

Dr. Mohammad Yousof Asefi

Artist · Physician · Cultural Preservationist

b. 1960, Kabul, Afghanistan — also published as Mohammad Yousef Asefi and Mohammad Yusuf Asefi

Overview

Dr. Mohammad Yousof Asefi is an Afghan artist, physician, and cultural preservationist whose work spans more than four decades. Born in Kabul in 1960, he earned his medical degree from the Kabul Medical Institute in 1989 and practiced medicine until 1995, when he devoted himself entirely to painting. During the Taliban's first regime he secretly saved more than 120 paintings at the Foreign Ministry and the National Gallery of Afghanistan by concealing human and animal figures beneath removable watercolor paint — an act for which he was later commended by the United States National Endowment for the Humanities for his “extraordinary and heroic role in the defense of Afghan culture.” He is the founder of the Asefi Art Gallery in Kabul, one of the largest private gallery spaces in Afghanistan. Since April 2022 he has lived in Tempe, Arizona, as a research scholar at Arizona State University and the inaugural artist-in-residence at ASU's Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict.

Early Life and Education

Born on June 3, 1960, in Kabul, the son of a career government employee, Asefi graduated from Habibia High School in 1980 and entered three years of compulsory military service, during which he received his first serious instruction in painting from the masters Nasrullah Sarwari and Ghulam Sediq Sediq. He enrolled at the Kabul Medical Institute in 1983, joined the Afghanistan Artists' Association in 1984, held his first solo exhibition at Kabul Medical University in 1985, and graduated with his MD in 1989.

Rise to Prominence

By the early 1990s Asefi was one of Afghanistan's foremost painters. Prime Minister Fazal Haq Khaliqyar opened his 1991 exhibition and commissioned him to decorate the Prime Minister's building; under President Burhanuddin Rabbani he decorated the presidential palace (the Arg) and the Foreign Ministry, where around sixty of his paintings hung. His works also adorned the Nangarhar Palace, Bank-e-Millie Afghan and its Zabuli Museum, De-Afghanistan Bank, Afghanistan International Bank, and the Ministry of Public Health. In 1995, after an exhibition at the Kabul Municipality, President Rabbani gifted him a plot of land in recognition of his talent — the future site of the Asefi Art Gallery.

Saving Art from the Taliban (1996–2001)

When the Taliban seized Kabul in September 1996 and banned all depictions of living creatures, around 300 paintings stockpiled at the Ministry of Information and Culture were destroyed, and about seventeen of Asefi's works were torn from the walls of the presidential palace — among them his beloved painting of Buzkashi. In

1998, Foreign Ministry officials who knew his earlier restoration work asked him to repair war-damaged paintings. Alone and in absolute secrecy, he instead painted removable watercolor scenery over the figures in 42 paintings there — most of them valuable works by foreign artists. From 1999 he extended the work to the National Gallery with the quiet help of Deputy Said Enayat Ullah, who alerted him whenever Taliban members entered the building. After the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in March 2001, the concealment became a race: roughly 80 more paintings were altered at the gallery, and about 70 damaged works genuinely restored across both institutions. Discovery would have meant imprisonment or death. After the Taliban fell in late 2001, he spent seven months wiping the watercolor away. On December 13, 2001, before twenty-five international media organizations at the National Gallery, a girl holding a basket of flowers emerged from beneath a wet sponge — and the story traveled around the world. Hamid Karzai attended the gallery's formal reopening in February 2002, and Ryan C. Crocker, who had just reopened the U.S. Embassy, watched Asefi unveil a concealed painting that same winter.

The Asefi Art Gallery

In 2003 Asefi founded the Asefi Art Gallery on the land gifted by President Rabbani — a six-story cultural landmark in Kabul, second in size only to the National Gallery of Afghanistan, housing some 250 artworks and an academy where dozens of young Afghans studied painting. Its official opening was delayed repeatedly by the security situation, including two bombings of the property in 2014–2015 that Asefi rebuilt from at his own expense. The gallery was still awaiting its long-delayed official opening when the Taliban retook Kabul in August 2021; it remains closed. In those days two of his sons, Mosawer Asefi and Mohammad Najim Asefi, hid every canvas bearing a human or animal figure — as their father had done twenty-three years earlier. In 2018 Asefi was appointed cultural advisor to the Meshrano Jirga, the upper house of Afghanistan's parliament.

Life in America (2022–present)

Asefi arrived in the United States on April 6, 2022, with his wife Nahid and youngest son Mosawer. Forty-three of his paintings were shown that October at ASU's Harry Wood Gallery (“War and Emotion”). In October 2024 the Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict presented “The Brush is Mightier,” at which he painted live before the audience. In July 2026, supported by a National Endowment for the Humanities Chairman's Grant, his work travels to Washington, D.C., for “Repression, Resilience and Renewal” (July 21–23). His recent canvases pair Arizona landscapes with works confronting the Taliban's renewed erasure of Afghan women from education and public life.

