

BALANCING POLITICAL HISTORY, ETHNOGRAPHY, AND ART: THE ROLE OF A NATIONAL MUSEUM THE CASE OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF CAMBODIA

Mr. Kong Vireak
Director, National Museum of Cambodia

INTRODUCTION

For its modest definition, museums are a major expression of cultural identity in every society. The role of national museums in defining and shaping a nation's identity has been a much discussed topic of late. In introducing, perhaps, the most stimulating collection of essays on the subject, Darryl McIntyre and Kirsten Wehner in the introduction to their co-edited publication, *National Museums: Negotiating Histories - Conference proceedings* (2001), drew attention to the difficulties contemporary national museums face in trying to “negotiate and present competing interpretations of national histories and national identities.”¹ How national museums seek to represent competing histories, contested certainties and cultural difference through their structures, spatial arrangements, collection policies and exhibition strategies has been analyzed by many scholars and practitioners, generating an extensive literature on the subject.

The 5th Asian National Museums Association (ANMA) focuses on the competing and difficult mandates that national museums address. The Asian Civilisations Museum of Singapore is the chair of this conference and defines the central theme of the conference as *Balancing Political History, Ethnography and Art: The Role of a National Museum* so as to encourage public discussion among the Asian National Museum practitioners.

It is not without difficulty that one can discuss and debate the role of the Cambodian National Museum within this theme. In its context of having been part of a French Protectorate, the National Museum of Cambodia was created with a mandate to cover archaeology and art history but also to balance the colonial history with the great past Cambodian civilization. Since it opened till the present day, the National Museum of Cambodia's core collections and displays center on archaeological and art objects, which include exclusively the statues of Indian Gods of Hinduism and Buddhism, with the exception of a small number of pre-historic and ethnographic objects, which complement the art collections.

What is the role in balancing political history, ethnography and art that the National Museum of Cambodia plays? This may become the turning point for a new mandate for a Cambodian National Museum to challenge.

IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WERE ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE ARTS

Needless to say, Cambodia is among the richest country in terms of its cultural materials. However, until the late 19th Century, Cambodia was lesser known to the West. Influenced by publications such as the journal, *World Tour*, (1863), travel accounts by the explorer Henri



The Exterior of the National Museum of Cambodia
Image courtesy of the National Museum of Cambodia

Mouhot (1826–1861), such as *Travels in the Central Parts of Indo-China* (published in 1863) and perhaps even more so from engravings of Mouhot's drawings, the image of Angkor, became emblematic of the most spectacular form constructed for the International Colonial Exposition in 1931, which captured the French imagination. The International Colonial Exposition attempted to display the diverse cultures and immense resources of France's colonies. It was the pinnacle of a number of exhibitions that reconstructed the colonies in 1878, 1889 and 1900, in Paris, and in 1906 and 1922, in Marseille.

Cambodian archaeological work was, and essentially remains, focused on its great monuments. The temples, by their number, their grandeur and beauty, almost ineluctably monopolise the attention of the few concerned institutions

and researchers. The discovery of Khmer sites resulted in a true scientific and museological expansion that raised the question of the role of archeology in 'cultural colonisation'. In the case of Cambodia, this question should be noted within a context of ruins and heritage objects being taken possession while being 'processed' for archaeological purposes. After the French naturalist and explorer, Mouhot, the first agent of such processing was the lieutenant Ernest Doudart de Lagrée, who took advantage of a reconnaissance to Angkor, before he became the leader of the French Mekong Expedition of 1866–1868, a major scientific expedition of the 19th century. If archaeological deposits, in the form of Khmer sculptures, define the cultural identity of Indochina, it is significant that the first move to conserve them was part of their appropriation and exportation to France. The other prominent

1. Daniel McIntyre, and Kirsten Wehner. In *National Museums: Negotiating Histories: Conference Proceedings*, (Canberra: National Museum of Australia, 2001), xiv.

