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*Rediscovering Afghan Fine Arts: The life of an Afghan student in Germany, Abdul Ghafur Brechna**

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Abstract

In 1919, Afghanistan embarked on a series of reforms that led to the presence of Afghan students at various European universities, facilitating the circulation of peoples, ideas, and goods. Focusing on one of these cases, this article examines how an Afghan student engaged critically with ‘Western’ art and translated artistic ideas and technologies through the grid of Afghanistan’s own history of the fine arts. Through an exploration of the work of Abdul Ghafur Brechna (1907–1974)—artist, music composer, poet, and writer—I argue that, despite his desire to train at German technical schools, Brechna translated, then connected, his Western training to restore Afghanistan’s traditional visual and literary arts, making it problematic to define his oeuvre as purely ‘modern’ or ‘traditional’. The first aim is to situate Brechna within the intellectual milieu of Weimar Germany, placing emphasis on how he curated the course of his education to support his aims. By tracing out the evolution of his artistic knowledge to Afghanistan, the second part of this article connects his earlier training to the newly emerging scholars in Kabul who also grappled with national renewal and an ‘Aryan’ literary and cultural heritage. Lastly, I discuss his attempt to rewrite the history of the arts by closely analysing his visual and literary work, emphasizing in particular his attempt to reconnect to themes and genres that had previously been lost or neglected.

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Introduction

Acts of self-portrayal, whether done through words or images, are rarely simple and innocent. The art historian T. J. Clark has suggested viewing self-portraiture as not merely an opportunity for the viewer see the artist, but also to look ‘back to the place from which one is looking’.¹ The Afghan artist Abdul Ghafur Brechna’s self-portrait from the mid-1920s is filled with ambiguous emotions and conveys a sense of control, discomfort, and experimentation (see [Figure 1](#)).² He presumably painted this portrait as part of a class assignment at an art academy in Germany, which he most likely drew from either a photograph or a reflection in the mirror. As Clark has argued, self-portraiture offers artists the opportunity to exert control over the ways in which they wanted to be represented to the viewer. The discomfort in Brechna’s look seems to allude to the divided self-perception of a migrant in Germany, prompting the viewer to rethink the racial and cultural categories by which Asian students were commonly categorized in Europe.³ After all, studies have shown how such racial typologies were documented and depicted in the case of Muslim students living in France.⁴

Exerting mastery in and control over processes of knowledge production or the development of knowledge-related practices are rarely associated with Asian artists working within European media. It may seem especially difficult to probe in this case of an Afghan student who clearly travelled to Germany to learn the latest and most up-to-date technologies in support of the newly independent Afghan state. The

¹ I thank Saloni Mathur for drawing my attention to T. J. Clark, ‘The look of self-portraiture’, *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1992, pp. 109–118. Also see Saloni Mathur, ‘A retake of Sher-Gil’s *Self-Portrait as Tahitian*’, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2011, pp. 515–544.

² All Persian names and words follow the *IJMES* transliteration system. However, ‘Abd al-Ghafūr Brishnā is standardized as Abdul Ghafur Brechna, as per the Brechna Archive, throughout the text, except for sources and references published outside the Brechna Archive.

³ For an examination of the unsettling temporalities that accompany the experience of migrants and ensuing creativity, see Ranajit Guha, ‘The migrant’s time’, *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1998, pp. 155–160.

⁴ I thank Ian Coller for this suggestion and for sharing his student images of the Mission égyptienne en France with me. See also Ian Coller, *Arab France: Islam and the making of modern Europe, 1798–1831* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); and Alain Silvera, ‘The first Egyptian student mission to France under Muhammad Ali’, *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1980, p. 17.



Figure 1. Abdul Ghafur Brechna, ‘Self-portrait “disguised as a Maha Raja”’, Germany, late 1920s. *Source:* Brechna Archive, Germany.

logic that juxtaposes European superiority with Asian mystical, religious, or tribal inferiority has been echoed in diffusionist historiographies that construe innovation, technology, and science as a key sign of Western modernity. Proponents of this argument understood science as moving from its centre in Europe in an immutable and systematic manner to the rest of the world, without any engagement or input from Asian thinkers.⁵ These views are further reinforced by a series of earlier and ongoing studies that depict Afghan state-building as a European-led process instead of an autochthonous one that also drew on local conditions and Islamicate traditions.

⁵ George Basalla, ‘The spread of Western science’, *Science*, vol. 156, no. 3775, 1967, pp. 611–622. For a critique of this view in the South Asian context, see Kapil Raj, ‘Beyond postcolonialism ... and postpositivism: circulation and the global history of science’, *Isis*, vol. 104, no. 2, 2013, pp. 337–347.

To move beyond simplified assumptions and the perceived rupture between modernity and a traditional Islam, this article seeks to trace out the dialogic and open-ended circulation of artistic technologies and media between Europe and Asia. The case study of Abdul Ghafur Brechna shows that Asian-European intellectual exchanges did not inevitably imply the inferiority of the Asian counterpart, nor compel the eradication of non-Western artistic elements. While Brechna's exchange was situated in a period of open diplomacy between the Afghan and German states (1921–1941), with the goal of developing a central Afghan state and strengthening its industries, the main aim of this article is to examine how Brechna translated, then connected, his Western education into reviving recognizably and distinctively Afghan artistic and literary traditions. I define these traditions as a set of historically contingent knowledge forms that articulated the cultural, social, and geographical position of Afghanistan in relation to regional networks. Artistically, Brechna accomplished this translation by smoothing the perceived rupture between the past and the present, specifically by tying his work to the Timurid painter Kamāl al-Dīn Bihzād (*circa* 1440–1535). In his writings, he participated in the movement that sought to revive the genre of *qissah* (story) and *afsānah* (fiction), both of which had been deemed obsolete in addressing pressing societal and cultural changes, in favour of translating European novels and short stories advocated by influential figures such as Maḥmud Tarzī.⁶

The study of Brechna's oeuvre is important, then, not merely because his career spanned four different Afghan regimes (1929–1974), but also because it offers us a less fragmented view of the relationship of the role of Islam in modern state-building. I argue against the inclination to categorize Brechna's art and writings as either 'modern' or 'traditional', 'Islamic' or 'pre-Islamic', and combine the scholarly perspectives of the history of migration, science, and visual studies to consider the ways in which Brechna created malleable mediums that did not simply conform to Western art media, nor purely reflect the modernizing agendas of Afghan state-sponsored literary and cultural institutions. The framework of circular migration, which set Brechna off to study in Europe then return to Afghanistan, is especially useful in understanding how actors transformed knowledge or knowledge-related practices across geographic, intellectual, and temporal terrains. A holistic view emerges

⁶ Nile Green and Nushin Arbabzadah (eds), *Afghanistan in ink: literature between diaspora and nation* (London: C. Hurst and Co., 2013), p. 12.

when considering his art and his writings as sources. In his paintings, Brechna engaged extensively with the broad category of antiquity and its potential to offer historical continuity and to break with binary models of artistic representation such as modern and traditional, Eastern and Western, Afghan and German, and even point to a blurry pre-Islamic/Islamic historical demarcation. His writings came in the form of folkloric tales designed for younger children and ekphrastic writings (or stories designed to accompany his paintings or narrate an action in the painting). Aside from its contribution to the study of Afghan intellectual history, an understanding of the body of work developed by Brechna enables us to reconsider the relationship between Islam and modernity, and the process of knowledge exchange in a non-European context.⁷

In the modern era, art education in Afghanistan was not formalized until the creation of new secondary and vocational schools in the mid-1920s. A select number of privately trained artists, who excelled in calligraphy, were typically brought into the dynastic courts of the Afghan state. For example, the calligrapher, poet, and historian Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Khālīl (1896–1984) was trained within his family. He subsequently joined the expanding state bureaucracy of Habīb Allāh Khān, Amān Allāh Khān, and Muḥammad Nādir Khān, and worked in various positions that the regimes required. This private and localized form of training began to change in 1921 when Ghulām Muḥammad Maymanagī (1873–1934), the eventual founder of the Kabul School of Fine Arts (Maktab-i Sanā'ī-yi Nafisāh) (f. 1924), received a diplomatic visa to study at a German vocational art school in Berlin.⁸ Following in Maymanagī's footsteps, Brechna was one of some 250 Afghan students who trained in German technical universities between 1921 and 1941. Participation in this exchange programme became a means to enter the Afghan state bureaucracy. Upon his return, Brechna engaged in a series of professional appointments: as Maymanagī's replacement directing the Kabul School of Fine Arts (1930–1939), director of the state's main editorial organ (Maṭba'ī

⁷ Recent studies in this direction include the work of Omnia El Shakry, *The Arabic Freud: psychoanalysis and Islam in modern Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

⁸ May Schinasi, *Kaboul 1773–1948: Naissance et croissance d'une capitale royale* (Napoli: Università degli studi di Napoli 'L'Orientale', 2008), p. 148; and Ināyat Allāh Shahrānī, *Sharḥ-i ahwāl va āsār-i pirūfīsūr Ghulām Muḥammad Maymanagī* (Peshawar: Kānūn-i Farhangī-i Qizil-i Chūpān, 1385 (2005)). I thank Jawan Shir Rasikh for sharing a copy with me.

