

America Supports Cultural Preservation

Text and photographs by ANGUS McDONALD

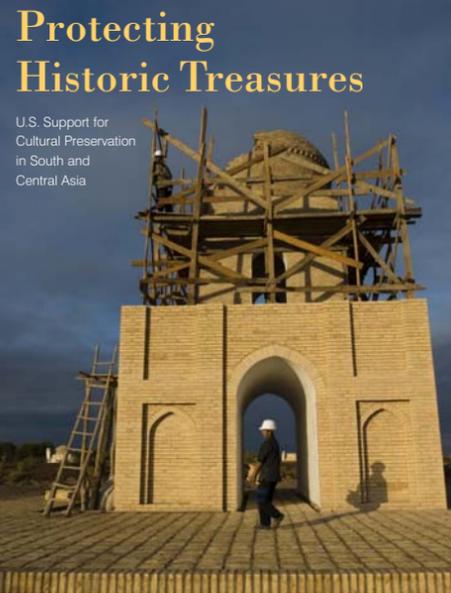
Any photojournalist will tell you we have the best job in the world. Not the best paid or most secure, perhaps, but the most satisfying and exciting. Yet, there are some assignments that stand out from the others, the kind that you dream about, the kind that come along once every few years, if you're lucky. This was one of those assignments.

In September 2006, the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi asked me to travel around South and Central Asia to document projects sponsored by the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation. I would visit 11 countries and photograph 24 projects, each of them a world-class historical and cultural treasure. Of course, I said yes.

This 14-meter reclining Buddha of Ajina Teppa is one of the most significant Buddhist statues remaining in Central Asia. Located at Tajikistan's State Museum of Antiques in Dushanbe, it was restored in 2001, partly with a grant from the U.S. Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation.



A man rides past a shrine in Bishnupur, 140 kilometers northwest of Kolkata, and home to a rich array of architectural, artistic and crafts traditions. A 2005 grant from the Ambassador's Fund allowed the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage to develop a comprehensive plan to preserve the arts of the city.



A booklet about the U.S. Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation projects in South and Central Asia was issued in the fall of 2007, containing Angus McDonald's text and photographs. On its cover, the 14-meter high Ak Saray Ding Tower near Dashoguz in Turkmenistan.

Protecting Historic Treasures

U.S. Support for Cultural Preservation in South and Central Asia

By mid-October, I was off on a whirlwind tour of the former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. In between, I would also visit Afghanistan and Pakistan. The next leg of the trip took me to Nepal, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Bangladesh. Finally, I visited projects at Bishnupur in West Bengal and Gangtok in Sikkim before landing back home in New Delhi.

By that time, I had been driven thousands of kilometers across Kazakhstan, accompanying a conservation architect and two archaeologists as they searched for half-forgotten Silk Road ruins. I had mingled with Hindu devotees as they prayed to the newly restored Kal Bhairav statue in Kathmandu's Durbar Square, and sat with Baul minstrels late into the night as they sang songs of union with God in deepest rural Bangladesh.

I witnessed Friday prayers more than once. The first time was in Kabul in Afghanistan, in a rare 17th-century cedar mosque, rebuilt after being shattered by war in the 1990s. A uniformed soldier left his boots at the entrance but brought his gun inside. Weeks later, a

Below: A devotee prays at the 17th-century Mullah Mahmood Mosque in Kabul's old city, which was restored to keep the rare cedar structure from collapse after damage from fighting in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s. The mosque reopened in 2004 after receiving restoration grants from the Ambassador's Fund.



subcontinent and an ocean away, I watched boys in surf shirts perform *namaz* at the Eid mosque in Male', capital of the Maldives, where walls made of finely carved coral had been scrubbed free of centuries of accumulated pollution.

Begun in 2001 with a budget of \$1 million, the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation has distributed about \$9.5 million, supporting 379 projects worldwide. Grants typically are between \$10,000 and \$50,000, and are distributed throughout the developing world. My assignment was to document projects funded within the State Department's South and Central Asia division.

A priority of the program is to benefit the communities in which projects are situated. In Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, a country with a long history of trade, metallurgy and nomadic culture, the Kyrgyz State Museum is home to a remarkable collection of precious metal objects. The centerpiece is a hoard of 156 gold items recovered from the tomb of a Hun princess,

including a diadem, a breast ornament inlaid with onyx and amber, and an eerily alive-looking funeral mask. Dating to the early centuries A.D. and discovered in 1958, the treasures have been shown around the world but have never been displayed locally due to a lack of adequate cabinets and security equipment. Instead, the collection languishes in an old-fashioned safe in a cramped strongroom below the museum, sharing the space with World War II-era machine guns and ammunition.

