



IN FOCUS: NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC GREATEST PORTRAITS

“AFGHANISTAN AND THE AFGHAN GIRL”

REMARKS BY

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**ORANGE COUNTY REGIONAL HISTORY CENTER
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Ms. Johanna Clark, (thank for introduction; Board Chairman of the Orange County Regional History Center)

Mr. Sara Van Arsdel, (Executive Director Orange County Regional History Center)

Mr. Max Stewart, (Executive Director for the International Council of Florida)

Ambassador Harriet Elam-Thomas, (Ambassador-in-Residence University of Central Florida)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honored to be here to celebrate the opening of this marvelous exhibit. My congratulations to the people who have made this possible, particularly to Mayor Buddy Dyer of Orlando and Mayor Richard Crotty of Orange County.

The images we see this evening all convey powerful messages. They represent beauty, agony, hope, perseverance and reflect resplendent history and traditions. Each one has a story to tell—none more so than the image of the Afghan girl.

In 1984, one-fourth of the Afghan people were living as nameless, faceless refugees in neighboring countries. Some were registered in obscure UNHCR lists as mere statistics. This is when photographer Steve McCurry encountered Sharbat Gula, who was 13 at the time. Earlier that year, her village was bombed by Soviet gunships, killing her parents and forcing her and her remaining relatives to flee their homeland. McCurry spotted Sharbat in a decrepit make-shift school in the camp and the entire world saw what Steve captured.

Published in 1985 in the *National Geographic*, Sharbat's piercing gaze, beautiful face, unkempt hair and torn shawl told of an Afghanistan ravaged by the violence of the Soviet invasion. Though only a teenager, her iconic image gave a distinct human face to a distant war and many faceless refugees.

Sharbat Gula's beauty was unique. A combination of east and west features, like Afghanistan. For thousands of years, it stood as a crossroad of civilizations, an ancient focal point of trade and migration that bridged East and West. As the heart of the Silk Road, Afghanistan became a mosaic of cultures, drawing influences from ancient Rome, China, Greece, Arabia, Iran, Central Asia and India. During periods of peace, this roundabout of cultures has contributed great accomplishments in almost every sphere of human endeavor.

Much of Afghanistan's rich cultural heritage and diverse history were buried during the three decades of conflict that started with the Soviet invasion and ended with the defeat of the Taliban in 2001. The performance of music was banned and traditional Afghan celebrations, like kite flying, were forbidden. Precious artifacts were stolen or destroyed; the National Museum in Kabul was bombed and looted; and the famous Buddhas of Bamiyan were shelled to rubbles by the Taliban. While the Soviet Union tried to destroy Afghanistan's infrastructure, the Taliban tried to destroy the Afghan nation by attacking its cultural and historical foundations.

In the last seven years, we have not only undertaken a process of building a peaceful and prosperous society in Afghanistan—we have also started recovering and re-discovering its culture, traditions and history. There is a saying in Afghanistan that we've taken to heart: "A nation stays alive if its culture stays alive."

In 2003, a stunning discovery was made. Hidden deep in the vaults of the Presidential Palace and Central Bank, brave Afghans had secretly stored some of Afghanistan's most precious artifacts. Included among them was the famed Bactrian Gold, a collection of thousands of gold artifacts dating back over 2,000 years. These priceless artifacts represent Afghanistan's most important cultural currency. They are a physical reminder of our historical traditions and a shining example of the many cultures and civilizations that shaped Afghanistan.

This year we brought the Bactrian Gold to the United States. In May, the exhibit "Afghanistan: Hidden Treasures of the National Museum, Kabul" opened at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. In four months, over 200,000 people visited the exhibit. It has since moved to San Francisco, where it will remain until January, and will continue on to Houston and New York throughout next year. If you find yourself in any of these cities, I strongly encourage you to visit the exhibit. It will give you a fuller understanding of Afghanistan's rich cultural heritage.

The story of the Afghan girl closely parallels the struggles Afghanistan has suffered. But in the last seven years we have worked with the international community to rebuild our institutions and recover our cultural heritage. Though we still face challenges, we have made significant advances. Sharbat may not yet have an easy life, but with your support, we are building a better place for her children.

Today 4.5 million Afghan refugees have returned home. 5.7 million children are going to school. 34 percent are girls, like Sharbat. Women are serving as ministers, governors, and 27 percent of our parliament are comprised of women. This is all due to your friendship, support and assistance, of which we are very grateful.

Thank you for inviting me to be part of this celebration.