



FIG. 1. The National Museum of Cambodia. On April 13, 1979, the museum reopened to the public after nearly five years of abandonment during the rule of the Khmer Rouge. Liberation found the museum “full of dust and wild plants, ...the sculptures in disarray. The roof and ceiling had rotted and...wild trees grew amid the empty ponds in the interior of the courtyard. The whole building was also filled with bat dung and its repulsive odor” (museum Director Pich Keo in Brand 1992:18).

Photograph by David A. Feingold, *Ophidian Films, Ltd.*

Cambodian History Through Cambodian Museums

Heather A. Peters

Museums are more than repositories for the relics of the past; they are also mirrors of a people and society at a particular time and place. A stroll through the Museum of Natural History in New York City aptly illustrates this point. Its galleries include those I remember from my childhood—dark rooms with illuminated panoramas filled with stuffed animals and birds placed in artificially created environ-

ments. These contrast sharply with the interactive scientific galleries created during the 1970s and the lively ethnographic galleries of the 1980s. Changes in what we choose to display—and how we choose to display it—reflect changes in how we perceive ourselves and others.

Cambodia is a country with a rich heritage of fine arts and monumental architecture. By the 1960s, it had not only five major museums, but several small



FIG. 2. Pre-Angkor and Angkorean sculpture in the National Museum’s southern galleries.

Photograph by David A. Feingold, *Ophidian Films, Ltd.*

provincial ones as well. From 1975 to 1979 all of these were closed because of the rule of the radical, Maoist-inspired Khmer Rouge. During the 1980s, some of the old museums reopened and, in Phnom Penh, new museums appeared.

From September 1993 to June 1994, I lived and worked in Phnom Penh, employed as a visiting professor at the Université des Beaux Arts (University of Fine Arts). This was not my first trip to Cambodia. I had visited the country at least five times during the previous seven years, but this was my first lengthy stay. I spent much of this time working in and visiting museums and thinking about their role in presenting Cambodian history.

I will focus here on four of these museums, old and new: the National Museum of Cambodia (Fig. 1), the Battambang Provincial Museum, the Wat (Temple or Monastery) Po Veal Museum, and the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. All reveal aspects of Khmer culture and society in the way they represent themselves. And all reflect particular periods or phases in Cambodia’s troubled history.

FRENCH COLONIALISM IN CAMBODIA

Khmer is the main ethnic group of Cambodia. Its members speak Khmer, a Mon-Khmer language. An intimate relationship existed and still exists between the presentation of Khmer culture and history and French colonial scholarship. Some suggest that through their scholarship, the French created the entire notion of



FIG. 3. The sculpture in the National Museum of Cambodia still plays a vital role in the lives of the people. This unidentified Buddhist figure, dating to the 13th–14th century, is adorned with an orange cloth as it would be in a temple. Visitors burn incense, bring flowers and money as offerings, and kneel in prayer before this and other sculptures.

Photograph by David A. Feingold, *Ophidian Films, Ltd.*

“Cambodia”: they gave to the Khmer the seductive-idea that their ancestors had been the most powerful and gifted people in mainland Southeast Asia, and that the years following the fall of the Angkorean Empire were ones of regrettable and frustrating decline (Chandler 1991).

When France extended her protectorate to cover Cambodia in 1863, there were less than one million people who owed allegiance to the Cambodian king (Chandler 1991). Although Cambodian Buddhists made pilgrimages to Angkor, the seat of the ancient empire, no one in the country knew the names of Angkorean kings or could decipher Angkorean inscriptions. It was French scholars who, at the turn of the century, threw themselves into the task of translating the inscriptions and re-creating the history of the Angkorean Empire. At the same time, French administrators began to put in place Cambodian institutions to protect Cambodia from disappearing.