"These objects have toured Japan, France and Italy, and have



aroused great interest," says Akylai Sharshenalieva, the museum's storage director. "But our first priority should be to show them to our own people."

A grant from the Ambassador's Fund in 2006 has given the museum the means to provide secure, climate controlled cabinets so the collection can go on display under safe, stable conditions. The grant also provides for copies to be made of the most important pieces, so handling of the originals can be minimized.

In Turkmenistan, another 2006 project, the restoration of the Ak Saray Ding tower, has a different kind of meaning for the local community. While archaeologists speculate that the 11th- or 12th-century monument was once the gate of a traveler's rest

stop on the Silk Road, built three stories high to guide caravans out of the desert, local legend tells another story.

Inhabitants of the remote region bordering Uzbekistan believe that the tower was erected in ancient times by a nobleman, in memory of his daughter who had died before she could marry. The monument is revered for its association with the purity of an unmarried girl, and draws pilgrims who pray for marriage or children.

Nearing collapse at the beginning of the 20th century, a religious leader urged the local populace to save the building in the only way they could think of: to pile earth around the crumbling base to prevent further damage. One hundred years later, with



Right: The 18th century Eid Mosque in Male', capital of the Maldives. Carvings on the mosque, constructed from blocks of coral, were deteriorating due to lack of maintenance before further damage from the 2004 tsunami. The mosque was restored with a grant from the Ambassador's Fund in 2005.

Right: Restorers undertake the painstaking process of reweaving damaged but rare Turkmen carpets at a rate of about half a square centimeter per day. The National Carpet Museum at Ashgabat in Turkmenistan has restored about 70 carpets, nearly half of them under the grant project. With 500-600 rare carpets in need of restoration, the task has only begun.

Left: The 30-meter high mausoleum of Sultan Tekesh, who ruled Khorezm from 1172 to 1200, is an outstanding example of pre-Mongolian architecture at Kone Urgench in Turkmenistan. A grant from the Ambassador's Fund helped rebuild and repair the walls and the dome of the mausoleum, which were deteriorating due to the ravages of time and an inexpert restoration attempt.



A 2006 grant from the Ambassador's Fund allowed for the purchase of cabinets and modern security alarms so that a rare collection of exquisite jewelry and artifacts in the Kyrgyz State Museum could be displayed for the Kyrgyz people. The collection had been exhibited in Europe and Japan, but never locally because of inadequate security and display facilities.



support from the Ambassador's Fund, the base had been completely rebuilt, with work in progress on restoring the upper story and double dome.

Ilyas Paltayev, a history teacher from the area who accompanied us to the site, was clearly overjoyed that a piece of heritage so treasured by the community had been rescued from oblivion.

"The older people are very happy, as they recognize that this is part of tradition. I also bring my students here to teach them about their history, and to show them how tradition can be preserved," he said.

Ambassador's Fund projects are not confined to museums and monuments. In a lightning two-day visit to Bangladesh, squeezed between national strikes during the aborted election campaign, I was accompanied by Jon Cebra and Sabreen Rahman of the U.S. Embassy in Dhaka to witness two completed projects that are helping to sustain living traditions.

The first involved taking a seven-hour drive west of Dhaka to

see musicians of the Pally Baul Samaj Unnayan Sangstha perform at a rural middle school. The association was formed to safeguard the skills of the Baul community of wandering minstrels, who traditionally performed at weddings and festivals. Singing centuries-old songs of Sufi mysticism and playing a remarkable variety of instruments, the Bauls have become marginalized by new forms

of entertainment such as television and recorded music.

A grant from the Ambassador's Fund enabled the association to record and transcribe Baul songs, to collect examples of their instruments, and to fund a group of musicians to tour 60 schools in Dhaka and outlying districts. Veteran performers were able to pass on their skills to a younger generation of Bauls, and support was provided to Baul families who had found themselves in difficult circumstances.

Returning to Dhaka the following day, we stopped at the village of Dhamrai, about 40 kilometers outside the capital, the last village in the country to practice the 2,000-year-old art of lost wax metal casting. At the village we met Sukanta Banik, who represents the fifth generation of a metalworking family in Dhamrai. Banik formed the Initiative for the Preservation of Dhamrai Metal-Casting and in 2003 the organization received a grant from the Ambassador's Fund to support its effort to preserve the lost wax technique.