Māshīn Khānah) (1938–1943), and subsequently co-director of Radio Kabul (1943–1953). After 1955, Brechna oversaw the creation of other Fine Arts colleges across Afghanistan, which, in some cases, were run by his former students or even funded through the sale of his portraits. The majority of these portraits were purchased by ordinary Afghans, in one case by a small shopowner from Kabul at an auction.⁹ These appointments certainly contributed to the spread and influence of his work, leading him to become a national icon responsible for multiple renditions of Afghanistan's founding figure Aḥmad Shāh Durrānī (r. 1742–1772) and composing the national anthem of Afghanistan in 1970. Although Brechna came to be identified with his homeland of Afghanistan, he has remained an international figure. His work was exhibited widely beyond the boundaries of Afghanistan.¹⁰ Long after his training in Germany ended in 1930, he maintained a close connection to the country, earning him the West German Distinguished Service Cross for his service to German culture and language in the 1960s.¹¹

In an attempt to chart the relationship between his earlier training during his migrant years and his subsequent oeuvre as a professional, the following sections will first situate Brechna within the larger geopolitical contours that put in motion his itinerancy between Afghanistan and Germany. In particular, I will focus on the efforts of the newly minted Afghan Ministry of Education (f. 1921), which trained and selected students for study abroad. Despite mounting European influence in the Afghan court, the Ministry remained determined to accommodate educational reforms within a Muslim curriculum. The second part locates Brechna in specific German artistic institutions, with the goal of explaining why certain sites of knowledge and their wider analogous artistic programmes spoke to him (as opposed to others that did not). Brechna's translation of German art was especially manifest in his desire to explore religious themes and employ contrasting scales in his paintings. These translations can be found throughout his art, music, stories, and plays, and made his work recognizable and meaningful to a wide-ranging Afghan audience and set of cultural contexts that expanded well beyond the literati.

⁹ 'Afghan artist returns from international art exhibition', *Kabul Times*, vol. 10, no. 201, 1971, pp. 2–4.

¹⁰ Tehran (1953, 1966); Delhi (1954, 1974); Cairo (1956); New York (1957); Moscow (1965, 1973); Peking (1967); Sofia (1967); Cannes (1971); and Dushanbe (1972).

¹¹ Brechna Archive, Karlsruhe, Germany: 'Hohe Auszeichnung für Abdul Ghafur Brechna', *Deutsches Nachrichtenblatt: Herausgegeben von der Botschaft der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, no.14, 1968.

Beyond stagnation and failure: towards a new history and historiography of circulation and exchange

In 1919, with the ascension of the Afghan sovereign Amān Allāh Khān (r. 1919–1929), Afghanistan was proclaimed an independent state poised to pursue a sovereign foreign policy, officially ending the country's status as a British protectorate. This declaration and the ensuing formation of diplomatic relations with various foreign countries are best understood in the context of mounting imperial influences in the region from India's integration into the British Raj in 1858. Following the end of the First World War, British and French powers expanded and created various protectorates in the Middle East. Afghanistan's own troubled relations with Britain had involved a series of disputes fought over resources, sovereignty, and the North-West Frontier, resulting in three Anglo-Afghan wars (1839–1842, 1878–1880, and 1919). The new Afghan regime thus perceived the nearby British as a threat and sought to maximize its independence by launching a policy that promoted new international treaties and sponsored the institutional development of the Afghan state.¹² These programmes included the development of new roads, dams, schools, and hospitals.

The new treaties resulted in the creation of embassies as well as calls on each foreign state to send technocrats to assist the regime's goals of centralization. Just as foreign technocrats arrived to oversee state-sponsored projects in Afghanistan, the Afghan government simultaneously sponsored the studies of students abroad where they were trained according to the strengths of each destination. Compared to the more modest involvement of some other nations, the German state sent over 300 German scientists and technocrats. Likewise, between 1921 to 1941, over 250 Afghan students travelled to train in higher education at German universities. The fledgling Afghan state discouraged students from settling down in Germany and on their return required them to take up positions in different sectors of the industrializing state.

It is tempting to succumb to teleological tropes, especially when considering the historical context that drove Afghanistan's aims to centralize and develop. After all, the idea that modern science emerged in the West in an era of Muslim decline has long been echoed in much

¹² Treaty parties included Turkey (March 1921), Iran (June 1921), Italy (1921), France (1922), Belgium (1923), Germany (1926), and Poland (1928).

of the historiography.¹³ A case in point is an understanding of the history of Afghanistan's exchange with the German state which relies on such an argument. From the vantage of the present historiography, the German state made its technological resources available to the Afghan state, but the latter could not successfully facilitate the shift from a fractured tribal system to a centralized 'modern' state. Regardless of how cleverly designed the flow of German expertise and technology was, ultimately the Afghan sovereigns Amān Allāh and his successor Nādir Khān (r. 1929–1933) 'failed' both ideologically and in terms of infrastructure to centralize and standardize factional laws.¹⁴ The inward-looking values and loose kinship structures intrinsic in Afghan tribes are often faulted for preventing the Afghan state's modernization schemes.¹⁵ Some successful transmission of German influence is measured in the development of Afghanistan's ethno-nationalist pursuits and its employment of Aryanism as an ideology to promote Pashto as the country's official language.¹⁶ The complex forms of exchange that developed between the Afghans and the outside world are, in this paradigm, boiled down to two opposing dichotomous viewpoints of the 'modern' and the 'religious'.¹⁷

Such perspectives ignore intellectual dialogues that took shape between Afghans and their Indian or Iranian counterparts, in particular within

¹³ For a discussion of this historiography and critique, see Marwa Elsharky, 'When science became Western: historiographical reflections', *Isis*, vol. 101, no. 1, 2010, pp. 98–109.

¹⁴ Thomas Hughes, 'The German mission to Afghanistan, 1915–1916', *German Studies Review*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2002, pp. 447–476; Ludwig Adamec, *Afghanistan's foreign affairs to the mid-twentieth century: relations with the USSR, Germany, and Britain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 24; and Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 434.

¹⁵ Leon Poullada, *Reform and rebellion in Afghanistan, 1919–1929: King Amanullah's failure to modernize a tribal society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), p. 267.

¹⁶ For the development of an Afghan racist nationalism in connection with Nazi Germany, see Senzil Nawid, 'Writing national history: Afghan historiography in the twentieth century', in *Afghan history through Afghan eyes*, (ed.) Nile Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 193. For the link in economic policies, see Sara Koplik, *A political and economic history of the Jews of Afghanistan* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

¹⁷ Afghan-German diplomacy is discussed in Adamec, *Afghanistan's foreign affairs*; Francis Nicosia, "'Drang nach Osten" continued? Germany and Afghanistan during the Weimar Republic', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 32, no. 2, 1997, pp. 235–257; Ğamrad Ğamšid, 'Die Beziehung zwischen Deutschland und Afghanistan, 1933–1945', PhD thesis, Humboldt University, 1994; and Dr Alema, 'Die Beziehungen zwischen Afghanistan und Deutschland in den Jahren 1919 bis 1929', PhD thesis, Universität Leipzig, 1994.

intellectual ‘contact zones’, where they interacted, studied, and critically exchanged ideas. In the field of Afghanistan studies, the past few decades have seen a surge of new studies that have not only ‘de-nationalized’ Afghan history and blurred the divide between the modern and the traditional, but also questioned the notion that reform and change was an external force *acting on* Afghans and subsuming them within supra-hegemonic imperial structures.¹⁸ Anthropologically and sociologically oriented histories have pointed at rich kinship structures and religious organizations that Afghans drew upon to respond to reform or to regulate the parameters of interchange with European counterparts.¹⁹ As historian Wali Ahmadi succinctly reminds us, there is not one telos to modernity, nor does it necessarily have a European inception:

[Afghan] intellectuals did not mount a discourse of wholesome imitation of the West and hardly saw modernization as an inexorable process of social transformation ending in direct importation and far-reaching reproduction of Western paradigms. They believed, rather paradoxically, that tradition and change could, and indeed do, coexist and effectively work together. Afghan modernity, in the process of its own self-legitimation, maintained a resilient and supple ambivalence towards tradition.²⁰

Engaging in large part with these works, as well as recent histories of science and migration studies, this article seeks to address the practical and intellectual implications of artistic interchange. While the study of

¹⁸ Robert D. Crews, *Afghan modern: the history of a global nation* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015); Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, *Connecting histories in Afghanistan: market relations and state formation on a colonial frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); May Schinasi, *Afghanistan at the beginning of the twentieth century: nationalism and journalism in Afghanistan: a study of Seraj ul-Akbhar (1911–1918)* (Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1979); Christine Noelle-Karimi, ‘The Abdali Afghans between Multan, Qandahar and Herat in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries’, in *Beyond Swat: history, society and economy along the Afghanistan–Pakistan frontier*, (eds) Benjamin Hopkins and Magnus Marsden (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); and Magnus Marsden, ‘From Kabul to Kiev: Afghan trading networks across the former Soviet Union’, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 49, no. 4, 2015, pp. 1010–1048.

¹⁹ Senzil Nawid, *Religious response to social change in Afghanistan* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1999); Fredrik Barth, *Political leadership among Swat Pathans* (London: Humanities Press, 1965); Alessandro Monsutti, ‘Anthropologizing Afghanistan: colonial and postcolonial encounters’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2013, pp. 269–285; and Richard Tapper, ‘Who are the Kuchi? Nomad self-identities in Afghanistan’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2008, pp. 79–116.

²⁰ Wali Ahmadi, *Persian literature in Afghanistan: anomalous visions of history and form* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 21.

