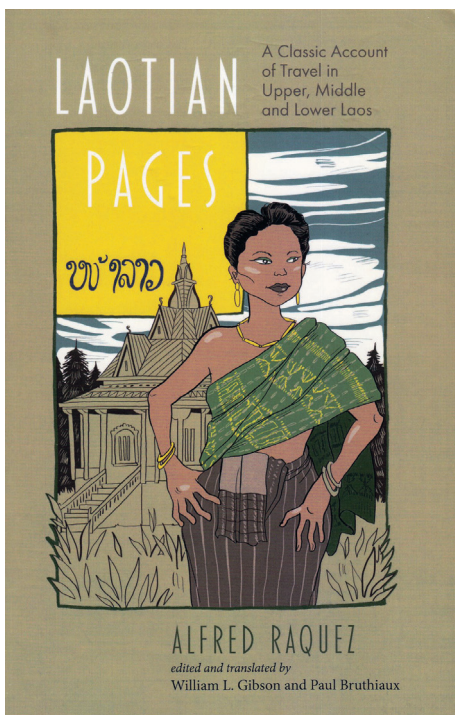


## Reviews

*Laotian Pages: A Classic Account of Travel in Upper, Middle and Lower Laos* by Alfred Raquez (edited and translated by William L. Gibson and Paul Bruthiaux). Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2018. ISBN 978-87-7694-247-2 (hardback) £100; 978-87-7694-248-9 (paperback) £30.



More than a decade ago, I developed a mild obsession about three study goals, seemingly unattainable to an impatient doctoral candidate researching the Plain of Jars of Laos. The first two concerned the particularly inaccessible sites known as Song Méng and San Hin Oume at the time of Madeleine Colani's surveys in the 1930s. I finally reached the sites in 2012 and 2014 respectively, fully concurring with her assessment.

Years after completing my doctorate, my third quest still evaded me: Alfred Raquez, a mysterious character who travelled to Laos and the Plain of Jars in 1900, after French administrators and explorers had already published surveys and maps of Laos, including the accounts by Auguste Pavie (1847-1925) and his officers at the end of the 19th century. Who was Raquez and why did he travel to Laos in the company of Armand Tournier (1852-1930), the Resident Superior for Laos, himself a member of the Mission Pavie in 1894-1895 (Le Boulanger 1930: 337)? The dearth of personal details intensified the allure.

In 1902, Raquez published *Pages Laotiennes*, an account of his journey to Laos. From this French original and a grainy black and white picture of his florid appearance, I visualised an affable bon vivant: the type of witty raconteur who amuses dinner guests with tales of elephants trampling natives and tigers carrying off terrified damsels. Similar to tall dinner tales, the image of Raquez as a well-connected French settler belied a dark reality, fully uncovered only recently.

Doubts about Raquez's true identity emerged shortly after his death in Marseille

on 10 January 1907. Alfred Raquez was the alter ego of Joseph Gervais, a wanted man: “a lawyer from Lille who fled to the Orient in 1898 to avoid arrest and prosecution for fraud” (Raquez 2018: vii). On 18 February, five weeks after his death, ‘Raquez’ was manually crossed out and replaced with ‘Gervais’ on his death certificate in the Marseille Municipal Archives (Fig. 1), as discovered by William L. Gibson in early 2016. The document also amends his age from 42 to 44, since he had made himself younger by two years when assuming the ‘Raquez’ pseudonym (Raquez 2016: x).

In his posthumous compendium of personages from French Indochina, Antoine Brébion (1857-1917) suggested that Raquez may have committed suicide by poison (Brébion 1935: 319) when unmasked, “but no supporting evidence for this conjecture has been uncovered” (Raquez 2016: xxvii). He likely died of smallpox, during an epidemic that claimed nearly 2,000 lives in Marseille in the year of his death (Raquez 2018: xxiv-xxv).

