Cambodian History Through Cambodian Museums

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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 environments. 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 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 1991 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 "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 1993). Although Cambodian Buddhists made pilgrimages to Angkor, the seat of the ancient empire, no one in the country knew the names of Angkorian kings or could decipher Angkorian 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 and culture in Cambodia and its history and culture are the products of the EEF 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 studied to refer to the most 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. They were responsible for piecing together its former glories, weaving them together into a coherent narrative. They created a powerful picture, one of a sophisticated 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 dominated by colonialism, the brilliance of the past Khmer Empire—was highly seductive. Consequently, the Khmer themselves had no difficulty accepting this "colony" 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 a century. The museum, which houses a collection of ancient Khmer sculpture, first opened on April 13, 1928, Khmer New Year (EEFO 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.)

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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 history is contained in stone, and that this mystic, 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 nonstop—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, silverware, shadow puppets, ceramics, and agricultural and weaving tools. Most of the latter are in very poor condition. (See Giteau 1966 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 ethno-graphic 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 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 uninstructed. 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 you 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 agree with the 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 storerores for "precious" items donated by devout laymen.

The collection at Wat Po Veal began in such a manner. Thus, 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 Sambuch Vannarith IV, the head of the monastery at that time (Hunt 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 architectural 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 of 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 are in their damaged condition, 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 focused on an integral part of a Buddhist institution, its collections were specially targeted for destruction. Unlike the
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

National Museum and 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

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 (Ian Sumnary 1987). It, too, was dismantled during the Khmer Rouge years, and was reopened by the Vietnamese-backed Cambodian government shortly after 1979.

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
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 Vinal, 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 walls. 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 are 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 linear 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 Angkorian-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 Loan, the head of Wat Damrei Sar, together with a photograph of the revered monk himself (Fig. 9). The museum as I saw it fits well with the concept of what we might term the "Franco-Khmer" museum style.

TUOL SELENG: 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 Slae Prey High School (also called Lycee Fonhea 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 Slae 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 two 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
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 Rouge 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 who 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 delisted 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 1993b).

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 coalition 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" (Izucarha Digest, 9 December 1994). However, by January of this year, the government had already changed its mind. On 19 January, palace chief of cabinet Kpeouth Samey announced to the news service Agence France-Presse that King Sihanouk had aban-
doned his idea to cremate the bodies at Tuol Sleng follow-
ing a plea from the central committee of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP). The CPP 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' (Izucarha 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 Cambodian 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, inventoring 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.

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