Afghan students may not fit within traditional frameworks of ‘migration’, seeing them as migrants opens new avenues through which to understand migration and the circulation of knowledge and people as interconnected processes, rather than one-way travel. Defining Afghan students in interwar Germany as migrants expands our understanding of the term and ensures that circular (or non-sedentary) and voluntary patterns of mobility are recognized as part of the framework of ‘migration’. This reformulation also problematizes the present image of Muslim mobility as merely a product of involuntary push or pull forces compelling displacement and exile, and points at heterogenous ways in which migrant experiences can be historicized.²¹ The emphasis on circulation, then, delineates a process by which ideas and methods about science and technology underwent important transformative changes at the hands of Afghan migrants, who rather actively participated in intercultural knowledge production.²²

The transcultural geopolitics of Brechna’s education and state-career

While the emphasis on Brechna’s independence vis-à-vis larger diplomatic arrangements remains an important theme throughout much of this article, it is still important to examine the geopolitical parameters that put his studies in motion. The geopolitics help chart out the structural dimension of his itinerancy, allowing us to see which institutions he visited and what the Afghan government expected these exchange programmes to accomplish for those it sent out. A close look at the activities of the Afghan Ministry of Education is especially useful to show how all levels of society, not merely its students in the diaspora, maintained a priority of preserving Afghan knowledge systems, despite (or in concurrence with) European reformers in the Afghan court. These exchanges were executed, first, through a careful selection process by which students were sent abroad and, secondly, by closely

²¹ For Muslim migration in Europe, see Bekim Agai, Umar Ryad and Mehdi Sajid, *Muslims in interwar Europe: a transcultural historical perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); for the interconnection of knowledge and migration, see Simone Lässig and Swen Steinberg, ‘Knowledge on the move: new approaches toward a history of migrant knowledge’, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2017, pp. 313–346.

²² Claude Markovits, Jacques Pouchepadass, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds), *Society and circulation: mobile people and itinerant cultures in South Asia, 1750–1950* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), pp. 3–4.

monitoring and working with European pedagogues. After all, the goal was not to replicate Western ideas but to produce new kinds of educational systems that fitted the state's needs.

The Afghan Ministry of Education housed 18 bureaus, one of which was exclusively designated to oversee and regulate daily interactions with foreign-born reformers. From Ministry publications, we know of the array of different responsibilities, which included (among others) overseeing the detailed translation of foreign textbooks into Persian, evaluating requests for new disciplines, and even sifting through archaeological discoveries and cataloguing them at the *Muzīyam-i millī-yi Afghānistān* (the National Museum of Afghanistan).²³

In 1921, as pedagogues from France, Germany, and Turkey arrived at the Kabul court to draft preliminary proposals for secondary schools, the Ministry set specific standards that conformed to religious educational traditions. Dr Walter Iven, the German petitioner, noted in a letter to the German Foreign Office that after presenting multiple versions of his proposal, ultimately the one written in Persian and in accordance with a classical Perso-Islamic study secured him the vote of the Afghan Ministry.²⁴ His proposal led to the creation of the first German-run secondary school in 1924, the *Ämani Oberrealschule* or *Maktab-i Amānī* in Kabul. While introducing Western educational practices, vernacular conventions were not to be forgotten. The school set up a special parallel curriculum (*Sonderprogramm*) that kept students immersed in Arabic, Persian, and Islamic history and thought, and at the same time prepared them for higher education in Germany. Matriculation exams were a crucial assessment tool by which students were approved for their studies abroad. Here, again, the Ministry hired Afghan superintendents to invigilate the exams and hand-pick students for higher education in Germany.²⁵

Once students were selected for the study abroad programme, the Afghan Ministry considered the strengths of each destination. Each country represented a key piece in a larger puzzle and an opportunity to interweave a specific set of abilities into various sectors of the industrializing Afghan economy. The earliest destinations in 1921 included Turkey, Germany, France, and Russia, followed by Japan and Italy in the 1930s. The programme even came to include a small

²³ *Nizāmnāmah-i asāsī-yi vizārat-i jalīlah-i ma'ārif-i Afghānistān* (Regulations of the Afghan Ministry of Education), 1302 (1923).

²⁴ Politisches Archiv des Auswärtiges Amt (German Foreign Office) (hereafter AAmt): R 63256-7: 'Die Aemani/Amani Oberrealschule, 1927–1934'.

²⁵ Ibid.

number of Afghan girls who, after 1928, predominantly travelled to Turkey to study medicine and nursing.²⁶ While the Soviet Union and Italy primarily received Afghans for training in aviation, Turkey and France were seen as ideal places to receive an education in medicine and the military. There was an overlap with Iranian students who also arrived in France for medical training.²⁷ Due to Afghanistan's long historic ties to the former Ottoman empire, and in part because the Turkish state helped subsidize the financial costs, the new Turkish Republic remained one of the most popular destinations up to 1941. For instance, between 1925 to 1927 roughly 50 per cent of the Afghan students were sent to Turkey, while Russia welcomed 27 per cent and France 17 per cent.²⁸

Within these larger educational reform movements, the German university system offered a multitude of unique incentives that were accompanied by financial, practical, and political advantages. Starting in the second half of the nineteenth century, the German state promoted the study of technology (*Technik*) as a field concerned with 'the useful arts, manufacturing, industry, invention, applied science and the machine'. Germany's distinction was especially highlighted in relation to its British counterpart, where 'science' as a field remained restricted to the natural sciences and where considerations of 'practical utility' could diminish the role of science as 'subordinate to industrial progress, a culturally powerful symbol in Victorian England'.²⁹ Many developing or formerly colonized states viewed this practical dimension of German education as an advantage and sent its youth for training well into the era of decolonization.³⁰

²⁶ Hafizullah Emadi, *Dynamics of political development in Afghanistan: the British, Russian, and American invasions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 22; and May Schinasi, 'Femmes afghans: instruction et activités publiques pendant le règne amâniya (1919–1929)', *Annali dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli*, vol. 55, no. 4, 1995, pp. 446–462.

²⁷ For France, see 'Les élèves étrangers dans les lycées', *Revue universitaire*, vol. 30, 1921; and Mehrzad Bouroujerdi, "'The West" in the eyes of the Iranian intellectuals of the interwar years (1919–1939)', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2006, pp. 391–401.

²⁸ This estimate comes from British surveillance records that traced the numbers carefully; see India Office Records, British Library/L/PS/10/1015/1: 1921–1928: Afghanistan: Education of Afghan Youths in Europe and Turkey.

²⁹ Eric Schatzberg, *Technology: critical history of a concept* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), pp. 67–68; and E. Schatzberg, 'Technik comes to America', *Technology and Culture*, vol. 47, 2006, pp. 486–512.

³⁰ Eric Burton, 'Decolonization, the Cold War, and Africans' routes to higher education overseas, 1957–65', *Journal of Global History*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2019, pp. 1–23.

Germany's advantages to Afghan reformers in the Ministry were not only educational. Germany's financial struggles with inflation following the First World War provided favourable exchange rates, easing the financial burden placed on students by the need to rent apartments and expand their libraries. In addition, Germany's lack of imperial power in the Middle East (in contrast to France and Britain) made it an attractive partner. During the First World War, many Afghan Pashtuns who had served in the British Army ended up in Germany either after being captured and brought to Germany as prisoners of war (POWs) or arrived voluntarily in Germany after deserting from the British Army. Through collaborative training by Ottoman and German officers, Muslim POWs were eventually remobilized to confront their former colonizers, while a large number of them settled as migrants in Germany.³¹ In the context of the First World War, the German Foreign Office supported the creation of places of worship, the celebration of religious holidays, the formation of clubs and organizations, and the printing of diasporic journals and newspapers. By the 1920s, roughly 400–500 Indians also lived in Germany, resulting in the development of widespread anti-colonial networks that connected Berlin to San Francisco, Paris, Kabul, and London.³² Afghan students who arrived in the course of the early twentieth century were privy to these many institutional and cultural spaces that had originally been founded by former Indian and Afridi prisoners of wars.

The Afghan Ministry of Education capitalized on German support for its Muslim sojourners and requested that Afghan students be closely monitored by the German Foreign Office and the Afghan legation in Berlin. Younger students who lived with their cohort in a newly purchased dormitory were regularly sent a tutor to ensure their local immersion. The German Foreign Office accommodated many of the Afghan Ministry of Education's concerns. For instance, it worked with the Prussian Ministry of Culture and Education to admit Afghans mid-semester and, more astonishingly, allowed Afghan students to replace the usual linguistic prerequisites of French and Latin with

³¹ For a thorough discussion, see Gerhard Höpp, *Muslimen in der Mark. Als Kriegsgefangene und Internierte in Wünsdorf und Zossen, 1914–1924* (Berlin: Zentrum Moderner Orient/Geisteswissenschaftliche Zentren Berlin e.V., Studien 6, 1997); and Ravi Ahuja, 'The corrosiveness of comparison: reverberations of Indian wartime experiences in German prison camps (1915–1919)', in *The world in world wars: experience, perceptions and perspectives from Africa and Asia*, (eds) Heike Liebau et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 131–166.