2 The Mekong Expedition was the first systematic exploration of the Mekong River. Led by Ernest Doudard de Lagrée and Francis Garnier, the expedition ascended the river from its mouth to Yunnan between 1866 to 1868. Delaporte was a young naval officer and chosen to accompany the expedition because of his talent in drawing.

figure in this process was Louis Delaporte, a lieutenant and member of the Mekong Expedition of 1866-1868.² He would later describe his initial emotion: "I could contemplate these monuments of art ignored for too long without feeling a strong desire to make them known to Europe and enrich our museums (with) a collection of Khmer antiquities whose place was all marked next those of Egypt and Assyria." With the creation of the Trocadero Indo-Chinese Museum in 1880, Louis Delaporte introduced the Khmer civilization to the pantheon of universal arts.

In Indochina, the essential scientific institution of archaeological investigation is *École française d'Extrême-Orient* (EFEO), the French School of the Far East. Established in 1898 by the Governor General Paul Doumer (1857-1932), it was first named the "archaeological mission" in spite of its objects of study being very broad. It is not limited to the study of extinct societies, since it includes philology and ethnology. EFEO was created under the aegis of the Institut de France, Academy of Inscriptions and Belles-Lettres. When officials of the EFEO have to reaffirm the school's authority, such as its scientific control of museums in Indochina, they still prevail in garnering this legitimacy at the highest national scientific bodies. Another notable point is the issue of preservation of ancient monuments in Indochina. This was discussed at the International Congress of Orientalists in 1897 and laid the foundations for the formation of the EFEO. In 1900, the law on historical monuments was established by the publication of a decree "on the conservation of monuments and objects of historic or artistic interest." In 1901, the first ranked list of conserved monuments was developed. The Khmer monuments were highlighted in this document. The following year in Paris a so-called foundation for conservation of ancient monuments in Indochina (*Société d'Angkor pour la conservation des monuments anciens d'Indochine*) was created. With it, the first restoration work

began and a new phenomenon arose: tourism. From October to December 1907, two hundred visitors visited the Angkor site. Tourism also brought with it a competition with other colonial powers, such as the British and Dutch, who sought archaeological treasures. For immediate solutions, many of the statues and architectural elements at Angkor were transported to the then newly created *Dépôt de Conservation d'Angkor*, Angkor Conservation Depot in Siemreap. As the number of objects increased in this depot, a museum was needed.

**FROM ARCHAEOLOGICAL
RESEARCH AND CONSERVATION
OF MONUMENTS TO THE MUSEUM:
THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF CAMBODIA**

In Phnom Penh, two museums with a mandate to cover archaeology and art history were established. The first was established by decree on August 17, 1905 under the authority of the higher Resident of Cambodia and the scientific control of the EFEO. The museum was built in 1908 by a Kuhn-Cambodian architect who graduated from the Central School of Paris. It was located in the grounds of the royal palace and was funded by the royal treasury. This fact gives an indication of the interest of the Khmer sovereignty in this type of conservation. However, in 1917, it was replaced by a second museum dedicated to Albert Sarraut (1872-1962), the then governor general. This museum is inseparable from the personality of George Groslier (1887-1943), its creator and curator. Groslier was the son of a director of the civil service. He became the first French born in Cambodia in 1887. Trained at the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, he returned to Phnom Penh and was dedicated to promoting the culture of this country. He established the School of Cambodian Arts in 1917, an institution located next to the museum. The museum provided objects as models for the

latter's study in jewellery, sculpture and weaving.

His museum was not conceived simply as a place to conserve and display collections. From the beginning, it was integrally linked to the School of Cambodian Arts (*École des Arts Cambodgiens*), whose mission was to train artisans in diverse skills. Such was the vision of its founder, George Groslier who intended that objects from antiquity provide a source of inspiration for modern art. He considered modern art somewhat sluggish after a long sleep. Yet, he thought modern art was potentially powerful. For this reason, 19th and 20th Century objects of everyday life are presented as being of artistic value in the museum. As such, apprentices in jewellery, metal-casting, drawing, sculpting and weaving of the time worked in a most propitious atmosphere. It must also be said that antiquities had already begun to disappear from sites. They were making their way to various foreign collections. Legal controls for their protection were not well-established. To mitigate cultural losses, a museum was clearly ever more indispensable.

