

Speech by the Minister for European Affairs and International Cooperation, Ben Knapen, at the opening of the Bamyan photo exhibition, Amsterdam, 31 March 2011

Your Royal Highness, Your Excellencies, distinguished guests,

Els van der Plas, former director of the Prince Claus Fund, once called attention to the fact that culture is about cultural expression, cultural values and intellectual debate. She said: 'These things determine a country's identity. We associate ourselves with Rembrandt. The Egyptians, with the pyramids. After food and water, culture is a basic need.'¹

This beautiful exhibition proves her point. The pictures around us show Afghanistan through the lens of 13 young men and women living in or around the city of Bamyan.

Their views are different from ours.

Their pictures show us the Afghan identity from within.

Ladies and gentlemen,

¹ Frans Bieckmann, *De wereld volgens prins Claus* (The world according to Prince Claus), Amsterdam 2004, p. 342.

His Royal Highness Prince Claus once said, that one does not develop people, they develop themselves.² I couldn't agree more. That is an important reason why my government is supporting a project to restore two major museums in Afghanistan with a 2.6 million euro donation. Reopening these museums will help Afghans get reacquainted with their own cultural heritage. Knowing your background is an important part of developing yourself - as important for Afghans as for any of us.

To grow, a tree needs to take root in solid ground.³

The world tour of the Bactrian Treasure and the international Alexander the Great exhibition puts the rich history of Afghanistan in the spotlight. Interest in its heritage is growing, although not always in a positive way. A lot of valuable art is stolen from archaeological sites all over the country. But now that the United States has announced that it will support a new national museum in Kabul, at least the Bactrian Treasure can safely be put on display in the future.

² Bieckmann, *De wereld volgens prins Claus*, p. 318.

³ Bieckmann, *De wereld volgens prins Claus*, p. 319.

That will make the Afghans proud, like the Dutch are proud of 'The Night Watch' by Rembrandt in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

Your Royal Highness, Your Excellencies, distinguished guests,

As I have said before, I have fond memories of Prince Claus. I knew him when I was a journalist at a national daily here in the Netherlands. And - I have said this before as well - the Prince said a lot of notable things about culture. But one thing he said stands out for me. Prince Claus felt that the West could not be the model for the elite in developing countries.

Entirely in this spirit, the Prince Claus Fund gave financial support to the 3rd Eye Photojournalism Center, which in turn offered 13 young people the opportunity to show Afghanistan the way they wanted. The pictures have been shown in Kabul and six other towns around the country. And now we can enjoy them here, too.

I invite you to view these fascinating pictures in the same way that the famous Dutch photographer Hans Aarsman looks at pictures. 'There's something to discover,' he recently said,

'there's something to be found.'⁴ Let's find out for ourselves today.

Thank you.

⁴ <http://www.tedxamsterdam.com/2009/video-hans-aarsman-on-the-mysterious-ways-of-beauty-in-photography/>