Lost wax casting requires highly skilled crafts-people to make a wax model of the statue, which is then coated with clay. When the mould is fired, the wax drains out and is replaced with molten metal. Once the cast has cooled, the mould is broken and the statue is filed and polished. This painstaking process allows the production of highly detailed three dimensional statues of Hindu deities, each of which is unique. But competition from inexpensive mass produced statues, combined with the exodus of much of Bangladesh's affluent Hindu

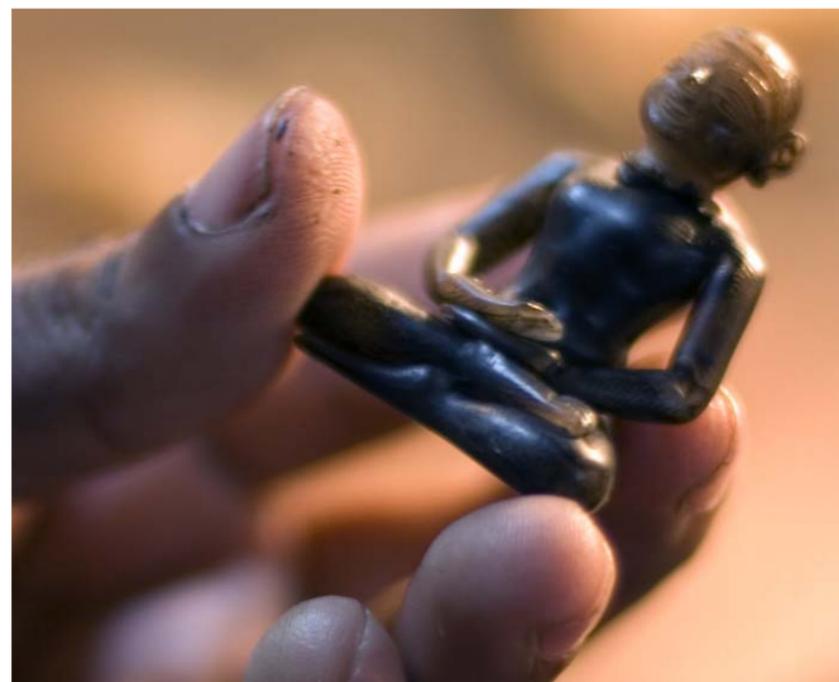
community to India, has pushed the once flourishing metal casting industry almost to extinction.

A grant from the Ambassador's Fund allowed Banik to hire and train more artisans for his workshop, to produce a short DVD about the lost wax method, and to hold an exhibition in Dhaka.

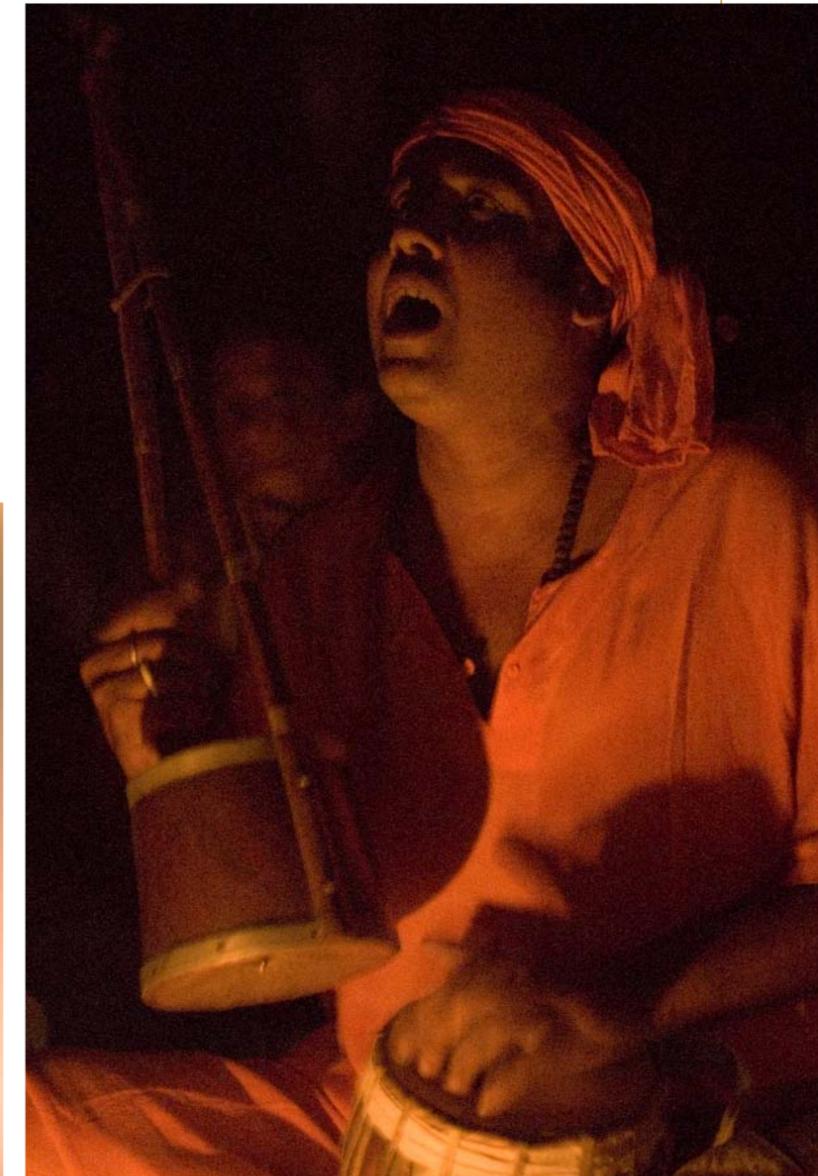
"After the exhibition, lots of Bangladeshis came to see our workshop," he says. "Before, we only had four or five artisans making small pieces, and the quality was not so good. Now the artists compete with each other to make better pieces. It's the confidence of the