Thus, from the mid-19th century onwards, the tradition of scholarship on Cambodian history and culture is both shaped and dominated by the French. In 1878 the Mission archéologique de l'Indochine was founded which in 1901 became the Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO). EFEO initiated an extensive program to inventory all the monuments in Cambodia and established a permanent base at Angkor to clear, conserve, restore, and research the ruins. Although this work was disrupted in 1972 by the civil war which culminated in rule by the Khmer Rouge from 1975 to 1979, it has once again resumed. As a result, almost all materials written about traditional Cambodian history and culture are the products of the EFEO and related projects, and are in French.

Before 1966, there were virtually no Cambodians studying their own history and culture within the country's university system; students preferred to study the more prestigious subjects of law or medicine. Only in 1966 when King Sihanouk (then Prince) raised the status of the Ecole des Beaux Arts to a university was a Faculty of Archaeology formed which then began to train Cambodian students. Classes, it should be noted, were taught in French by professors from France.

The French, thus, were intimately involved in rediscovering Cambodia's past and were responsible for piecing together its former glories, weaving them together into a coherent narrative. They created a powerful picture, one of a strong unified people whose territory spread over land that included parts of today's Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, Malaysia, and Burma. For a people whose more recent history, since the 16th century, has been demoralizing, this portrait—emphasizing the brilliance of the past Khmer Empire—was highly seductive. Consequently, the Khmer themselves had no

difficulty accepting this "colonial" view of their history and embraced it without reservation.

THE FRENCH AND THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF CAMBODIA

How does this role of French colonialism affect the National Museum of Cambodia? The answer is straightforward—the museum was created and developed by the French during a period lasting nearly half a century. The museum, which houses a collection of ancient Khmer sculpture, first opened on April 13, 1920, Khmer New Year (EFEO 1920). It continued under the direct control of the French Governor of Indochina until 1951. However, even after independence from French rule in 1953, the French retained authority over the museum as well as archaeological activities in Cambodia until 1966.

The National Museum was the product of the vision and efforts of one man, George Groslier (1887–1945), painter and son of an important French colonial family in Indochina. Groslier's passion for Khmer art and civilization inspired him not only to design and build the museum, but also to establish the Ecole des Beaux Arts as a sister institution. The two existed in a symbiotic relationship. Local artisans and artists participated in the actual design and construction of the museum. Members of the Ecole contributed to the museum after its completion by producing the products, such as textiles, wood

carvings, and silver wares, that were sold in the museum shop. In this manner Groslier actively nurtured traditional Khmer arts and crafts and gave them a new lease on life. Consequently, although Cambodian royalty encouraged and supported the creation of this museum in Phnom Penh, it was, in reality, the product of the enthusiasm and efforts of French colonials. (For additional information on the history of the National Museum, see Peters 1994.)

The exterior facade of the National Museum is obviously modeled upon traditional Khmer architecture, which in turn reflects a French vision of Cambodia (Fig. 1). However, what does the interior—the artifacts themselves and the way they are displayed—tell us? This is not a modern museum with well-lit rooms and tastefully arranged cases of artifacts accompanied by educational, graphically interesting labels. Instead, upon entering the museum, visitors cross the threshold into not only the world of the ancient Khmer, but also that

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of the colonial French. The last French curator, Madeleine Giteau, retired in 1966, and since then the Cambodians have left the museum virtually untouched. They recognize, perhaps unconsciously, that most of their visitors expect what they find, and that this musty, faded yet tranquil setting is part of the experience of seeing the magnificent Khmer statuary (Fig. 2). For many foreign tourists to Cambodia, a visit to the museum is a visit of nostalgia—to a romanticized colonial past mingled with the splendors of an ancient empire.

The collections encompass a wide range of objects, despite the losses accrued during the Khmer Rouge years (see Brand 1992). They can be broadly divided into three categories: stone sculpture, the core of the collection (Figs. 3–5); bronze materials, mostly small religious statuettes and ritual paraphernalia; and ethnographic materials, which consist primarily of objects associated with Cambodian kingship, but which also include some lacquerware and silverware, shadow puppets, ceramics, and agricultural and weaving tools. Most of the latter are in very poor condition. (See Giteau 1960 for descriptions of some of the most important objects in the collection.)