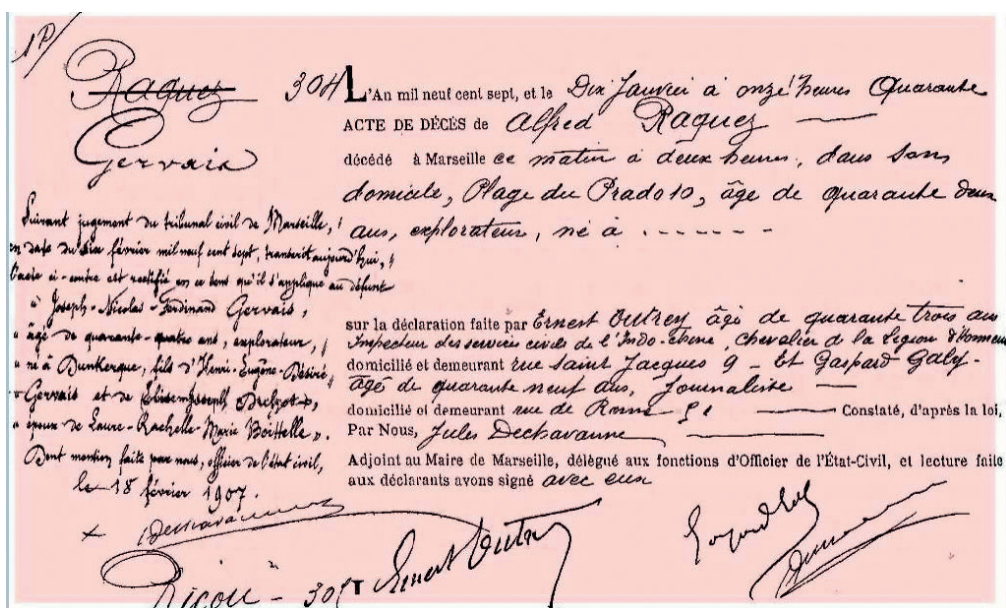


Figure 1. Death certificate for Raquez showing his real surname as Gervais, amended on 18 February 1907, five weeks after his death. (Source: Marseille Municipal Archives).

Notwithstanding the rugged and exotic nature of Laos a century ago, it was the country where the French were at their happiest, in a languid abandon aptly described by Norman Lewis (1908-2003) as “the earthly paradise that all the French had promised; the country that was one vast Tahiti, causing all the French who had been stationed there to affect ever after a vaguely dissolute manner” (Lewis 2003: 258). For Raquez, it may have been a practical expedient, perhaps a good place where Joseph Gervais could be Alfred Raquez, a distant location for Gervais to hide “amidst the minutia of Raquez’s descriptions” (Raquez 2016: xii). We can safely discount the notion that he was trying to be inconspicuous, judging by the expensive luxuries carried by his retinue. When woodlice ruined some of his provisions by boring through caps and corks, he lamented the loss of “a case of beer and one of champagne” (Raquez 2018: 402).

Raquez loved Laos unconditionally, its culture, customs and women, the latter

instigating some of his more poetic offerings: “Their peals of laughter are like drops of limpid water gushing from the rocks”, while their “upright deportment, their best *sinh* [traditional Lao skirt] hugging their bodies tight, part of a scarf worn as a long necklace, their small baskets coquettishly held on one hip, flowers in their provocative little hair buns” make them look “good enough to eat” (Raquez 2018: 196-197).

Like a parent’s unconditional love for a cherished child, Raquez took exception to anyone denigrating Laos, as when he chastises Édouard Jeanselme (1858-1935) for calling sturdy Tai Neau girls “female buffalo” (Raquez 2018: 153). Though ungallant, Jeanselme’s remarks are some of the least derogatory directed at Laos and its people. Centuries after Giovanni Filippo de Marini (1608-1682), an Italian Jesuit priest, called the Laotians “the greatest enemies of work” (De Marini 1998: 51), the French administrator, Lucien de Reinach (1864-1909), proclaimed that the Laotians were viewed as “lazy and work-shy” (De Reinach 1906: 122), whose alleged idleness could be cured if only they could develop a taste for French-made goods and services.