³² Maia Ramnath, *The Hajj to utopia: anti-colonial radicalism in the South Asian diaspora, 1905–1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

Persian.³³ Older Afghan students who had already begun their higher education at technical universities were encouraged to visit the Institute for Oriental Studies at the University of Berlin (Seminar für Orientalische Sprachen zu Berlin) (f. 1887), where Persian-language courses had originally been designed for diplomats. All of this was congruent with the goal of students returning to Afghanistan and serving the state after their training abroad. These special accommodations also highlight the extent to which the German Foreign Office worked to fortify its geopolitical relations with Afghanistan through the educational exchange programme. It invested considerable resources in overseeing various aspects of the students' lives in Germany. Internal correspondence explains the reason: '[I]t is of utmost importance for Germany that the students are trained in Germany so that upon their return to their homeland they can function as advocates for German culture.'³⁴

It was in this context that, in 1922, at just 15 years of age, Abdul Ghafur Brechna arrived in Berlin to train in engineering. However, soon after his arrival, Brechna decided not to pursue the 'useful arts' and petitioned the local Afghan legation in Berlin to study art and painting instead. After multiple exchanges, in which the Afghan legation warned him that a 'career in painting would not feed him', it finally approved Brechna's studies in painting (*naqqāshī*) on the condition that he incorporate a 'useful' component into his curriculum.³⁵ To that end, Brechna studied lithography alongside art and painting. Lithography was highly sought after in Afghanistan and the wider region, because it kept intact some aspects of the manuscript traditions of Arabic, Persian, and Urdu calligraphy. Furthermore, when he became director of the state's printing press (Maṭba'-'i Māshīn Khānah), lithography eventually allowed Brechna a much more portable and cost-effective system of reproducing prints, which manifested in designing some of the covers of the monthly *Kābul* journal for the literary association, Anjuman-i Adabī-yi Kābul.³⁶

³³ AAmt: R 62998 and 9: 'Die Zulassung'.

³⁴ AAmt: R 62998f, 'Die Zulassung von Schülern aus Afghanistan zu deutschen Lehranstalten 1921–1927', p. 28.

³⁵ The process is documented in his memoir, see Brechna Archive: Abdul Ghafur Brechna, *Khātirahā-yi Abdul Ghafur Brechna, 1959–60*; and 'Afghan artist returns from international art exhibition', *Kabul Times*, vol. 10, no. 201, 1971, pp. 2–4.

³⁶ Nile Green, 'From Persianate past to Aryan antiquity. Transnationalism and transformation in Afghan intellectual history, c.1880–1940', *Afghanistan*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2018, pp. 26–67.

Brechna's training began with a short stint at a small arts and crafts school in Berlin, followed by his entrance into the Prussian Academy of Arts (*Akademische Hochschule für die bildenden Künste*), where he studied under the German modernist Otto Bartning (1883–1959) and the famous German impressionist painter Max Liebermann (1847–1935). It was here that Brechna first encountered European paintings with realistic scenes and emphasis on daily life. His artistic development was to shift significantly during the course of his training in Germany, which also took him to the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich (*Akademie der Bildenden Künste*), the School of Arts and Crafts (*Kunstgewerbeschule Barmen/Elberfeld*) in the western German town of Barmen, and finally to the Academy of Fine Arts in Leipzig (*Akademie für graphische Künste und Buchgewerbe*).

At the School of Arts and Crafts in Barmen, Brechna not only met his future wife Lisette Marguerite Neufeind, but also began to develop his own distinctive style. Like many of the other Muslim migrants who had pushed against the ban on interracial marriages, Brechna and Neufeind were able to circumvent the interdiction by reassuring the German Foreign Office that they would not remain permanently in Germany. In an exchange of letters, he assured the German Foreign Office of his return to Afghanistan because the Afghan government had promised him a position in the government's editorial printing press, *Māshīn Khānah*.³⁷ Internal correspondence suggests that the German Foreign Office made inquiries at the Afghan legation in Berlin and only thereafter approved the pair's departure to Afghanistan.³⁸

Just as Brechna and Neufeind were making their way back to Afghanistan in 1929, a coup instigated by the usurper *Habīb Allāh Kalakānī* (r. January 1929–October 1929) broke out and deposed the pro-German King *Amān Allāh*. Amid these developments, many Afghan students in Germany broke off their educational programmes and returned to Afghanistan to support the deposed *Amān Allāh*.

³⁷ The *Māshīn Khānah* served different purposes under different sovereigns, and under both the *Amān Allāh* and *Nādir Khān* regimes, the state housed a printing press (*Maṭba'ī Māshīn Khānah*).

³⁸ The German Foreign Office banned intermarriages between migrants and German women, and therefore monitored the itinerancy of Germans going to Afghanistan. See the files held at the Bundesarchiv (German Federal Archives), Koblenz (hereafter BArch): R 901/28136: 'Überwachung des Auswanderung nach Afghanistan, 1924–1938'. *Brishnā's* letter sent to the German Foreign Office was kept in these same files that monitored German émigrés; see, in particular, 'Überwachung des Auswanderung nach Afghanistan: Anschrift an das Auswärtige Amt, Sept. 1928'.

Kalakānī's rule lasted for roughly nine months until Muḥammed Nādir Khān, one of Amān Allāh's foremost generals, defeated him and re-established order. Rather than welcoming back the ousted king, however, Nādir Khān announced the formation of a new dynasty under his Musāhibān family.

Starting in 1933 a series of German-educated students and teachers contested Nādir Khān's rule, including plotting a series of conspiracies and assassinations. Among these political assassinations was the murder of British officials at the British Legation in Kabul, as well as the murder of the king himself in 1933. The role of Brechna and his wife in these turbulent political events is unclear from the sources. Abiding by their promise to the German authorities, the couple lived in Afghanistan during these political changes and soon began their long careers in the arts and education. Neufeind assumed a teaching position at the Maktab-i Āmānī, where she illustrated and translated several German books for the Afghan curriculum. For his part, Brechna became the director of the Kabul School of Fine Arts (1930–1939), where he replaced its founder Ghulām Muḥammad Maymanagī. Under Brechna's leadership the School added new courses in architecture, ceramics, lithography, and stone carving.³⁹ From 1938 to 1943 Brechna assumed the role of director of the Māshīn Khānah, taking charge of the Afghan government's printing press which published government pamphlets and, most notably, the monthly and annual publications of the Anjuman-i Adabī-yi Kābul (Kabul Literary Society) and the Afghan Historical Society (Anjuman-i Tārīkh-i Kābul). Brechna followed this by acting as the co-director of Radio Kabul from 1943 to 1953. It was in this position that he most clearly engaged with the complex problems facing the new Afghan state, now headed by King Nādir Shāh's son Muḥammad Zāhir Shāh (r. 1933–1973).

Ambitions and limitations: reframing Brechna's engagement with German art

Having traced the institutional dimensions of Brechna's education in Germany, this section examines the overlapping intellectual and artistic networks that he encountered in Germany to trace his intellectual development. It may be possible to reduce Brechna's art to little more

³⁹ Madhavan K. Palat and Anara Tabyshalieva, *History of civilizations of Central Asia*, Vol. 6 (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2005), p. 766.

than pastiches or imitations of European art, with suggestions that his paintings in his own Afghan setting were merely diffusionist representations lacking in originality. It is certainly true that Brechna devoted his course of study in Germany to bringing back new techniques for his nation-in-the-making. Yet, clues within his paintings and texts offer evidence of a much more complex process of translation of the artistic techniques, themes, and traditions he encountered in Germany. His activities cannot be reduced to the modernizing agenda of his patrons in Berlin. Instead, his work reveals an attempt to create historical continuity between the Afghan past and the world he experienced upon his return through an active process of translation and adaptation rather than any passive form of imitation of German masters.

The work of art historian Partha Mitter is especially useful here, as he reminds us to consider the complexity involved in studying artistic exchanges between the West and East. Mitter suggests that cultural interchange does not always reflect 'the inferiority of the borrower'.⁴⁰ He questions the conventional notion of 'influence' to reconstruct a dialogic relationship between the colonial language and vernacular artistic representations. Building on Mitter's work means considering Brechna's exchange with European artists as one defined neither through 'domination and dependence nor a loss of self'.⁴¹ Instead, we should focus on Brechna's active process of translation, which can be done by first asking why the small, out-of-the-way art school of Barmen offered Brechna a moment of dialogue and negotiation.

The reconstruction of Brechna's life and work poses a challenge to the interested scholar. Unlike his German contemporaries who travelled and researched in Afghanistan and carefully documented their observations in their published ethnographies and scientific accounts, Afghan students in Germany did not systematically record their experiences during their sojourn. As problematic as the use of state and institutional sources (including matriculation records) can be in recovering individual agency, these records can help to locate Brechna's intellectual development within the ideological currents of the numerous art schools at which he studied. This approach seeks to consider the qualitative significance of institutional sources, recasting them as distinctive sites of knowledge production and exchange within the otherwise seemingly 'flat' diplomatic

⁴⁰ Partha Mitter, *Art and nationalism in colonial India: Occidental orientations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 6.

⁴¹ P. Mitter, *The triumph of modernism: India's artists and the avant-garde, 1922–47* (London: Reaktion, 2007), p. 10.

spaces between Afghanistan and Germany, thereby acknowledging the agency that individual students possessed in this exchange.

Brechna's particular agency in the knowledge exchange between Afghanistan and Germany can be pieced together through his artistic work in Germany and upon his return to his homeland. In addition, his memoir of his travels to Germany, written in 1959–1960, well after the described activities took place, provides Brechna's own interpretation of his experience. The memoir must be read within the new social and political contexts as a self-conscious retelling, designed to present Brechna's experience and sojourn as he wished them to be remembered. Nevertheless, the memoir helps to tease out Brechna's expectations of a German education and ultimately hints at the ways in which he reconceptualized his art training into new Afghan subject matter.