The display of the collections is designed specifically to remind the visitor of the greatness of Cambodia's past, and in this regard, more than two-thirds of the gallery space is devoted to magnificent stone sculpture and bronze objects. Even the so-called ethnographic materials on display do not tell us much about ordinary Khmer traditional culture and society because they are principally items attesting to the political strength, ritual powers, and economic wealth of the king.

The galleries themselves are arranged to stun and astound. As you walk through the rooms, tall statues emerge from the shadows, their power a tangible force. There is little explanation for the uninitiated: you are expected to know the history and cultural context of these pieces. If you do not, then it is sufficient that their greatness and beauty wash over and impress you. (In fairness, this approach was once fairly common in art museums all over the world.)

In one sense, the plan of these galleries agrees with the vision of French colonial scholarship in Cambodia. The French scholars focused their own work on the monuments, the inscriptions, the art and sculpture of the pre-Angkor and Angkor periods, almost to

the total exclusion of prehistory. However, in another sense, the arrangement of the galleries might also be seen as agreeing with the Khmer's own non-linear view of history. For both, Khmer history tells of particular kings and their periods of greatness.

A BUDDHIST VIEW OF MUSEUMS AND THE MUSEUM AT WAT PO VEAL

There is a long tradition in Buddhist countries, and especially in Southeast Asian Buddhist countries, for temples to serve as storehouses for "precious" items donated by devout laity.

The collection at Wat Po Veal began in such a manner. Then, because of the richness of the objects, a special building was constructed inside the temple complex to house and display them. This building was officially designated a museum in 1967 upon the initiative of His Excellency Samdech Vannarath Iv Tuot, the head of the monastery at that time (Lan Sunnary 1987).

With this new building designated as a museum, local people increased their donations to the temple. Wat Po Veal had additional significance because of its royal connections. During my visit to Battambang in November 1993 as part of the UNESCO survey team, I was told by monks currently in the temple that King Sihanouk had spent three months there as a monk and that his mother had taken a keen interest in its museum. Before the destruction caused by the Khmer Rouge, the collections were reported to be particularly rich and beautiful. They included archaeological pieces (both stone and bronze sculpture), works of ethnographic and artistic interest such as wooden sculpture and architectural elements from local temples, and Chinese and Thai ceramics.

During the years of civil war preceding the Khmer Rouge takeover, the local people, in an attempt to save objects from destruction, buried some of them in the grounds around the temple and threw others in the nearby river. Today a few of these artifacts have been retrieved and, in their damaged condition, are being housed in the dirty and decrepit rooms belonging to the former museum (Fig. 6).

The museum was not only closed during the Khmer Rouge years, but, perhaps because it formed an integral part of a Buddhist institution, its collections were specially targeted for destruction. Unlike the

during the Khmer Rouge years... [Wat Po Veal's] collections were specially targeted for destruction.



FIG. 4. A seated Shiva and headless Uma from Banteay Srei, dating to the second half of the 10th century, dramatize the critical security situation in the National Museum. The head of the Uma was stolen from the museum in the early 1970s.

Photograph by David A. Feingold, Ophidian Films, Ltd.

National Museum and the Battambang Provincial Museum (discussed below), both the monastery and the museum remained closed during the thirteen years of the Vietnamese-installed government. Adding insult to injury, the monastery grounds were used to garrison Vietnamese troops. It was only after the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia in May 1989 that Wat Po Veal reopened its doors to monks. The museum building, however, remains essentially an empty shell. It became clear during my later visit to Battambang that while our team's focus was on the