In 1917, the first stone was solemnly laid; thus launching the project of building a museum. Construction was completed in 1920. This was followed by the inauguration of the museum, then called The Albert Sarraut Museum. Regardless of its first collections, the building itself was already perceived as a work of great distinction. This opinion was unanimous. In 1951, the responsibility for managing patrimony was transferred by the French Protectorate to Khmer authorities. It was then that the museum's name was changed to The National Museum of Cambodia. The museum was directed by a succession of French directors until 1966, before the first Cambodian was put in charge. It goes without saying that from the very beginning the archaeological and ethnographic collections (of stone, wood, metal and ceramic objects) have been continuously enriched.

A number of guides as well as various catalogues and publications relevant to the collections are already known to the public.

**BALANCING POLITICAL HISTORY,
ETHNOGRAPHY AND ART: SPECIAL
EXHIBITION AND THEIR ROLE
IN BALANCING NATIONAL AND
REGIONAL IDENTITIES**

As the number of visitors to the National Museum of Cambodia has increased, there is a need to shape the public's understanding of their country's history. The National Museum of Cambodia has arrived at a the turning point in its development. Instead of its traditional role of collecting, preserving and sharing its rich collections, it now finds that it plays an expanding role in supporting the development of communities and major economic activities. In performing such important duties, the National Museum of Cambodia needs to consider the role of cultures and communities which cross national borders and cultural objects that have been retooled and contextualized over different historical periods.

From 2010, the National Museum of Cambodia has promoted special and temporary exhibitions for different stakeholders. With support, it is hoped that the National Museum will continue to develop exhibitions that promote Cambodian art, explore aspects of Cambodian art history and showcase the extensive and extraordinary national collection. Such a special exhibition would encourage the participation of individual artists and the private sectors to cooperate with the National Museum to show their works of art as well as to advocate for representations of their community's identity. Some special exhibitions also lead to regional cooperation.

In 2010, the National Museum of Cambodia presented a special exhibition of ethnography of the Mekong entitled *Stories of the Mekong - Challenges and Dreams*. This exhibition lasted 3 months from July 28 – October 30, 2010. The Mekong River has been the home of cultures as old as time and a continuous source of life and legend. It gathers people with different ways of life, but who have shared challenges and dreams. This exhibition brings to life the rich cultural heritage of the river through different voices in this crossroad between old and new.

This exhibition was followed by a special exhibition entitled *Our Common Heritage: Exploring World Heritage Sites of Cambodia, Laos and Viet Nam* that was inaugurated on 19 February 2013. It was a result of the UNESCO-Japan Fund in Trust project called *Revitalizing World Heritage Sites and Museums in Cambodia, Laos and Viet Nam*. The project was launched on July 2011 and followed by two regional workshops, the first in Hanoi (in 2011) and the second in Siem Reap (in 2012). It included participants from the nine museums: National Museum of Cambodia, Preah Norodom Sihanouk Angkor Museum, Angkor National Museum, Preah Vihear Eco Global Museum from Cambodia, Thang Long Imperial

Citadel site museum, My Son Interpretation Center, Da Nang Cham Sculpture Museum, Ho Citadel site Museum from Vietnam, and Wat Phu Museum from Laos. In addition to the exhibition, the National Museum of Cambodia, as well as other eight participating museums in this project ran an education programme with school children until the end of June 2013. The aim of this exhibition was to provide visitors with new narratives by shedding light on the historical interconnections between various World Heritage sites and related populations of the sub-region.

CONCLUSION

With the need for reform to cope with the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) integration by 2015, the National Museum of Cambodia has started to address its role in defining and shaping the public's understanding of history and in balancing such histories with regional political histories and identities. The National Museum of Cambodia has found their way out of a traditional context of arts and archaeology by promoting special exhibitions in socio-history and ethnography.

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