However, notwithstanding his devotion to Laos, Raquez was an advocate for France’s *mission civilisatrice*, using his pen in support of “Doumer’s vision” in Indochina, perhaps in return for being allowed to satisfy his travel lust “under the protection of the colonial administration” (Raquez 2018: xiii). Paul Doumer (1857-1932) was Governor-general of Indochina from 1897 to 1902.

The most authentic section in Raquez’s account deals with Laotian law according to the Vientiane Code, which remained in force in all Laotian regions. Colonel Tournier had this Code translated into French by “a team of men of letters, mandarins, monks, and interpreters” (Raquez 2018: 402-403). We learn about prison life and the administration of justice in Laos at the turn of the century, with penalties for gambling debts and murder. Robbing a temple was punishable by death, although such sentences were not carried out immediately. A militiaman was expected to take the place of a prisoner who escaped under his watch (Raquez 2018: 179).

The “full rigor of the law” awaited anyone found guilty of “touching the bosom or even the hands of a married woman” (Raquez 2018: 403). Straying wives bore the brunt of extramarital indiscretions, with the Code allowing her husband to “submit her to lashes of the rattan cane, sell her into slavery, or even put her to death” (Raquez 2018: 406). An adulterous wife’s penalty varied according to the rank and social position of the amorous accomplice, with the highest penalty payable when consorting with a high-ranking authority. Lesser penalties were imposed in cases of trysts with a monk or novice (Raquez 2018: 404-405). The French banned the practice of customarily parading nearly naked married women and monks guilty of adulterous liaisons.

Raquez delves into the subject of opium consumption among the militia and civil servants, noting that the shooting skills of an Annamese [Vietnamese] detachment in Laos became inferior after a short stay in Luang Prabang, due to substance abuse (Raquez 2018: 180). Opium smoking was also widespread in Vientiane, prompting the Resident Superior in 1907 to ban its consumption among civil servants (Askew et al. 2010: 90).

Opium was already an important commodity in Asia, “when Europeans first visited Southeast Asian and Chinese ports” (Bailey and Truong 2000: 1). With alcohol and salt,

opium was one of Indochina's main sources of income, directly exercised by the colonial government with "the most profitable results" (Doumer 1902: 9). In 1896, three years after most of present-day Laos was annexed as the fifth province of French Indochina, the colonial government set up an opium-processing plant in Luang Prabang, but it was shut down on 1 January 1899, with all opium sold in Laos subsequently sourced from "the plant in Saigon" (Doumer 1902: 455).

Raquez's rich prose, laden with a myriad of facts and impressions concerning people, places and customs, was at times achieved at the expense of accuracy, as in his account of 'Haw' incursions into Laos. The Haw were Muslim traders and caravaneers, perhaps "the least known but most ubiquitous minority people of the Golden Triangle" (Forbes and Henley 1997: 13), engaging in the flourishing trade between China and Southeast Asia. The bandits who laid waste to entire villages in Laos, stalking the inhabitants in the woods and "abducting women and children" (Pavie 1900: 44), consisted of bands of defeated rebels who originated from southern China, like the genuine Haw traders, hence the erroneous association. James McCarthy (1853-1919), the British surveyor seconded to King Chulalongkorn's court as Superintendent of Surveys, was unique among early visitors to Laos in differentiating between genuine Haw merchants and the marauding Flag Gangs: "They were, in a word, Chinese brigands" (McCarthy 1994: 44). Whereas Raquez wrote that the Haw eventually went back the way they came (Raquez 2018: 370), in fact, Striped Flag gangs travelled south to Vientiane, where they ransacked the city's venerated *That Luang* temple, "looking for jewellery and gold" (Evans 2002: 34).