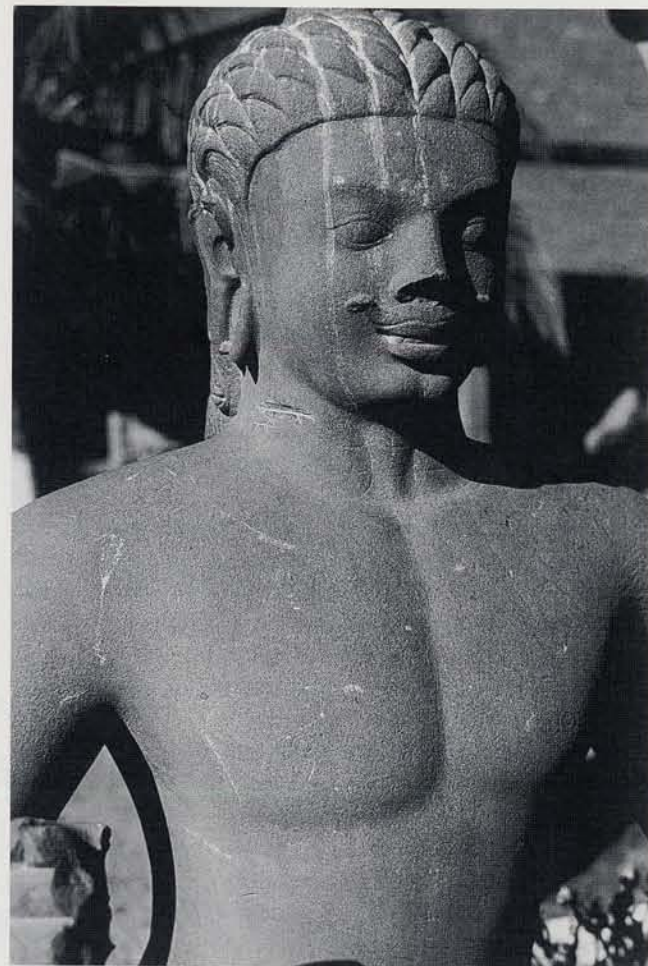


FIG. 5. Bat dung streaks the so-called Leper King with white. This 12th–13th century statue from the Royal Terrace of the Leper King at Angkor Thom reveals another problem the museum faces: the more than 1.5 million bats that live in its attic. Not only is there a constant pungent smell in the galleries, but bat dung drops onto floors, walls and sculptures, where it poses a health hazard and erodes stone surfaces. To ease the problem, the museum has begun installing a well-sealed ceiling to prevent the bat dung from falling into the galleries.

Photograph by David A. Feingold, Ophidian Films, Ltd.

Battambang Provincial Museum, the local peoples' interest was in restoring and renovating the temple of Wat Po Veal. This concern was significant, because the Provincial Museum was physically in much better condition and, unlike Wat Po Veal, it still had a collection. Yet, for the people, the museum in the Wat was the more important.

This priority reveals another aspect of Khmer self identity—the significance of Buddhism to the people and the close links between its preservation and the preservation of Khmer culture. It explains why the

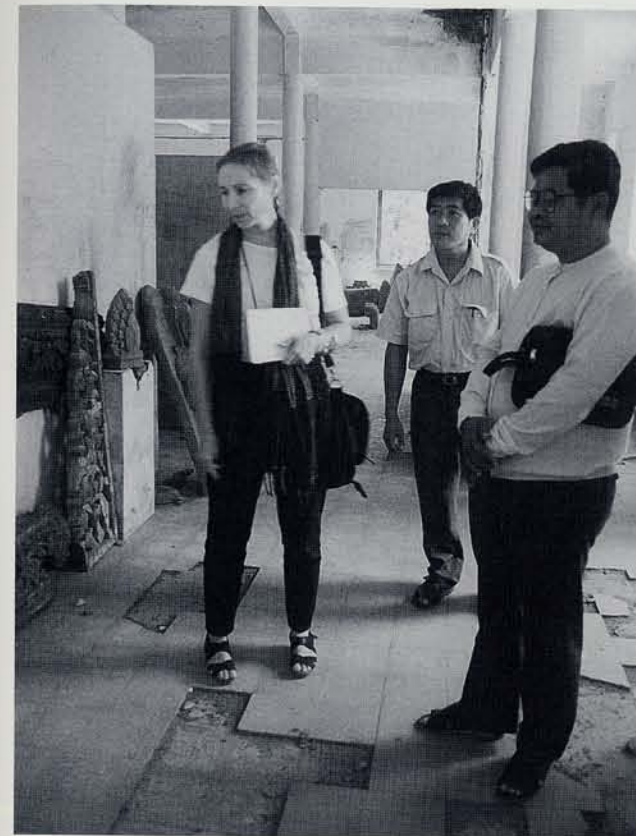


FIG. 7. The Battambang Provincial Museum is a colonial-style building whose exhibits, although in much disarray, still reflect a Vietnamese historical perspective.

