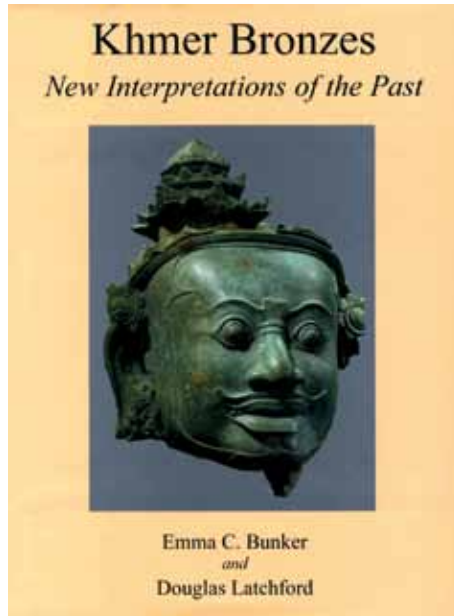


Khmer Bronzes: New Interpretations of the Past by Emma C. Bunker and Douglas Latchford (Chicago: Art Media Resources, 2011). ISBN 978 1 58886 111 5 (hard). US\$120.



The study of Khmer bronze sculpture and ritual/ceremonial objects has experienced a groundswell in recent years. Among the most notable developments is the discovery of a bronze-making workshop north of the Royal Palace in Angkor Thom, the only Angkor-era bronze production workshop that has thus far come to light (Polkinghorne 2014-2015). Substantial portions of major international exhibitions in 1997-1998 (Jessup & Zéphir 1997) and 2006-2007 (Lobo & Jessup 2006) were devoted to bronzes, and recent museum catalogues of collections in Phnom Penh (Dalsheimer 2001) and Paris (Baptiste & Zéphir 2008) have included significant coverage of them as well. In 2010-2011 visitors to the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery

(Washington, D.C.) and the J. Paul Getty Museum (Los Angeles) were treated to *Gods of Angkor* (Cort & Jett 2010), an important exhibit consisting of bronzes selected from the National Museum of Cambodia in Phnom Penh.

Right on its heels, and covering some of the same objects but also many more, came this hefty volume, by far the most thorough and ambitious study of Khmer bronze art ever published. It is the third and reportedly final installment of Bunker and Latchford's series on ancient Khmer art (Bunker & Latchford 2004, 2008). The finest of the three, *Khmer Bronzes: New Interpretations of the Past* exhibits many of the same strengths, challenges, and risks of the previous books as noted, for example, in a review of Bunker and Latchford's *Adoration and Glory: The Golden Age of Khmer Art* (Baptiste & Zéphir 2004). Because several bronze sculptures featured in this book were previously published by Bunker and Latchford, many for the first time and often with extensive discussions scattered across their publications, it is helpful to read *Khmer Bronzes* with the previous two volumes close at hand.

Like their previous books, a main strength of *Khmer Bronzes* is its multifaceted perspective that bridges art history, archaeology, technical analysis, and art connoisseurship. *Khmer Bronzes* is a collaborative effort that includes, in addition to the main text by Bunker and Latchford, contributions by TzeHuey Chiou-Peng, Pieter Meyers, Peter D. Sharrock, and Hiram Woodward. The first three chapters examine different aspects of bronze metallurgy in Southeast Asia and Yunnan prior to the

mid-1st millennium CE. Chapter 1, by Bunker and Latchford, provides a summary of “The Beginning of the Use of Metals and Alloys in Cambodia.” Chapter 2 by TzeHuey Chiou-Peng discusses “The Technical History of Early Asian Kettledrums” with a primary focus on Yunnan. According to her, the bronze kettledrum tradition originated with the Wanjiaba drums. The earliest of these is often argued to date to the 7th century BCE, a date supported by Chiou-Peng, but international scholarly consensus regarding the chronology and influence of the Wanjiaba drums is lacking. She argues that “a distinct Yunnan metallurgical tradition” relying on piece-mold casting led to the development of the famous Heger I type kettledrums, including those associated with Dong Son (or Đông Sơn) civilization in northern Vietnam, and that lost-wax casting commenced in Yunnan during the 4th century BCE, but only then as a supplementary technique for casting plaques and figural scenes on the lids of Dian drums and cowry shell containers (p. 25).

