mixes culture and the arts, politics, international diplomacy, and human rights. Prior to joining WMF, Montlaur spent two decades working across three continents as a senior diplomat at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Dr. Omar Sharifi, Country Director, American Institute of Afghanistan Studies

Dr. Omar Sharifi currently serves as Assistant Professor of Social Sciences and Humanities at the American University of Afghanistan and as Country Director of the American Institute of Afghanistan Studies, a center in Kabul for visiting American academics engaged in Afghanistan studies. He is also a member of the advisory board of the Civil Society Development Center (CSDC).

After graduating from Kabul Medical Institute in 2003, Dr. Sharifi worked as Head of Research and Publications for the Foundation for Culture and Civil Society in Kabul, and as Director of the Open Media Fund for Afghanistan. From 2006 to 2008, he studied cultural anthropology at Columbia University under a Fulbright fellowship, before completing his PhD at Boston University in 2019, where he conducted research on poetry and identity in Afghanistan.

Shoshana Stewart, CEO of Turquoise Mountain

Shoshana Stewart is the CEO of Turquoise Mountain, an international NGO working in Afghanistan, Myanmar, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan to revive historic neighborhoods and traditional crafts in order to create jobs, skills, and a renewed sense of pride in areas where culture is under threat.

Shoshana has spent the last 14 years leading the charity to restore and rebuild over 150 historic buildings and train over 6,000 traditional artisans and builders. During her tenure as CEO, Shoshana expanded the initial project in the old city of Kabul across Afghanistan and to three other countries.

Shoshana Stewart has an MBA from the London Business School, a master's degree in education, and a bachelor's degree in astrophysics. She is currently Senior Fellow at the Yale Jackson Institute For Global Affairs. Prior to Turquoise Mountain, she worked as a teacher and administrator in low-income urban communities with Teach For America and Uncommon Schools in New York, Boston, and Honduras.

Rory Stewart, author, diplomat, explorer, politician, and academic

Rory Stewart is currently Senior Fellow at the Yale Jackson Institute for Global Affairs, where he is focusing on contemporary politics in crisis and international development. Previously, Stewart served as the UK Secretary of State for International Development.

Prior to that, Stewart served as Minister of the Environment, Minister of State responsible for development policy in the Middle East and Asia and UK policy in Africa, Minister of State for Justice, and as Chair of the House of Commons Defense Select Committee. Earlier in his career, he served as an infantry officer and then as a diplomat for the UK government. On leave from the Foreign Service, he walked for 21 months across Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Nepal, staying in 500 village houses on the journey. From 2005 to 2008, he was the Chair and Chief Executive of the Turquoise Mountain Foundation based in Kabul.

Stewart has written four books: *The Places in Between*, *Occupational Hazards or The Prince of the Marshes*, *Can Intervention Work?*, and *The Marches*.

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About World Monuments Fund

World Monuments Fund is the leading independent organization devoted to safeguarding the world's significant cultural places to enrich lives and build mutual understanding. For more than 55 years, working at more than 700 sites in 112 countries, its highly skilled experts have applied proven and effective techniques to the preservation of important architectural and cultural heritage sites around the globe. Through the World Monuments Watch—a biennial, nomination-based program—WMF uses cultural heritage conservation to empower communities and improve human well-being. In partnership with local communities, funders, and governments, WMF seeks to inspire an enduring commitment to stewardship for future generations. Headquartered in New York City, the organization has offices and affiliates worldwide. wmf.org

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