Brechna's later work and recollections from his memoir make it possible to connect his intellectual and artistic development to different art institutions in Germany, enabling us to identify specific methods that he would subsequently draw on. For example, Brechna's introduction to the Berlin art scene must have been quite unfamiliar to the young adolescent, yet his memoir depicts him as largely unimpressed by it and by his teachers. He struggled not only to appreciate the art scene of Berlin, but also expressed frustration in his memoir about the difficulty of specific techniques in anatomy and animal paintings. In fact, he very much dismissed the training he received from Max Liebermann at the Prussian Academy of Arts. Liebermann was a famous impressionist artist, but he only showed up to class when absolutely necessary, leaving his teaching duties to fellow professors, such as Otto Bartning and a certain Herr Fischer, presumably Arthur Fischer (1872–1948), the German painter and photographer.

While Brechna failed to find his place in Berlin, his experience at the small School of Arts and Crafts in the western city of Barmen (modern-day Wuppertal) after 1925/26 proved to be much more influential. Brechna described how the topography of Barmen reminded him of his homeland (*'tappahā-yi sabz-i vatan'*). It became a place where he was finally able, in his own words, to be 'happy'.⁴² Unlike his rather unfulfilling experience with the famous Liebermann, Brechna also found a true mentor and inspiration in the person of Ludwig Fahrenkrog (1867–1952). Thematically and methodologically he seemed particularly intrigued by his teacher's ability to paint something so inherently evil and dark as the figure of the Satan (*iblis*) in the most 'romantic' and flattering way.

⁴² Brechna, *Khātirahā-yi*, p. 45.

Professor Fahrenkrog was our Professor of anatomy and portraits, besides being trained in painting, he was also a poet and literary scholar. His famous work is called Lucifer, meaning the devil, which is also reflected in his latest paintings, depicted in the techniques of Romanticism. In contrast to how my imagination views the devil, which is analogous with frightening wings and tail, he drew the devil in the most beautiful manner.⁴³

Having struggled with anatomy and animal depictions while in Berlin, Brechna saw in Fahrenkrog's work the ability to depict something unpleasant in a stunning and inspiring way. Fahrenkrog challenged the limits of Brechna's imagination, while also pushing his technical abilities to actualize his expanded imagination.



Figure 2. Abdul Ghafur Brechna, title unknown, Germany, circa 1920s. Source: Brechna Archive, Germany.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 96. See original: *Pirūfīsūr Fārīnkrog ustād-i anātūmī va pūrtit-i mā, 'alāvah bar naqqāshī, shā'ir va adīb ham būd. Aṣārī banām-i lūsfar ya'nī iblīs dārad. Aghlab tāblūhā-yi ū (bashwāh-yi rūmāntūk) hamūn mawzū' rā namāyish mūdahad. Bar 'aks ānchi man shaytān rā taṣawwur mīnamūdām bāl va dumī barāyash qiyās mīkardam ū iblīs rā qashang rasm mīnamūd.*

The striking conversations that Brechna had with Fahrenkrog is best illustrated in a work he produced in the mid-1920s, most likely while he was a resident at the Academy of Fine Arts in Leipzig. The painting is only known from a photograph in which Brechna can be seen at work (see [Figure 2](#)). Viewing this painting alongside Fahrenkrog's 'Baldur' (see [Figure 3](#)) shows the thematic overlap in both content and technique. Given that Brechna's painting is only able to be seen in a photograph, it is not clear whether Brechna, like Fahrenkrog, painted in black-and-white or if he used a variety of colours. The latter is more plausible, given that Brechna is shown holding a colour palette. Both painters made use of similar brush strokes, emanating in both cases away from the main subjects in the paintings, accentuating the centrality of the figures. The scenes depict a spiritual setting; in Brechna's example the toga-like robes and the reference to the ocean may be connected to a sort of blessing or baptism, while in Fahrenkrog's painting a Christ-like figure is shown descending from the skies.

Each painting experiments with contrasting depictions of scale. Fahrenkrog's painting featured an oversized figure wearing a *manji* sign (or *Hackenkreuz*) on his belt as a reference to the pagan Germanic emblem of the god of adventure, Donner (Thor). Such a contrast in scale between a central figure and smaller peripheral ones featured quite prominently in Brechna's later paintings (see [Figures 4](#) and [5](#)). Yet, while we can see Brechna's initial experiment with contrasting scale in dialogue with Fahrenkrog, the imbalance in proportion and scale, and the distribution of individuals across the scope of the painting, directly connect to the Herati painter Kamāl al-Dīn Bihzād and his painting of the Timurid Great Mosque in Samarqand (see [Figure 6](#)). The monumental presence of figures commonly featured in Persianate paintings may have been 'miniatures' in scale but served to accentuate figures as larger than life.⁴⁴ Thus, there is no reason to believe that Brechna's experiments with scale solely derived from the examples of his German teacher and may have embodied an attempt to produce historical continuity.

In Brechna's words, '[Fahrenkrog's] artistic style was in the techniques of Max Klinger—[and Anselm] Feuerbach and in certain images in the

⁴⁴ B. W. Robinson, *Fifteenth-century Persian painting: problems and issues* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), p. 14.



Figure 3. Ludwig Fahrenkrog, 'Baldur', place unknown, 1908. *Source:* Galleria d'arte Thule.

methods of Arnold Böcklin, the famous German painter.⁴⁵ Fahrenkrog came out of the tradition of a previous generation of German artists, like Arnold Böcklin (1827–1901) and Max Klinger (1857–1920), who introduced bold and contrasting colours into German art. Their style did not attract much interest from their contemporaries. Their neopagan and romantic landscapes did not fit within the modernist art movements in the rapidly modernizing post-*fin de siècle* Germany. Yet, recent studies have revisited the role of these largely forgotten figures in shaping debates around cultural politics and the place of art in Germany. One scholar places these artists under the larger umbrella of *Phantasielkunst* ('art of the imagination') and points at their desire to return to classical antiquity with the aim of attaining spiritual renewal.

⁴⁵ Brechna, *Khātirahā-yi*, p. 96; see original: *Sabk-i ū dar naqqāshī bashīva-yi Max Klinger—Feuerbach va dar ba' šī tasāwīr ba ravīsh-i Arnold Böcklin naqqāshān-i ma' rūf-i Almān būd.*

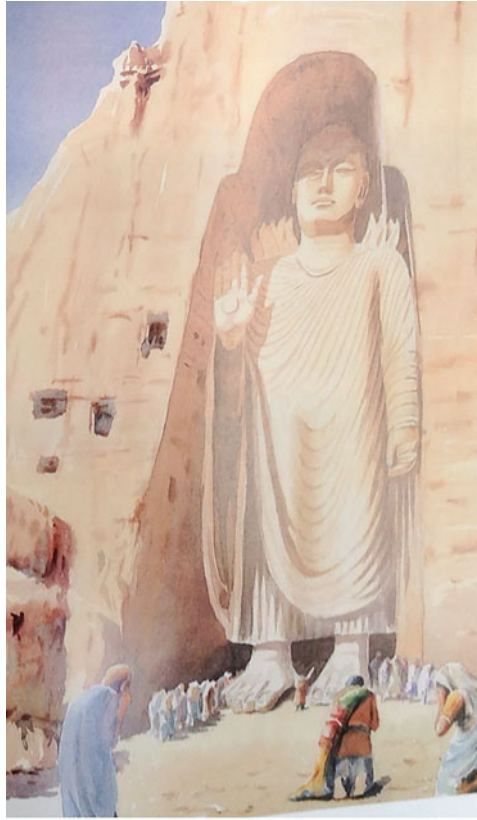


Figure 4. Abdul Ghafur Brechna, 'The large Buddha in the pre-Islamic era', Kabul, 1960s. Source: Habibo Brechna, Roland Steffan and Abdullah Breshna, *Buddhas und Menschen in Bamiyan: Begleitschrift zur Ausstellung 'Der Bazaar von Kabul-Schnittpunkte der Kulturen'* (St Gallen: Historisches und Völkerkundemuseum, 2001).

This conception of art precipitated out of German reactions against French impressionism in the 1880s and 1890s. Its advocates diverged from theories of modern painting, emerging with mid-nineteenth-century realism...[They] sought to advance an art that would be somehow 'modern' and yet conceive of its function as the awakening of content of consciousness in the viewer... through the stimulation of his imagination (*Phantasie*).⁴⁶

Böcklin and his cohort were among the first German-speaking painters to draw from the full range of available genres and canvases, explicitly trying to connect the themes and techniques of the past

⁴⁶ Annie Bourneuf, *Paul Klee: the visible and the legible* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 95.

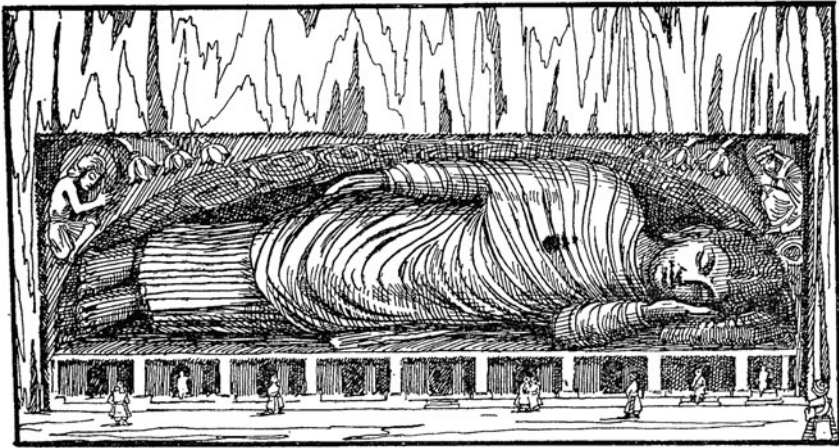


Figure 5. Abdul Ghafur Brechna, 'The resting Buddha of Bamiyan', Kabul, 1972. *Source:* Habibo Brechna et al., *Buddhas und Menschen in Bamiyan*.