In Chapter 3, “Casting Technology in Cambodia and Related Southeast Asian Civilizations,” Pieter Meyers builds on the data provided by Chiou-Peng to argue, contrary to the opinions of many scholars, that the lost-wax casting technique (or a variation of it) was not used to produce the kettledrums associated with Dong Son civilization (Heger I type drums). Instead, according to Meyers, these drums, and related bronze objects like bells and gongs, were all produced with the piece-mold casting technique derived from Yunnan. This technique, he says, disappeared in Vietnam ca. mid-1st millennium CE around the time that lost-wax casting was introduced to Southeast Asia from South Asia. As discussed in Chapter 4 by Bunker and Latchford, the lost-wax casting innovation first occurred in parts of Southeast Asia ca. 6th century to facilitate the production of three-dimensional Hindu and Buddhist figures, large sculptures of which were equipped with an internal “iron armature to support the wax-covered clay core during the casting process...” (p. 53).

These essays are often quite compelling and provide a useful overview of some aspects of prehistoric Southeast Asian bronze traditions, but the picture they paint is rather incomplete. The well-known nationalistic debates over the origins, chronology, and stylistic sequence of bronze drums aside, the early chapters of this book give extremely short shrift to evidence from Vietnam and the role of (northern) Vietnam in the development of Southeast Asian metallurgical traditions. Other than a handful of references to key sources on Dong Son culture and bronzes published in Vietnam, there is little engagement with Vietnamese scholarship or with Vietnamese language sources. Given the immense scale of archaeological research in Vietnam, much of it in Vietnamese, this is indeed a major shortcoming. A higher level of reader confidence might have been attained had the authors engaged more comprehensively and directly with differing interpretations of the data advanced by Vietnamese scholars, as well as by scholars of other nationalities who have worked

extensively in Vietnam (e.g. Japanese scholars).¹

Similarly, the essays would have been strengthened had the authors included relevant archaeological evidence found in Vietnam and Laos and had they made more than a cursory reference to objects held in Vietnamese collections. For example, given the welcome attention by the authors to the technical aspects of bronze objects and their manufacture, it is striking that no mention is made of archaeological evidence that indicates the casting of bronze drums in northern Vietnam, including two fragments of a clay mold excavated in 1998 (discussed with citations in Calo 2014: 39-40). Pieter Meyers stresses detailed firsthand examination and technical analysis and states that his observations “were made based upon careful study of dozens of drums and associated objects” (pp. 36-37). Yet all of his examples of kettledrums said to be from Vietnam are drawn from a private collection in California (Chan Kieu Collection) with no information provided about either provenance (documented history of ownership/custody) or provenience (find spot). It is unclear whether his conclusions were at all informed by firsthand analysis of any of the “classic” examples of Dong Son (Heger I type) drums in Vietnamese museums or any of the bronze drums that have been discovered at known locations or by archaeologists in controlled excavations. However experienced or capable the analyst, technical arguments based on objects of unknown or undisclosed origin, rather than unimpeachable examples with known histories, is not sound methodology – if that is indeed what has occurred here; readers are provided no way of knowing otherwise. Given the potential impact of the arguments that Meyers makes, this reviewer eagerly awaits their confirmation by additional scholarship employing a more transparent, inclusive, and systematic methodology.

Chapters 4-9, written by Bunker and Latchford and comprising the bulk of the book, present the history of Khmer and Khmer-related bronze art traditions, mostly Brahmanical and Buddhist, from the 7th through the 13th century. The main topics are the following: Pre-Angkorian images, primarily examples found in Cambodia and northeastern Thailand (Chapter 4); the “Early Angkor Period” (Chapter 5); the “Golden Age” of the Baphuon style (Chapter 7); the “Angkor Wat Period” (Chapter 8); the “Bayon Period” (Chapter 9); and “exotic Buddhist bronzes” (Chapter 6)

¹ Three examples will suffice here. Imamura (2010) offers somewhat differing opinions regarding the dating and significance of the drums known variably as the Wanjiaba type, pre-Heger I type drums, or Dong Son type D. In addition to the piece-mold and lost-wax casting methods, expertly discussed by Meyers, a “lost fiber” method has been suggested for the handles of a few Heger I type bronze drums (Imamura 1989). In several publications Nishimura Masanari (e.g. 2008: 76-78) observes the predominance of the piece-mold technique for so-called Pre-Heger I type and Heger I type bronze drums, but he argues that several early examples of these two types of drums were likely to have been produced using the lost-wax casting method, which he associates with localization occurring in Thailand and Vietnam (e.g. in Binh Định province). Did Meyers examine these drums? In any case, arguments such as these potentially complicate relatively straightforward theories of cultural transmission, sequences of style and technique, and attempts to date these developments. None of these perspectives are acknowledged or discussed in *Khmer Bronzes*.

found in “Khmer territory” but imported from China, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and perhaps other parts of Southeast Asia. A major contribution of Chapters 6-9 is the rich information provided on the development of Khmer esoteric Buddhist artistic traditions beginning perhaps as early as the late 8th century and culminating in the strongly Vajrayāna Buddhist milieu of King Jayavarman VII in the late 12th and the early 13th century.