Photograph by David A. Feingold, Ophidian Films, Ltd.

Vietnamese not only did not reopen the monastery or the museum within the temple compound, but even garrisoned their troops there. In essence, this act stripped the complex of its Buddhist nature and defaced it by turning it into something counter to Buddhism, something connected with violence and killing.

THE VIETNAMESE AND THE BATTAMBANG PROVINCIAL MUSEUM

The Battambang Provincial Museum was created by provincial authorities in 1968 (Fig. 7). A small museum, it served as a repository and exhibition space primarily for archaeological pieces consisting of stone sculpture and wooden architectural elements (such as lintels and columns) which came from surrounding temples (Lan Sunnary 1987). It, too, was dismantled during the Khmer Rouge years, and was reopened by the Vietnamese-backed Cambodian government shortly after 1979.

FIG. 6. The author and Cambodian officials from the Battambang Provincial government inspect the dilapidated galleries of the museum at Wat Po Veal. The museum was closed not only during the Khmer Rouge years, when its Buddhist collections were specially targeted for destruction, but also during the years of the Vietnamese-installed government that followed. It reopened as a monastery in 1989, but its museum and collections have yet to be restored.

Photograph by Phoeng Sopbean, UNESCO, Phnom Penh



The Battambang Provincial Museum, as it stands today, contains the only traces I saw of Vietnamese influence on Cambodian presentation of history and culture. The museum is located in a small, T-shaped room in a one-storied colonial-style building. As at Wat Po Veal, the museum's collections came primarily from donations. I was told during my visit that objects were usually offered first to Wat Po Veal. When that museum had sufficient objects, donations were redirected to the Provincial Museum. The current collection was inventoried in 1983 and contains only 589 pieces. The original collection was larger, but because the original inventory is lost, no one remembers the total count. Again, as at Wat Po Veal, people believe that many objects from the original collection were buried in the grounds around the museum to protect them from the ravages of war. In addition, the most valuable pieces were crated and shipped to Phnom Penh for safety in the early 1970s. These boxes still sit in the



FIG. 8. Within the Battambang Provincial Museum there is little order and few labels. Some objects are not even mounted, but lie in rows on the floor (lower right).

Photograph by David A. Feingold, Ophidian Films, Ltd.

basement of the National Museum today, allegedly waiting for the national security situation to improve sufficiently for them to be returned to Battambang.

Unlike Wat Po Veal, the Battambang Provincial Museum was, for the Vietnamese, "politically correct." Consequently, the Vietnamese-installed government reopened the museum sometime before 1983 and provided it with a staff of mostly untrained non-specialists. (The use of the verb "reopened" is misleading because the museum is rarely open to the public and can be visited only upon request.) There is currently no concept of an orderly exhibition (Fig. 8). Objects are simply placed around the museum on the floor, on pedestals, or on ledges on the wall. Not all of the objects are labeled, and those that are carry only brief identifications written in Khmer.

However, located at the entrance to the museum is a large text panel which is strikingly familiar to a visitor knowledgeable about exhibitions in Chinese and Vietnamese museums. I was told that the panel, produced in 1982 and written in Khmer, introduces the visitor to the paleolithic and neolithic periods in Cambodia. It is accompanied by illustrations of stratigraphy and of pottery and stone tools, none of which are represented in the museum. In fact, there is very little material representing these periods in any museum in Cambodia, partly because only a few prehistoric sites

have been excavated, and partly because the emphasis of archaeological work has been and still is on the Angkorean Empire and the period immediately preceding it.