Raquez was a consummate storyteller with a keen eye, a largely objective observer who sought to pay homage to the rich cultural heritage of Laos, a little-known country surrounded by powerful and worrisome neighbours. He regretted not speaking Lao, but conveyed his perceptions with effective prose, as when he describes the courting ritual in Luang Prabang, where the females play a game "to highlight their attributes" while male admirers utter "pleasing sweet nothings" (Raquez 2018: 159). His writing opens "a unique window onto the French experience in the Far East" (Raquez 2016: x) and while the informal style reflects an easy-going approach to life and narration, it occasionally suffers from "some sloppiness in the scholarship" (Raquez 2016: xvii).

Gibson and Bruthiaux have brought to life an early 20th century account from Laos, as narrated by a complex and not wholly trustworthy character. Was Paul Doumer aware of Raquez's double life and assumed name, and that he was on the run from the law, when he apparently extended an invitation to dinner during the 1899 Christmas festivities?

William L. Gibson and Paul Bruthiaux have translated *Pages Laotiennes* and edited the English version with ample footnotes and explanations, to inform readers about events, characters and cultural mores prevalent in early 20th century Laos. After the preliminaries, the English rendering follows the French original. The first twelve chapters adhere to Raquez's itinerary in chronological order, starting in Yokohama (Japan) on 1 December 1899, thence to Hué (central Vietnam) and on to Laos, via Savannakhet, Vientiane, Luang Prabang and the Tran Ninh (Xieng Khouang province) in mid-June 1900. The final three chapters deal with Laotian Law, Vientiane-Pak Hin Boun and Toward Cambodia. The degradation in the picture reproduction could have been prevented by high-resolution scans of the originals, the approach adopted by the publishers of the 2012 White Lotus version,

who invested heavily to raise the quality of Raquez's low-quality images.

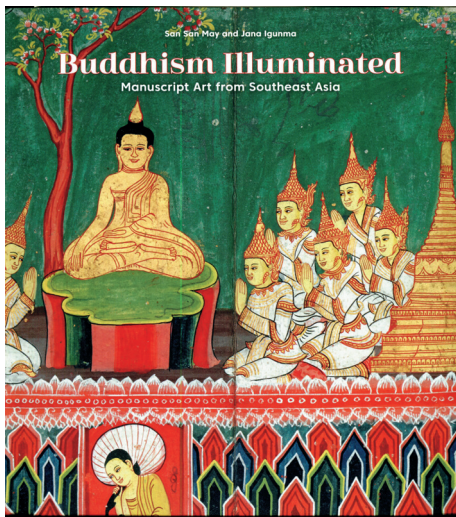
Something approaching a comprehensive understanding of Gervais/Raquez belongs to the future, with William L. Gibson's forthcoming biography likely to deconstruct an enigmatic character, whose opaque past was shielded by highly-placed connections, within the hermetically sealed circles of early 20th century Indochina. In addition to the version by Gibson and Bruthiaux (2018), an earlier English edition of *Pages Laotiennes* was published by White Lotus Press in 2012 with the title *Around Laos in 1900*.

Lia Genovese

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*Buddhism Illuminated: Manuscript Art from Southeast Asia* by San San May and Jana Igunma. London: British Library, 2018. ISBN 978 0 7123 5206 2. £50.



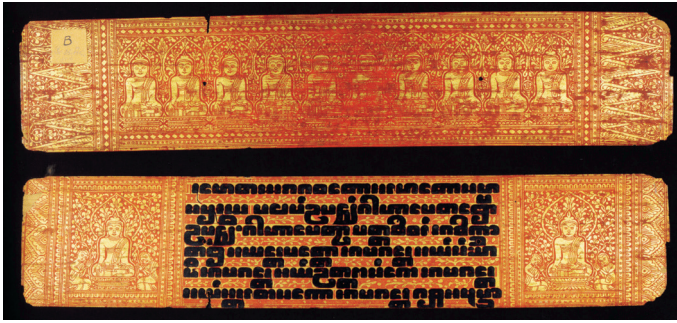
This beautiful book is a showcase for the collection of Southeast Asian manuscripts in the British Library. The book is dedicated to the memory of Henry Ginsburg (1940-2007), the long-time curator of the collection and a leading interpreter of the region's art. The authors are the current curators of the Burmese collection and the Thai, Lao and Cambodian collection respectively. The illustrations are drawn from around 100 manuscripts in the library's collection. Most are of Burmese or Thai origin, in roughly equal proportions, with a few from Khmer, Lao, and Shan territories. Most are dated to the 19th century, with a handful of exceptional examples from the 18th century.