Specific aspects of the development of tantric/esoteric Buddhist art are treated in several of the book’s appendixes. In Appendix 2, Peter D. Sharrock identifies the naga-enthroned Buddha images of Angkorian art as the Buddha Vairocana. In Appendix 3, Sharrock examines the iconography of a ca. 11th-century Buddhist bronze sculpture in the National Museum of Cambodia and identifies it as the supreme cosmic Buddha Vajrasattva. Appendix 4, by Hiram Woodward, argues that several stone and bronze figures, seated and holding a *vajra* and bell, should be identified as Bhaiṣajyaguru, the Medicine Buddha. Related triadic images and image pedestals can, he furthermore argues, be associated with the Medicine Buddha flanked by the bodhisattvas Sūryaprabha (Sunlight) and Candraprabha (Moonlight). These appendixes introduce important information for understanding the iconography of late Angkorian bronze sculpture, but the issues are complex and are best approached with knowledge of other publications by Sharrock and Woodward, many of which are cited. Appendix 5, by Bunker, examines five-headed Śiva images in Khmer art. She argues that they need to be distinguished according to their iconography as “the great deity Mahesha, Shiva’s supreme manifestation, and Bhairava, his horrific aspect” (p. 503) and that at least one late example of Mahesha displays iconography indicating “the deity’s complete Vajrayana transformation” (p. 508).

According to their introduction, the goals of *Khmer Bronzes* are to highlight the “Khmer genius” in copper-alloy metallurgy “by studying the actual bronzes as unique records in themselves,” to highlight the uniquely “Khmer qualities” of the objects, and to examine “early Khmer bronze sculpture in its own cultural context with merits of its own” (p. x). Certainly, these are worthwhile and laudable aims, but the insistent linkage of a monolithic Khmer ethnicity with styles of art and ancient polities is naïve and anachronistic. The authors write, for example, that “[t]housands of bronzes created by Khmer artisans have been recovered from all over Cambodia, southern Laos, southwest Vietnam, and northeast Thailand, regions that once belonged to the great Khmer Empire...” (p. x). Sweeping assertions about the supposed ethnicity of ancient artists working across a vast and culturally variegated territory are not only unverifiable, but are also unintentionally problematized by the authors themselves in a brief discussion (pp. 461-2) of the famed iron-working tradition of the Kuy ethnic group, inhabitants of northern and northeastern Cambodia, northeastern Thailand, and southern Laos.

It is, of course, not my intention to question the predominantly Khmer character of Angkor; I am not at all seeking to resuscitate the French Colonial discursive

specter of a supposedly vanished or degenerate Khmer race (Edwards 2007: 10-39), nor a return to the Thai nationalist use of the term “Khom” to disassociate the Khmer from Angkor (Keyes 1991: 277-278). But I am advocating greater critical sensitivity to the “dynamic and situational aspects of ethnicity” (Jones 1997: 72-83) vis-à-vis archaeology and art history, particularly in an age of heightened tensions over national heritage often construed in stridently exclusivist terms. Thankfully the rather extravagant ethnic essentialism that occurs in the Introduction and the Concluding Remarks (Chapter 10) of *Khmer Bronzes* is not characteristic of the rest of the book.

With *Khmer Bronzes* Bunker and Latchford seek to assemble “a large range” of objects that “will provide a critical mass that can clarify the significance of bronze in the development of Khmer culture” (p. xi). Like another recent book on Khmer bronzes (Zefferys, Zefferys & Stone 2001), but far exceeding it in scope of coverage and caliber of scholarship and presentation, *Khmer Bronzes* includes examples of bronze sculpture, many of them of extraordinary high quality, drawn from numerous public museums and private collections.