Figure 6. Kamāl al-Dīn Bihzād, 'The building of the great mosque of Samarkand', Herat, circa 1480. *Source:* Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, John Work Garrett Collection, ff. 359v–360r.

with those of the present. They thus proposed their own responses to the same anxieties that troubled their fellow artists at the turn of the twentieth century. The end of the nineteenth century was a particularly tumultuous period in Germany that saw rapid industrial, social, and political transformation. Artists offered a range of reactions to these changes, including a turn to the past in search of stability in an ever-changing age.⁴⁷ It was not uncommon for German artists to seek inspiration from Greek mythology. This was particularly the case for Böcklin, who promoted an art that he saw as Grecian in form but ‘modern’ in colour.⁴⁸

In the same vein, then, we will see that Brechna’s oeuvre played with ‘modern’ techniques, especially as these were manifested in experimenting with bold new colours. He did so within a framework that rooted the Fine Arts in an ancient Greco-Buddhist genealogy that he saw as unique artistic features of Afghanistan’s history. The stark similarities between Fahrenkrog and Brechna should not be reduced to a simplistic master-teacher relationship, especially considering the numerous teachers Brechna had during his stay in Germany. Rather, his artistic education took place within a wider context that led Brechna to find inspiration specifically in Fahrenkrog and his artistic networks. Having situated Fahrenkrog’s own intellectual circle, as well as how Brechna thematically and methodologically drew from the master, the next task is to see how these earlier encounters materialized in Brechna’s art as he returned to Afghanistan.

A new meaning in a new master: the rediscovery of the old in the new

In an effort to show how Brechna’s artistic circulation contributed to intercultural dialogues, the next part of this article discusses Brechna’s engagement with his intellectual milieu after he returned to Afghanistan. What he found were ongoing debates among state-sponsored cultural and literary associations, which sought to promote Afghanistan as an heir of the ancient notion of *Arya*, thus linking the past with the present. It seems, then, that Brechna’s interest

⁴⁷ Suzanne Marchand, ‘Arnold Böcklin and the problem of German modernism’, in *Germany at the fin de siècle: culture, politics, and ideas*, (eds) Suzanne Marchand and David Lindenfeld (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004).

⁴⁸ Arnold Böcklin, *German School* (Boston: Bates and Guild, 1906), p. 116.

in Fahrenkrog's style would be linked to the general idea that viewed the development of Afghan Aryanism with the concurrent growing presence of Germans across Afghanistan. Despite his German art training, Brechna deviated from such conversations, even though, through professional affiliation, his career depended on state support. Unlike his colleagues, Brechna rarely employed terms such as *Arya* or *Ariana* and focused, instead, on fostering a kind relationship with the past that not only spoke to the Afghan elite circles associated with the Afghan state but embodied the heterogenous forms of national identities intrinsic to the country.

Scholars of Afghan nationalism connect a renewed interest in the past to the close relationship between Afghanistan and Germany, especially the growing involvement of Nazi pedagogues and diplomats in Afghanistan after 1933. Historians have argued that the 'development of modern nationalism in Europe had a tremendous influence on the emergence of nationalism in Afghanistan', tracing the issue further to Europe's encounter with the *Rig Veda*.⁴⁹ Perhaps it is the idea that when Europeans discovered these ancient texts, Afghanistan became aware of them too, leading Afghan scholars to examine other 'Aryan texts', that is, Vedic and Avestan texts, to locate Afghanistan's linguistic, literary, and religious importance within the development of Vedic and Avestan civilizations. Certainly, in specific Afghan national identities there were ethnocentric movements to adopt Pashto as the national language, or to create a separate Pashto state, manifested in the Pashtunistan movement, although it remained unrealized. As in Nazi Germany, these movements have had oppressive consequences and assumed the supremacy of one group of Afghans over others, most notably over the Hazara ethnic minority.⁵⁰

There is, however, little evidence of how intercultural exchange and historical encounters between Germany and Afghanistan materialized and produced this putative one-sided diffusion of European ideas into Afghan modernism. Such assumptions also rest on the problematic notion that Afghans were passive recipients of German ideas—an assertion that cannot be substantiated, especially when taking into consideration the earlier discussion regarding the Afghan Ministry of Education.

Comparative studies of the region, too, trace the development of the concept of 'Aryanism' as a response to imperial relationships and

⁴⁹ Yahia Baiza, *Education in Afghanistan: developments, influences and legacies since 1901* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 53.

⁵⁰ Sayed Askar Mousavi, *The Hazaras of Afghanistan: an historical, cultural, economic and political study* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

British formulations of the term. In the Iranian case, the argument has been made that although Aryanism was not a European import, the concept played an important role in Iranian identity politics as a way to manage the trauma wrought by the experience of European imperialism.⁵¹ Thomas Trautmann's *Aryans and British India* extends the study to British intellectuals who colonized the notion. Trautmann notes that the British study of Sanskrit led to 'the discovery of its similarity to Latin and Greek', thus institutionally impacting on ethnology and philology in England.⁵² Subsequently, Tony Ballantyne highlights Aryanism as 'central to constituting colonial subjects and fashioning the very structures of colonialism'.⁵³ His well-known 'web of empire' framework (or 'bundle of relationships' as he calls its variation) conceptually strings together disparate regions and communities across the British empire, pointing especially at multiple reconfigurations that the idea of Aryanism underwent across the empire. Aryanism provided a flexible construct that could be used to highlight similarities between Indians and the British, unite the colonized, or even draw lines between communities. Ballantyne argues that Aryanism was not only a tool of imperialist aspirations but factored in the development of modern Hindu nationalism. Projit Bihari Mukharji has shown how Aryanism was used to create a distinctive Bengali identity that distinguished itself from northern Indians.⁵⁴

The ongoing Buddhist-Greco archaeological excavations and the urgency with which Afghan intellectuals engaged with Afghanistan's past through the framework of Aryanism in the 1930s and 1940s placed Afghanistan at the centre of these debates. Yet, Afghan employment of Aryanism beyond the bilateral Nazi-Pashto link has not been sufficiently addressed in the historical scholarship. Afghanistan is tangentially referenced in Phiroze Vasunia's *The Classics and Colonial India*, where he discusses the travels of veterinarian and horse-trader for the East India Company William Moorcroft (1767–1825), who found an altar of

⁵¹ Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, 'Self-Orientalization and dislocation: the uses and abuses of the Aryan discourse in Iran', *Iranian Studies*, vol. 44, no. 4, 2011, pp. 445–472.

⁵² Thomas R. Trautmann, *Aryans and British India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 131.

⁵³ Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and race: Aryanism in the British empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 8.

⁵⁴ Projit Bihari Mukharji, 'The Bengali pharaoh: upper-caste Aryanism, pan-Egyptianism, and the contested history of biometric nationalism in twentieth-century Bengal', *Comparative Studies in Society History*, vol. 59, no. 2, 2017, pp. 446–476.

Alexander while travelling through Samangan, formerly Aibak.⁵⁵ Vasunia tells of a number of other British agents in Afghanistan and across the northwest frontier who modelled their journeys on that of their ancient hero. However, Vasunia's main focus is on the ways in which the colonial encounter between the British and Indians gave rise to an exploration of the Greco-Roman past of India. This involved, on the one hand, the British positing themselves as heirs to Alexander and Augustus, using them as blueprints by which the empire was to be consolidated and developed, and, on the other hand, Indian responses that looked to the past to develop a modern anti-colonial India.

How, then, are we to understand the overlooked development of Aryanism in a context where there was no direct colonial order? As an occasional contributor to state-run journals and director of the Maṭba'-'i Māshīn Khānah, Brechna was embedded in the intellectual culture around state-sponsored literary and historical associations, yet it was equally important to maintain the salient boundary which eventually ensured his contribution to an evolving public sphere. His colleagues in institutions such as Mūzīyam-i millī-yi Afghānistān (National Museum, f. 1931), the Anjuman-i Adabī-yi Kābul (Kabul Literary Society, f. 1931), and the Anjuman-i Tārīkh-i Kābul (Afghan Historical Society, f. 1942) had been exploring Afghanistan's pre-Islamic past and specifically employed 'Aryanism' as an interpretive tool for reformulating a new Afghan past. This past was intimately linked to the revival of Afghanistan's centrality as the ancient 'cradle' of Vedic and Avestan civilizations.⁵⁶ The tasks of these institutions cannot be homogenized, and different aspects of each have been studied. Generally, what we know is that through these associations the 'government succeeded in establishing an active and prolific, though largely conformist group of intelligentsia that dominated the literary and cultural scene during the period'.⁵⁷ Nile Green's recent work has argued that some intellectuals used these institutions as infrastructural networks to engage with and adapt European intellectual disciplines.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Phiroze Vasunia, *The classics and colonial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 69–70.

⁵⁶ One of these colleagues was Aḥmad 'Alī Kuhzād (1907–83); see Ahmad Ali Kohzad, 'Les relations culturelles entre l'Afghanistan et l'Inde', *Afghanistan*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1946, p. 14.

⁵⁷ Shahwali Ahmadi, 'Fiction in Afghanistan', *Encyclopædia Iranica*, vol. 9, no. 6, 2012, pp. 603–606.