This atypical interest in Cambodian prehistory represented by the text panel can only mean that it was designed by Vietnamese specialists (who in turn model their own archaeological publications and illustrations on Chinese ones). The approach reflects the Vietnamese, not the Cambodian, presentation of history. For the Vietnamese, history is lineal and orderly: society is believed to have passed through evolutionary phases of development, all of which can be illustrated by data retrieved from archaeological excavations. This view of history contrasts sharply with the Khmer presentation, which focuses on the greatness of the Angkorean period, its monuments and inscriptions, and the cycles of the great kings.

The efforts of the Vietnamese, if successful at all, certainly did not last. The museum today is, as described above, a hodge-podge of Angkor-period objects from local monuments. A most extraordinary glass display case is found at the entrance to the museum. It is stuffed with a melange of objects given to the museum by the Venerable Monsieur Oeur Loem, the head of Wat Damrei Sar, together with a photograph of the revered monk himself (Fig. 9). The



FIG. 9. One case in the Battambang Provincial Museum is filled with objects donated by Venerable Oeur Loem, the head of Wat Damrei Sar. The photograph sitting amidst the clutter on top of the case is of Monsieur Oeur Loem himself.

Photograph by David A. Feingold, Ophidian Films, Ltd.

FIG. 10. One of the former classrooms at the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. The room was left the way the Vietnamese soldiers found it when they liberated Phnom Penh from the Khmer Rouge in January 1979. The room contains a bedspring on which the prisoner was strapped during torture sessions, and implements of torture.

Photograph by David A. Feingold, Ophidian Films, Ltd.

museum as I saw it fits well with the concept of what we might term the "Franco-Khmer" museum style.

TUOL SLENG: A MUSEUM FOR MODERN TIMES

A very different kind of museum opened in 1979, around the same time the National Museum was reopened to the public. The building and grounds of this new museum belonged to the former Tuol Svay Prey High School (also called Lycée Ponhea Yat). Taken over by Pol Pot's security forces in 1975, the school was turned into one of the world's most notorious prisons, Security Prison 21 (S-21; Fig. 10). Some estimate that more than 17,000 people passed through Tuol Sleng to be interrogated and tortured. Those held as prisoners were accused of alleged political crimes against the state; their ranks included more and more members of the Khmer Rouge itself, as the government became increasingly paranoid. All prisoners were brutally tortured and executed except for three inmates whose talents proved useful to the Khmer Rouge regime (one was a mason) and four who were still alive on the day Phnom Penh was liberated by Vietnamese troops. Prison officials, mostly young teenage boys and girls, kept detailed written and photographic records of each prisoner (Fig. 11). Because the Khmer Rouge were confident they were returning soon to Phnom Penh, they did not take any of these documents with them. These and other artifacts found at the site now





FIG. 11. Photographs of victims tortured and executed in the Tuol Sleng S-21 Security Prison. Part of the archives kept by the prison guards, these photographs were left behind when the guards fled Phnom Penh. The organizers of the museum have literally plastered over many of the walls of the exhibition rooms with these documents.

Photograph by David A. Feingold, Ophidian Films, Ltd.

form a large part of the museum's collections (Becker 1987; Chandler 1991; Thion 1993).

In early 1979 the new Cambodian authorities commissioned Vietnamese experts, trained in Poland, to create the new Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. Modeled after Auschwitz, the museum's stated purpose is to remind the Khmer people and the world community about what happened in Cambodia from 1975 to 1979. It is also an homage to the millions who died during that period (Fig. 12).