Left: A 2003 grant from the Ambassador's Fund helped artisans such as this man conduct an apprenticeship and a skills exchange program with metal workers using similar techniques in Nepal.



Above: A modern example of a 2,000-year-old tradition of handmade metal casting that survives in 30 villages around Dhamrai in the Manikganj district of Bangladesh.



Above: A 2005 grant from the Ambassador's Fund benefited the Baul singers of Bangladesh. These wandering musicians are preserving a 1,000-year-old tradition of Sufi music, singing songs of love for God. The Bauls were given funds to record hundreds of songs and visit schools.



A woman walks past a Portuguese colonial-era building showing signs of tsunami damage in Matara, Sri Lanka. The Ambassador's Fund sponsored a survey of the architecturally unique town, with a mix of Dutch, Portuguese, British and indigenous structures, to facilitate reconstruction.

artists that is different now, because of the recognition.”

The last stop on the journey took me to Sikkim, where a grant from the Ambassador's Fund has allowed the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Gangtok to upgrade its library and museum. Founded in 1958, the institute houses about 45,000 Tibetan

manuscripts, the third largest collection in the world. Almost 50 years on, the grant allowed the institute to make urgent improvements to its building, including waterproofing the roof, rewiring and installing dehumidifiers. These are essential if the manuscripts are to survive in Sikkim's rainy climate.

Funds were also used to improve the displays in the institute's ground-floor museum, where visitors from all over India and the world browse through an enlightening array of Tibetan paintings, statues and ritual objects.



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Left: A weaver prepares to spin a silk sari in a Bishnupur tradition that is still practiced today.

Below: Improved lighting and new cabinets afford a fresh view of rare statues and traditional art objects at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Sikkim. In addition to beautifying the museum display, the Ambassador's Fund waterproofed and rewired the building.

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SAMPALHUNDREB - 7 NOS

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Guru Padmasambhava
(Illustration artist, 1900s)

Sampa hundred literally means "the spontaneous fulfilling of wishes", and is a prayer text by Guru Rinpoche containing the 13 Manifestations of the Guru, which are depicted in this thangka. The prayer originated from the 8th century when Guru Rinpoche was departing for the Western cannibal land to preach the Dharma. The King of Tibet at that time, lha sras mukhe'i lisan pa, beseeched the Guru to prolong his stay in Tibet but the Guru refused and proceeded to leave. The King of Tibet was moved to tears and fell unconscious to the ground. When the King regained consciousness, the Guru felt deep compassion and gave him lha sras dpa' lhun grub prayer text as his testament. The king kept the text away from the public view in the temple of Ras lag dam pa gyang in Lhasa. Later in 10th century (male water dragon year), the text was discovered by s'nal sku bzang po bdag pa who presented it to Rig 'dzin rgod idem chen. Rig 'dzin rgod idem chen grags pa revived the text all over Tibet in the form of a prayer text to Guru Rinpoche, along with the depiction of his 13 Manifestations.



Padmasambhava (Padma 'byung gnas), or the Lotus-Born, was born in the 8th century in Onyzen (Oddiyāna) now located in the Swat valley of present day Afghanistan. It was thanks to Padmasambhava that Buddhism succeeded in gaining a foothold in Tibet where he is venerated as the Second Buddha. He is usually represented wearing a red cap and holding a dorje (vajra) in his right hand as a

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Guru Rinpoche
Skt. Padmasambhava

symbol of his Tantric power. In his left hand, he holds a skull which is used as a receptacle for daily food or nectar in the performance of rituals. A trident rests on his left shoulder symbolizing the doctrine of Kusum (Trikaṃya) aimed at rooting out the Three Poisons of lust (desire), hatred and ignorance. Statues are made of wood, clay or metal and depict the deity in different forms.