⁵⁸ Nile Green, 'The Afghan discovery of Buddha: civilizational history and the nationalizing of Afghan antiquity', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2017, pp. 47–70. See also Aria Fani's excellent close reading of *Āryānā*, which

These networks were designed not merely to search for Afghanistan's deeper Aryan literary and artistic national culture, but also to explore Afghanistan's role as a regional hub and exporter of culture.⁵⁹ For example, the author 'Alī Aḥmad N'āimī depicted Afghanistan as the wellspring of knowledge about art and science (*une série d'arts* and *le foyer de la science*), which were transformed and re-emerged elsewhere across the world. Over the course of several essays that study the Herati School of Art and its export to Safavid Iran and Mughal India, N'āimī described a series of influential networks and artistic methods that he collectively defined as a family of artists—'*une famille d'artistes*'—a series of followers, and trained protégés who were both in and beyond the court.⁶⁰ 'Like the Greco-Buddhist art, whose home was in the east of our country, before Islam, the art of miniature painting, inlaying, calligraphy, the art of bookbinding, which was born in Herat in the 9th and 10th centuries (hijrī), are the arts specific to Afghanistan.'⁶¹

Bihzād had primarily been seen within an Iranian or Mughal context and many tied his artistic accomplishments to the beginning of a unique artistic lineage developed in the Mughal court.⁶² However, in N'āimī's contributions, Bihzād and his school in Herat acted as a

uncovered both the local and transregional processes of new disciplinary formations. Aria Fani, 'Disciplinizing Persian literature in twentieth-century Afghanistan', *Iranian Studies*, forthcoming.

⁵⁹ This tandem collaboration manifested in the naming of the national airline 'Ariana', new sporting clubs (such as the Klub-i Āryānā Kābul Afghanistan, and political tracts that reflected a uniform message highlighting Afghanistan's regional centrality. See for instance: 'Tārikhcha-i Klub-I Āryānā Kābul Afghanistan (The History of Aryana Club, Kabul Afghanistan)', *Afghanistan Digital Library*, available at <http://afghanistandl.nyu.edu/search/?start=0&sort=title.sort&q=Tarikhchahi+Klubi+Aryana+Kabul+Afghanistan>, [accessed 26 February 2021]; and Abdussattar Shalizi, *Afghanistan: ancient land with modern ways* (Kabul: National Government of Afghanistan, 1961).

⁶⁰ Ali Ahmad Naïmi, 'Afghan calligraphy, illumination and miniature—work in ninth century A.H.', *Afghanistan*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1946; Ali Ahmad Naïmi, 'Behzad', *Afghanistan*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1948; and Ali Ahmad Naïmi, 'Une famille d'artistes', *Afghanistan*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1948.

⁶¹ Naïmi, 'Une famille d'artistes', p. 43. See original: '*Comme l'art gréco-bouddhique dont le foyer était à l'Est de notre pays, avant l'Islam, l'art de la peinture miniature, l'incrustation, la calligraphie, l'art de la reliure lesquels sont nés à Hérat aux IX et X siècles de Hégire, sont les arts propres à l'Afghanistan.*'

⁶² For Safavid Iran, see David Roxburgh, 'Kamal al-din Bihzad and authorship in Persianate painting', *Muqarnas: An Annual on the Visual Culture of the Islamic World*, vol. 33, 2016, pp. 119–146. For Mughal India, see Abū'l Fazl ibn Mubārak, *The Ain-i Akbari*, trans. and reprint Henry Blochmann and H. S. Jarret (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 2010).

gravitational centre, from which N'āimī traced various techniques, such as manuscript illuminations using specifically 'Afghan' objects (such as lapis lazuli), to elsewhere across the world.⁶³

As historian Tapati Guha-Thakurta has shown, it was not out of the ordinary for South Asians to 'objectify their past' and attach material objects to cultural authenticity and the development of nationalist identities.⁶⁴ Brechna, too, understood this and therefore engaged with the state literati but with significant limitations. Government-sponsored projects sought to bring the artistic past closer to the present, while also employing Aryanism as an ancient signifier that showed Afghanistan's centrality. In contrast, Brechna sought to connect to the past through religious themes inspired by his training in Germany with Fahrenkrog. On the one hand, he connected his work to archaeological projects that sought to claim Aryana's past cultural significance, but he remained committed to exploring the commensurability of modern art with religion. 'In Agesilaos' Atelier' (see Figure 7), painted in 1967, reflects the need to combine a wide range of artistic media and even temporal registers. The strong references to Greek influences are visible in the clothing style of the master and in the reference to Greek sculptural traditions. Along with Greek influences, the painting also features Buddhist elements through the use of a Buddhist head and a bust, two important archaeological finds in the art history of Afghanistan. The head of the Buddha was found accidentally in 1912 and had been part of the Hadda monastery. Located in eastern Afghanistan, it was one of the largest monasteries in the region. The other Buddhist figure (with a torso) referred to a goddess at a Buddhist monastery in a medieval region called Fondukistan (north of Kabul). The site, excavated by Joseph Hackin and his team of the *Délégation archéologique française en Afghanistan* (DAFA) in 1936, predates the seventh century CE.

The painting depicts a master-disciple relationship and features a noticeable amalgamation of different components and styles of the sort that Brechna was promoting among his own students. Given the resemblance between the master's face and a younger Brechna, it is possible that this image is another example of self-portraiture. If this is in fact the case, his audience may be privy to another illustration in which Brechna sought to control a set of emotions accompanying the

⁶³ Nāimī, 'Afghan calligraphy', p. 35.

⁶⁴ Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, objects, histories: institutions of art in colonial and post-colonial India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).



Figure 7. Abdul Ghafur Brechna, 'In the atelier of Agesilaos', Kabul, 1967. *Source:* Habibo Brechna et al., *Buddhas und Menschen in Bamiyan*.

painting. Brechna—like the Timurid court painter Kamāl al-Dīn Bihzād—was somehow always available to the viewer, not merely visible and present in the work, but performing a narrative duty as well.⁶⁵ In this instance, he was possibly styling himself as an ancient master, who was equipped with various instructional methods and themes.

To Brechna, archaeology merely complemented his findings and kept him connected to the state associations that employed him, but his emphasis remained on exploring the connections between the history of the fine arts and religion. In fact, when Brechna addressed Alexander the Great's arrival in Afghanistan, he described him not as a warrior or ancient hero, but as someone who had promoted the 'development of the arts'. To Brechna, the lesson in recording these histories was less about proving how Afghan cultural and literary influence had shaped

⁶⁵ Roxburgh, 'Kamal al-din Bihzad and authorship in Persianate painting'.

its neighbours, but how artists and writers in the country could take inspiration from previous intercultural encounters. He wrote: 'Without a doubt the arrival of the teachers and experts of Greece like Aesop brought a new change in the development and style of Koshanide art. But the Koshanide artists were not totally affected by the Greeks for they kept their classic designs and superiority.'⁶⁶

The return to ancient themes served two purposes for Brechna. First, it allowed him to extend a narrative of Afghanistan's history to beyond the onset of Islam and to a much earlier Greco-Buddhist past. And second, doing so allowed him to allude to themes (especially religion) and to practical methods (such as accentuated scale) that reflected his broader training with Fahrenkrog. For instance, in his 1940s rendition of 'the Big Buddha's Facial Structure' (see [Figure 8](#)), Brechna replaced the neat cuts on the Buddha's face with a reconstruction based on the account of Xuanzang (*circa* 602–664), the Chinese Buddhist monk and pilgrim.

Just as Fahrenkrog had done in 'Baldur', Brechna featured an oversized spiritual figure in which the side elements accentuate or point to the relevance of the figure. Brechna enclosed in the painting a historical argument that brought modern Afghanistan closer to its Buddhist roots through his theory regarding the cuts on the Buddha's face. Brechna argued that:

... everyone says that the orthodox people, probably the Moslems had cut the faces to disfigure the Buddhas. But in my opinion this was done by the artists at the time [it was constructed]. Otherwise, had it been cut because of religious fanaticism, without any doubt the cut would not look so clean and arranged standing at a height of more than fifty meters. But instead, the cut would look like the Buddha's feet which was destroyed by Auwrang Zayb [sic], son of Shah-e-Jahan, with a cannon, during his march to Balkh. It seems that this clean vertical cut was done very carefully by the expert builders and the upper part of his lips, nose, cheeks and forehead up to the top of its head was built with bricks and then covered by clay from the back. Since this part of the face was not cut like the other parts of the Buddha's body from the mountain; but built from bricks with the inside empty, it might have been ruined by time or easily destroyed from the back.⁶⁷

Brechna never explicitly assessed the assumed relationship between Afghanistan's fine arts and the onset of Islam, but treated it with ambivalence. On the one hand, he critiqued the faltering progress of

⁶⁶ A. G. Breshna, (trans.) Maliha Fazil Zafar, 'A glance at the history of fine arts in Afghanistan', *Afghanistan*, vol. 25, no. 3, 1972, pp. 11–22.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.



Figure 8. Abdul Ghafur Brechna, 'The facial feature of the large Buddha', Kabul, 1940. *Source:* Habibo Brechna et al., *Buddhas und Menschen in Bamiyan*.

art during the reign of the Mughals and the pillage of South Asian cities, and on the other, he challenged the claim that in his rage against the Shi'i Hazaras the (Muslim) Afghan Amir 'Abd al-Rahmān Khān (r. 1880-1901) had deformed the standing Buddha's face. By clearing Muslim Afghan rulers of any accusations that they had desecrated the Buddha, Brechna was, in a way, softening the sense of a 'break' with the pre-Islamic past in Afghanistan. Whatever the validity of Brechna's claims, it is intriguing to note his impulse to 'sell' the idea of a pre-Islamic history. Instead of seeing the death of Bihzād as a rupture leading to the decline of Afghan arts, as was the scholarly consensus among his contemporaries, Brechna smoothed out many of the bumps between the past and the present.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ See this argument developed further by one of Brishnā's contemporaries: Enayatullah Shahrani (Ināyat Allāh Shahrānī), 'Art education in Afghanistan', PhD thesis, University of Arizona, 1978, p. 45. See also Shahrānī, *Sharḥ-i aḥwāl va āsār-i pirūfīsūr Ghulām Muḥammad Maymanagī*.