However, the museum was also constructed during the time of the Vietnamese-installed government, and there are some look upon it unfavorably. They say that behind the museum is the hand of the Vietnamese, who wished to focus the Cambodian people's anguish and hatred on the Khmer Rouge and not let them think too much about the fact that the Vietnamese were now

manipulating their government. The museum also deflected attention away from Vietnam's own relationship with the Khmer Rouge (friendly and supportive until the Khmer Rouge began attacking Vietnamese villages along the Cambodian-Vietnamese border), and away from the fact that among the ranks of the Vietnamese-installed government were Khmer Rouge defectors. Some take issue with the basic concept. A French scholar who has lived in Cambodia and researched its history and politics for years comments, "I understand the idea of a 'museum' dedicated to mass killing but I am not convinced that such places should exist. I do not believe reality can be shown in this way" (Thion 1993:xix).

During my stay in Cambodia, officials in the government were beginning to question Tuol Sleng's role as a public museum. Some people suggested that the current coal-

"If we keep the display of bones it goes against our Buddhist beliefs but if we cremate them we will lose the evidence of the Khmer Rouge crimes"

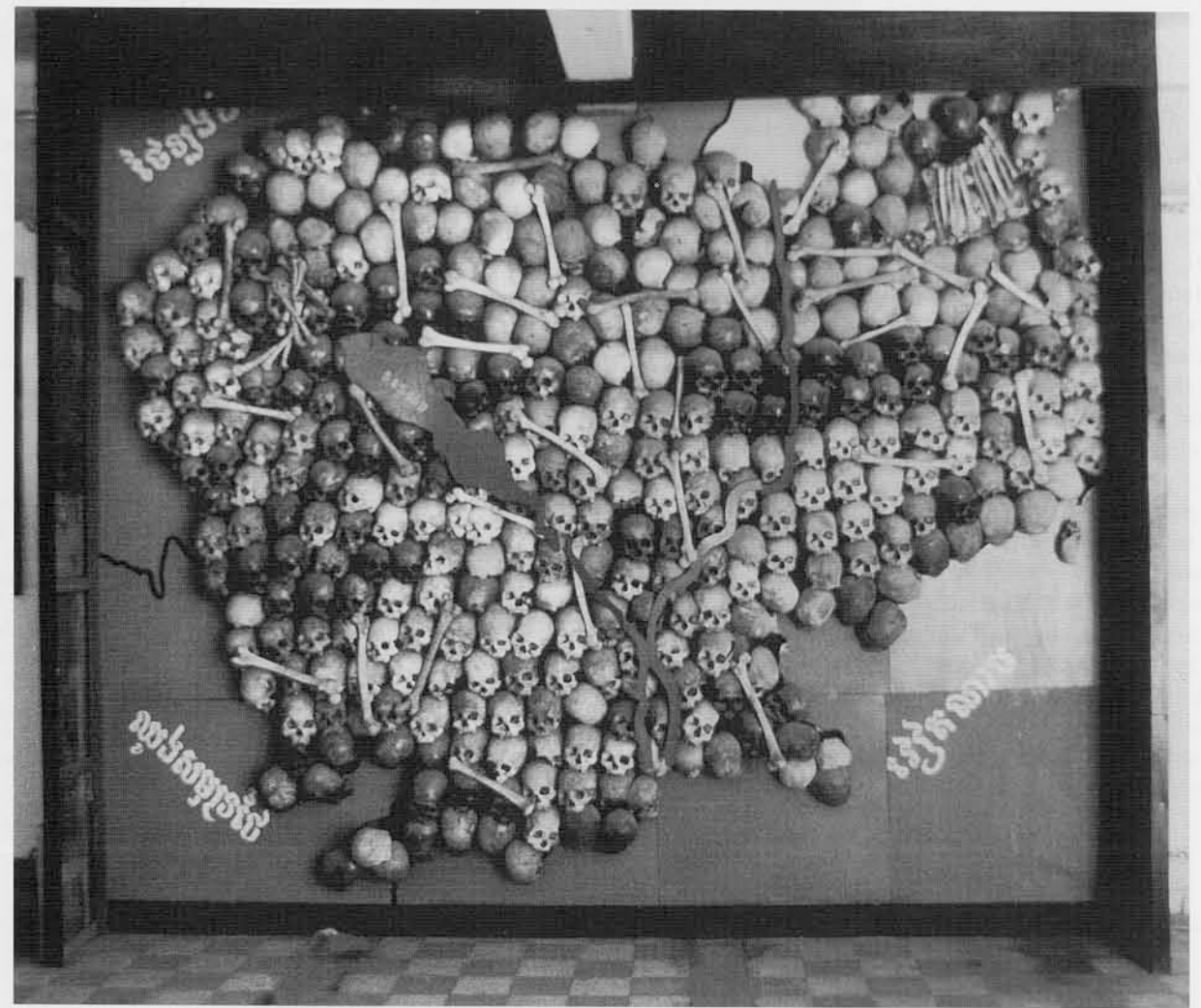


FIG. 12. A map of Cambodia made with skulls of tortured prisoners from Tuol Sleng on display at the museum.

Photograph by David A. Feingold, Ophidian Films, Ltd.

tion government does not want to offend the Khmer Rouge faction which lies outside today's legitimate government but nonetheless exerts a strong influence on it through its military power. Others give a more simple reason: "Do we really need Tuol Sleng anymore? Is this the image of Cambodia we want the tourist to take away from his or her visit?" The implication is that the Cambodian people want to move on to a more positive image of their country. They recrowned Sihanouk as king in October 1993, turning Cambodia once again into a kingdom. The Ministry of Tourism, not unreasonably, wants tourists and visitors to admire the grandeur of Cambodia's past kingdoms, as well as to appreciate the achievements of the present king.

Just last year, Tuol Sleng was once again the focus of attention when the Cambodian government announced that it would cremate the skulls and bones on display. King Sihanouk said that he would contribute \$10,000 for the cremation ceremony plus an additional \$10,000 to build a stupa for the ashes. He said, "I hope that after we complete this ceremony in the Buddhist