Particularly well-represented in *Khmer Bronzes* are the collections of the National Museum of Cambodia in Phnom Penh (approximately sixty pieces), the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (approximately eight featured pieces), and at least a dozen private collections in Thailand, Europe, and the United States (over 145 pieces) with many of the privately held pieces presumably owned by Latchford and/or his family members. Also included are over twenty-five bronzes from a dozen public museums in the United States and several sculptures from museums in Australia and Taiwan. In contrast, European museum collections, many of which have important Khmer bronzes, are poorly served here, with just one sculpture each from the Musée Guimet in Paris and the Museum of Asian Art in Berlin. Other than the National Museum of Cambodia, Southeast Asian museums are also neglected. In spite of the substantial holdings of important Khmer-related bronze sculpture in various branches of Thailand’s National Museum system, only two sculptures from museums in Thailand are included (one each from the Phimai National Museum and the privately run Muang Boran Collection). There is nothing at all from the other branches of Thailand’s National Museum, including the Bangkok National Museum, and there is no coverage whatsoever of Khmer-related material in collections in Laos (e.g. Hawixbrock et al. 2012: 71-79) or Vietnam (e.g. Guy 2014: figs. 92, 96, cat. no. 61). In Appendix 6, however, Bunker helpfully reassembles six 12th-13th century bronzes, first published by Sherman E. Lee in 1943, that were found in 1919 near Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) and are now dispersed in six different collections in the United States.

In general, with the exception of some reservations previously expressed regarding Chapters 1-3, the research on display in *Khmer Bronzes* is thorough, up-to-date, well-annotated, and followed by a lengthy and useful bibliography. Close technical, stylistic, and iconographic analysis of the bronze objects sheds new light on the development of Khmer and related bronze traditions, casting

techniques, regional and period characteristics, artistic and technological influences, and religious changes. The discussion is accompanied by hundreds of high-quality photographs, many of them occupying a full-page, and with numerous featured artworks presented in multiple angles and with close-up detail shots. Presented here are a number of previously unpublished works. Some of them are revelations of beauty and great historical significance. Among the most spectacular are a ca. 7th century four-armed goddess (figs. 4.6a-e) closely related to Cham art and a ca. mid-9th century Lokeśvara (figs. 5.3a-h), both of which are accompanied by copies of authenticity testing and dating documents (presented in Appendix 1).

In contrast to the high-quality photographs of the featured artworks, some of the comparative photographic material, maps, etc. are of rather uneven quality and reflect the original published source from which they were drawn. A book of ostensibly such high production value could have benefited from somewhat more diligent copyediting. It contains quite a few typographical errors and misspelled words (e.g. “clay” often appearing as “^lclay”). Chapter 3 suffers from a rather strange system of multiple sequential superscript notations at the end of sentences (e.g. “^{26, 27, and 28}” and “^{35, 36, 37}”) and, in several instances, unnecessarily complicates matters by placing numbered superscript endnote references within the endnotes themselves. Throughout the book, a number of cross references and abbreviated citations in the endnotes are not listed in full in the Bibliography, which makes certain aspects of the presentation difficult to follow-up.

Overall, *Khmer Bronzes* is both informative and provocative. Some readers may understandably approach it with ambivalence and even some trepidation. Many of the artworks published in this book are owned by one of the co-authors, Douglas Latchford, and/or, it seems, by members of his family. An avid collector and connoisseur of Khmer art for nearly sixty years, Latchford is able, perhaps uniquely, to provide invaluable information about these artworks and their histories. However, he has come under scrutiny for his alleged role in the acquisition and sale of looted Cambodian art (Mashberg 2012). Most notably this was in connection to questions surrounding the now famous Koh Ker Duryodhana statue that, in December 2013, Sotheby’s agreed to return to Cambodia under the pressure of a civil forfeiture suit filed by the United States attorney’s office in Manhattan (*United States v. 10th Century Cambodian Sandstone Sculpture*) (Roasa 2013).

Khmer Bronzes presents many previously unknown artworks held in private collections and museums, provides little or no documentation of ownership history, and, unfortunately, as is so often the case, the authors are able, or willing, to present only the bare minimum information about object location and circumstances of discovery. It collates these newly revealed objects with more widely known examples that may or may not have better understood histories. It skillfully weaves all of these beautifully photographed artworks into a thoughtful and well-researched art historical narrative while simultaneously offering many insights into the technical and stylistic

development of Khmer art. One might well argue that publications such as this, whether intentionally or not, may support questionable acquisition and collecting practices, perhaps stymie heritage management and archaeological research, and could be used to legitimate objects with potentially contested provenance and/or controversial provenience histories.

On the face of it, Bunker and Latchford take a pragmatic approach and conclude by saying that “[a]ny bronze found in Khmer territory should be studied and appreciated, as it may provide evidence leading to significant re-interpretations of Cambodia’s glorious past and encourage future research” (p. 467). As Emma Bunker (2005: 312) writes elsewhere, “[i]gnoring works of art for lack of documentation is a disservice to scholarship. We have an obligation to the object and to the acquisition of any knowledge that it might hold.” We also have an obligation to pursue scholarship and art collecting ethically and with balanced consideration of the often-competing interests of various national public and political constituencies, archaeologists, art historians, curators, collectors, dealers, and others. *Khmer Bronzes*, together with Bunker and Latchford’s two previous books will no doubt fuel debates surrounding these tangled issues for some time to come. It is an important book, both as a source of potential controversy and as groundbreaking scholarship.