Brechna's blending of multiple themes and methods continued across his literary oeuvre, which exhibited a similar tendency to comment on the role of more traditional lifestyles and their place in ongoing debates in the context of the changing global economy. Just as we observe a range of artistic styles, his writings, too, span short stories, folk materials in the form of *afsāna* (tales), theatrical plays, and music compositions.⁶⁹ His writings can be classified into two categories: those written for state journals and those he wrote in a private capacity with a much wider audience in mind. An example of the former would be the 1970 play titled 'Haji Mirwais Khan: A Historical Play in 3 Scenes, 17 Acts'. Clearly designed for his patrons in the Afghan government, the play portrays the military campaign of Mir Vays Khān Hūtak (1673-1715), the founding head of the Ghilji Pashtun from Qandahar. The play traces Hūtak's revolt against the Safavid dynasty and conquest of Qandahar in 1709.⁷⁰

An example of a perhaps much more independent form of writing is a 1967 short story, *Jādah-yi Āfīn* (Road to Opium), passed on to Brechna during one of his travels.⁷¹ The story recounts how an Afghan traveller made the acquaintance of a former British agent and became familiar with his activities on the North-West Frontier of Afghanistan. Mr Knox, known by his undercover name of Muhmān Khān to the villagers, had initially received in-depth training in Pashto and was resident in a small village near Peshawar. His task was to learn about the internal kinship structures of this village, befriend the leader, and persuade the village to abandon wheat and maize, and instead grow rapeseed (*gul-i sharsham*) (commonly used to fuel biodiesel in Europe). When he succeeded, and had earned the trust of the town elders, the town made money from selling their harvest in nearby Peshawar to the British companies there.

When the practice of growing rapeseed became common, the companies stopped buying from this village, demanding that its residents allow the British to construct roads instead. The villagers were told that rather than having their seeds transported by animal stock (damaging the seeds in the process), newly constructed roads would enable safer transport via caravans and cars. The story traces the

⁶⁹ Most notably for the 1965 film *Waqt* (1965). See 'Imaginary encounter with a maestro', *The Hindu*, published online on 24 October 2018, available at <<https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/music/imaginary-encounter-with-a-maestro/article25313029.ece>>, [accessed 14 April 2021].

⁷⁰ A. G. Breshna, (trans.) Nurullah Sahrāi, 'Haji Mirwais Khan: a historical play in 3 scenes', *Afghanistan: Historical and Cultural Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1970 [1349], pp. 59–81.

⁷¹ 'Abd al-Ghafūr Brishnā, *Jādah-yi afīn* (Kabul: Dawlati-i Maṭba'ah, 1967 [1346]).

internal struggle of the British agent who, on the one hand, feels obligated to continue concealing his identity and work undercover for the British Crown, but is also conscience-stricken about guiding the villagers to contribute to British mercantile activities.

Brechna used the story as a lens through which to assess how the arrival of modern infrastructure disrupted the villagers' way of life, focusing instead on the ways in which village life was organized, the community's knowledge of the land, and their unique agricultural practices (in many cases developed by women of those towns). Through these internal descriptions, Brechna reconceptualized what was considered 'modern' and what was not. Most importantly, Brechna used the inversion of gender roles as a moment to consider the role of women and mothers in agrarian economies. For example, when the villagers' lands were threatened by internal strife, men fulfilled domestic tasks, forcing women to work the land and manage their staff, knowing that competitors would not commit violence against women.

In *Jādah-yi Āfyūn*, Brechna explored Afghan themes and offered commentary on the kind of lifestyles considered 'traditional' and detached from Kabul or other metropolitan areas in the 1960s. Among Brechna's contemporaries, novels about British engagement in Afghanistan were commonly set in urban areas, yet he made an explicit stylistic choice to locate the novel outside that often-used literary feature.⁷² His story, especially in the attempt to capture historic memory through folktales and through an Afghan village's experience of British imperialism, points to his desire to revive traditional narratives such as the *qissah*, *afsānah*, and *rivāyāt* (novels), but permeate a classical genre with commentaries on an ever-changing political and economic landscape. These revivals are especially important in the context of the 1960s, which saw the diminishment of vernacular forms of stories.⁷³ 'A rapidly expanding urban social state, with a new conception of leisure time, were overwhelmingly receptive to the emergent forms of prose fiction.'⁷⁴ New channels for printing and distributing led to the publication of new books, including the translation of European genre novels and short stories into Persian, and their importation from neighbouring places, resulting in a larger readership throughout the country.

⁷² I thank Ahmad Rashid Salim for this point.

⁷³ Green and Arbabzadah (eds), *Afghanistan in ink*.

⁷⁴ Ahmadi, 'Fiction in Afghanistan'.

It may be too much to say that Brechna developed a fully fermented public sphere. However, both his official and non-official activities worked to create a space for artists and the public to communicate—significantly a public that extended beyond urban areas. Brechna offered a social and political critique that worked to develop new national identities that did not always fit with official goals. He pushed against the status quo, for example, when in 1950, as co-director of Radio Kabul, he broadcast for the first time the voice of Mīrman Parvīn, a trained midwife whose musical aspirations had previously found no support in the class-conscious and male-dominated musical milieu.⁷⁵ Similarly, various humorous figures, such as ‘Ajab and Rajab’ (see Figure 9), critiqued the social hierarchies within Afghan bureaucratic systems.



Figure 9. Abdul Ghafur Brechna, ‘Djad wa Hazel’, Kabul, circa 1940s. Source: Brechna Archive, Germany.

Such examples shed light on Brechna as mediating a new historical practice, redrawing the multiple boundaries of the Afghan artistic past and yet critically managing to maintain some independence from the various intellectual institutions collected under the Afghan nation’s cultural and literary umbrella. During his student years, he seems to have been mostly drawn to the work of painters who sought a return to

⁷⁵ For a history of radio in Afghanistan, see Mejgan Massoumi, ‘The sounds of Kabul: radio and the politics of popular culture in Afghanistan, 1960–79’, PhD thesis, Stanford University, 2021.

the ancient past in the search for solutions to the myriad crises facing artists in the *fin-de-siècle* period. Brechna began by following the conventions of romantic paintings, only to later depart from them on his own terms. These departures or translations were manifested in his desire to not merely connect to medieval figures such as Bihzād, but also to interweave themes and methods that a wider range of Afghans recognized in the context of distinctively Afghan knowledge systems. His interventions included coming to terms with urban changes and wielding these through sophisticated agrarian-based kinship structures, for example. He rethought and subverted the dichotomy between the modern and traditional, and blurred their implicit boundaries to reflect his own imperatives and own local choices.

Conclusion

This case study, with an emphasis on the global and regional circulation and translation of art, shows one of the many ways in which young Afghans in the 1930s and 1940s grappled with state-building, history making, and knowledge production. Tracing the journey of the itinerant Afghan student Abdul Ghafur Brechna suggests a different approach to studying the role of non-diplomatic actors in crucial processes of building a new state. Brechna's journey to Europe may have begun as a state-sponsored programme that aimed to train a new class of technocrats, but what this article has shown is that the students' ambitions exceeded and reworked the terms of the geopolitical arrangements. The Afghan Ministry and authorities in Berlin were not so firm in their steering of Brechna's journey, nor were they able to manage how he engaged with European art.

Rather, Brechna selectively and carefully identified the kinds of influences that echoed his own vision for the fine arts. A bilateral emphasis on Afghan-German internationalism does not fully account for how Afghan students forged and moved through transcultural spaces where they met, collaborated, and negotiated the limits of modernity. In this, I do not suggest ignoring the significance of state and nation-building to the history of modern Afghanistan, nor to simply repackage the historiography of this process with a new transnational focus, as if the two could be so easily divorced. Rather, the examination of a non-diplomatic actor who played such a crucial role in the process of knowledge transfer, while embodying contradictory fears about national decline and renewal, demonstrates that skills and expertise accrued from Western training do not necessarily

translate into the erasure of the past. Mediating between a variety of media, colours, political regimes, and even cultures, Brechna responded to global fears concerning state- and nation-building inherent in the early twentieth century. He did so by ‘rediscovering’ and translating an artistic legacy that was not merely for the purpose of cultural preservation but also for public consumption and memory. Specifically, by refusing to classify his work within neat categories of ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’, he declined to work within them and instead proposed a conceptual framework that argued for a revival and amalgamation of different artistic traditions that were recognizably and distinctively Afghan, even though they were enriched by external dialogue.

This article provided snapshots of a wide range of political, cultural, and literary activities seeking to restore Afghanistan to its supposed rightful place at the centre of regional cultural production. As many new studies on Afghanistan have shown, the country was embedded in wider circulatory patterns, especially with its neighbours. By investigating Brechna’s use of modern artistic themes and techniques in reintegrating (or rediscovering) the fine arts in the history of Afghanistan, this article has taken the conversation into more global terrain and outlined the circulation and translation of knowledge between Europe and Afghanistan. Yet, it has also addressed the somewhat classical conundrum of working with European sources about innovation, technology, and science—about modernity, in other words—without attributing to ‘the West’ the role of master or confining ‘the Rest’ to the role of disciple.