tradition, the role of the skeletons will be to bring our country to peace" (*Indochina Digest*, 9 December 1994). However, by January of this year, the government had already changed its mind. On 19 January, palace chief of cabinet Keoputh Rasmey announced to the news service Agence France-Presse that King Sihanouk had abandoned his idea to cremate the bones at Tuol Sleng following a plea from the central committee of the Cambodian People's Party (CCP). The CCP said the "majority of Cambodia's population disagreed with cremating the bones" and wanted to keep them as "witness to the Khmer Rouge crimes." The deputy director of the Tuol Sleng Museum said, "If we keep the display of bones it goes against our Buddhist beliefs but if we cremate them we will lose the evidence of the Khmer Rouge crimes" (*Indochina Digest*, 20 January 1995). Thus, for the moment, the symbolic significance of Tuol Sleng in keeping alive the memory of one of Cambodia's blackest periods is more important than the Ministry of Tourism's desire to create a more sanguine image of Cambodia to tourists.

CONCLUSIONS

These museums in Cambodia are most certainly a product of Cambodia's past. Their displays, except for Tuol Sleng's which for obvious reasons stand apart, bring together a blend of the Khmers' own view of themselves with that of their colonial rulers. In the years between the departure of the French administrators and the beginning of the Khmer Rouge regime, and those since the end of the Khmer Rouge rule, the vision of Cambodia reflected in museum exhibits has not changed.

When I initially investigated the question of the presentation and representation of a national identity in Cambodia museums, I expected to find changes following the departure of the French—or if not actual changes, then plans for change. At the moment, there are none. One answer has already been suggested: that the French version of Cambodian history fits too nicely with the Khmer's own. However, on a completely different level, perhaps the museum directors and curators are simply too busy with very practical and elementary problems. In addition to the ever-present problem of

lack of funds, Cambodian museum officials must try to restore their institutions in a country where basic services such as electricity, water, and telephones are still lacking. The simple tasks of cleaning up their museums, providing much needed security, inventorying their collections, and beginning desperately needed projects to conserve and preserve their collections are made even more difficult by the lack of professionally trained staff. There is no room for the luxury of abstract contemplation when basic survival is still so precarious. 21

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