Paul A. Lavy

References

- Baptiste, Pierre and Thierry Zéphir, 2004. Review of *Adoration and Glory: The Golden Age of Khmer Art*, by Emma C. Bunker and Douglas Latchford. *Arts Asiatiques* vol. 59: pp. 182-184.
- _____, 2008. *L’art khmer dans les collections du Musée Guimet*. Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux.
- Bunker, Emma C., 2005. “The Acquisition and Ownership of Antiquities in Today’s Age of Transition.” In Kate Fitz Gibbon (ed.), *Who Owns the Past? Cultural Policy, Cultural Property, and the Law*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, pp. 311-317.
- Bunker, Emma C. and Douglas [A.J.] Latchford, 2004. *Adoration and Glory: The Golden Age of Khmer Art*. Chicago: Art Media Resources.
- _____, 2008. *Khmer Gold: Gifts for the Gods*. Chicago: Art Media Resources.
- Calo, Ambra, 2014. *Trails of Bronze Drums across Early Southeast Asia: Exchange Routes and Connected Cultural Spheres*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Cort, Louise Allison and Paul Jett (eds.), 2010. *Gods of Angkor: Bronzes from the National Museum of Cambodia*. Washington, D.C.: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institute.

- Dalsheimer, Nadine, 2001. *Les collections du Musée national de Phnom Penh: l'art du Cambodge ancien*. Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient.
- Edwards, Penny, 2007. *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Guy, John (ed.), 2014. *Lost Kingdoms: Hindu-Buddhist Sculpture of Early Southeast Asia*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- Hawixbrock, Christine, Claude Jacques, Marielle Santoni, Viengkèo Souksavatdy, and Valérie Zaleski, 2012. *Collections du musée de Vat Phu / Vat Phu Museum collections*. Champassak, Laos: Département du Patrimoine mondial de Vat Phu – Champassak.
- Imamura, Keiji, 1989. "A Unique Casting Method Discerned on the Handles of Some Bronze Drums of Heger I Type." *Bulletin of the Department of Archaeology* (The University of Tokyo) vol. 8: pp. 99-105 [text in Japanese and English].
- _____, 2010. "The Distribution of Bronze Drums of the Heger I and Pre-I Types: Temporal Changes and Historical Background." *Bulletin of the Department of Archaeology* (The University of Tokyo) vol. 24: pp. 29-44.
- Jessup, Helen Ibbitson and Thierry Zéphir (eds.), 1997. *Sculpture of Angkor and Ancient Cambodia: Millennium of Glory*. Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art.
- Jones, Siân, 1997. *The Archaeology of Ethnicity: Constructing Identities in the Past and Present*. London: Routledge.
- Keyes, Charles F., 1991. "The Case of the Purloined Lintel: The Politics of a Khmer Shrine as a Thai National Treasure." In Craig J. Reynolds (ed.), *National Identity and Its Defenders, Thailand, 1939-1989*. Clayton, Victoria: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, pp. 261-292.
- Lobo, Wibke and Helen Ibbitson Jessup (eds.), 2006. *Angkor: Göttliches Erbe Kambodschas*. Munich: Prestel.
- Mashberg, Tom, 2012. "Claims of Looting Shadow Expert in Khmer Art." *The New York Times*, December 12, 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/13/arts/design/us-links-collector-to-statue-in-khmer-looting-case.html?_r=0.
- Nishimura, Masanari, 2008. "Bronze Drums Unearthed around the South China Sea and Their Cultural Context." *Vietnam Archaeology* no. 3, pp. 73-83.
- Polkinghorne, Martin, 2014-2015. "The Royal Palace Workshop of Angkor." *In Focus: The Center for Khmer Studies* no. 12: pp. 24-25.
- Roasa, Dustin, 2013. "Fate of a Statue: The Case of the Duryodhana." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, October 20, 2013. <http://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/fate-of-a-statue-the-case-of-the-duryodhana>.
- Zefferys, Marlene L., Nicholas S. Zefferys, and Jeffrey Stone, 2001. *Heaven and Empire: Khmer Bronzes from the 9th to the 15th Centuries*. Bangkok: White Lotus.