Exhibitions and Recognitions — Chronological

1982–1990 Participant, artistic conferences of the Ministry of Information and Culture, Kabul (diplomas and honors).

1985 First solo exhibition, Kabul Medical University.

1988 Gold medal, art exhibition of the Ministry of Higher Education, Kabul.

1989 Two exhibitions in Dushanbe, Tajikistan; Abu Ali Sina honorary medal and fiftieth festival medal of the Medical Institute.

- 1990** Exhibition with the World Health Organization, Ministry of Public Health, Kabul.
- 1990** Exhibition, Prague, Czechoslovakia.
- 1991** “Afghanistan's Historical Monuments” exhibition; honorary medal from the President of Afghanistan.
- 1993** Artists' Association exhibition, Kabul; certificate from the Ministry of Education; Nowruz diploma, Ministry of Information and Culture.
- 1994** Kabul Municipality exhibition (certificate); group exhibition, Islamabad, Pakistan.
- 1995** World Health Day exhibition with the WHO, Islamabad, Pakistan.
- 1996** Exhibition, Stoor Hall, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kabul.
- 1998** International handicraft and painting exhibition, Dubai — first rank for Afghanistan.
- 2001** FOCUS foundation exhibition, Islamabad; appreciation from the President of Afghanistan for protecting the National Gallery's works.
- 2002** Independence Day exhibition, Intercontinental Hall, Kabul; invited visit to the national art theater of Indonesia; certificate from the President's office through the Artists' Union.
- 2003** Global Village international exhibition, Dubai.
- 2004** Interviewed and nominated for an international award by National Geographic; featured in the documentary “Lost Treasures of Afghanistan.”
- 2005** Commendation presented in Kabul by a delegation of the U.S. National Endowment for the Humanities; National Art Day certificate.
- 2006** Painting exhibition, New Delhi, India; certificate from the Ministry of Commerce.
- 2007** First Afghan artist at the SAARC art camp, Rajasthan, India.
- 2008** Nowruz festival exhibition, Kabul.
- 2009** ECO member-states exhibition, Balkh, Afghanistan.
- 2010** Afghan–Turk joint exhibition; SAARC art camp, Thimphu, Bhutan — “Contemplation” recognized as Master Art Piece.
- 2011** Certificate from the Afghan Parliament; SAARC art camp, Kerala, India.
- 2012** dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, Germany — “Dare Shamali” (2011), purchased in Kabul by the curatorial team, displayed in the rotunda of the Museum Fridericianum; SAARC art camp, Colombo, Sri Lanka; Asia Art Biennale, Dhaka, Bangladesh.
- 2013** ECO exhibition, Tehran, Iran; SAARC art camp, Malé, Maldives.
- 2014** Asia Art Biennale, Dhaka, Bangladesh.
- 2015** SAARC program, Bamyan, Afghanistan.
- 2018** First South Asian International Art Camp, Nepal; SAARC art camp, Negombo, Sri Lanka; appointed cultural advisor to the Meshrano Jirga (Senate) of Afghanistan.
- 2020** Solo exhibitions, Sydney and Melbourne, Australia.
- 2022** “War and Emotion” — 43 paintings, Harry Wood Gallery, Arizona State University; ASU research fellowship; inaugural artist-in-residence, Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict.

2024 “The Brush is Mightier: One Man's Mission to Rescue Art from the Taliban” — live painting and gallery open house, ASU Tempe.

2026 “Repression, Resilience and Renewal: Religious Freedom and the Art of Mohammad Yousof Asefi” — Barrett & O'Connor Washington Center, Washington, D.C. (July 21–23), with the panel “The Courage to Create,” supported by an NEH Chairman's Grant.

Public and Institutional Collections

Presidential Palace (the Arg), Kabul · Afghan Parliament (old and new buildings) · Prime Minister's Palace, Kabul · Foreign Ministry, Kabul · Marmarin Palace, Kabul · National Gallery of Afghanistan (dedicated room in his honor) · Nangarhar Palace · Bank-e-Millie Afghan and Zabuli Museum · De-Afghanistan Bank · Afghanistan International Bank · Ministry of Public Health (Medical Museum) · Jakarta National Museum, Indonesia · dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, Germany · Harry Wood Gallery, Arizona State University.

Selected Press

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (Dec 13, 2001) · Voice of America (Dec 14, 2001) · The Washington Post, “Taliban Had Wrong Impression” (Jan 2, 2002) · The New York Times, “An Afghan Artist Erases Layers of Taliban Repression” (Jan 13, 2002) · The New York Times, Andrew Solomon, “An Awakening From the Nightmare of the Taliban” (Mar 10, 2002) · National Geographic, “Lost Treasures of Afghanistan” (2004) · The National, UAE (Mar 2019) · ASU News (Oct 2024) · National Endowment for the Humanities (Jul 2026).