The overwhelming majority of the manuscripts and illustrations are on Buddhist themes.

The introductory chapter has a neat and comprehensive presentation of the technology of manuscript making and illustration. The Burmese and Thai practices are presented separately, although they are largely similar, using either treated leaves or paper fashioned into accordion books. The text covers writing materials, bindings, wrappers, binding ribbons, and storage chests and cabinets. It reviews the use of pigments, but rather too briefly, and has little on the materials and techniques of painting. It stops short of discussing restoration.

The remainder of the text is organised as a kind of Buddhism 101. The five chapters are titled as Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, Kamma and Punna respectively. Within this framework, the authors offer a highly lucid introduction to the history, teachings, texts, organisation, iconography, and everyday practice in Southeast Asia of the form of Buddhism now known as Theravada. The chapter on the Buddha, for example, covers the Buddhas of the past, the previous lives of Gotama Buddha as recounted in Jātaka tales, the main events of Gotama's life and ministry, and a little on the future Buddha, Metteyya. The chapter on Kamma is mostly on the cosmology of the Three Worlds, while that on Punna focuses on ceremonies to make merit, but also brings in the tales of Phra Malai visiting heavens and hells, the iconography of the stupa, and the significance of the Buddha's footprints.

The illustrations are simply superb. The manuscripts have clearly been expertly preserved and restored. The photography is of the highest professional standard and the book is sumptuously produced. By far the majority of the illustrations are drawn from the major Jātakas (especially Vessantara), the life of the Buddha, the tales of Phra Malai, and the Three Worlds cosmology. A smaller number come from treatises on medicine and astrology and manuals on other subjects, including architecture, grammar, and the Buddha's Footprint. A handful from Burma show historical scenes. There is also a short,



*Kammavacca* manuscript on gilded and lacquered palm leaves, Burmese, 19th century, British Library Or 12010B.

but very striking, section on *Kammavacca* manuscripts, elaborately decorated compendia of texts made to celebrate an ordination.

The Burmese and Thai traditions are presented side by side, with little attempt at comparison by the authors, but with enough pictorial material for the reader to

see the similarities and differences. The Burmese and Thai traditions seem to have diverged quite significantly in the 19th century (and possibly before then), in the choice of subjects, use of the folding book, and adaptation of Western traditions of perspective and light and shade.

For example, from 19th century Burma, there are several *parabaik* accordion books, which devote four, six or eight consecutive folds to panoramic illustrations, particularly of Jātaka tales and of key episodes in the life of the Buddha, such as the Great Departure, but also of historical scenes, including a royal donation in Mandalay in 1857. There are also examples where several palm leaves are used for a single illustration, particularly a rendering of the Catummaharajika heaven spread across six leaves. This technique, particularly with *parabaik*, allows a much fuller interpretation of the narrative, and more scope for the artists to work on detail. There are no similar examples from the Thai part of the collection. Although the Traibhum manuscripts from the late 18th century (not featured in this collection) made liberal use of multiple folds, there seems to have been no extension of this technique to other subjects in Siam.



A 4-fold scene from the Anusasika Jataka, Burma, 19th century, British Library Or 4542A.



A *kinnara* from an *Abhidhamma* text, Thailand, 1903; British Library Or 15370.

In Siam, meanwhile, there seems to have been more experimentation, more borrowing from other artistic traditions. The scene from the *Vessantara Jataka* shown on the cover of this issue, for example, displays influence from both Chinese and Persian painting, besides having an unusually clean and uncluttered look. Maddi's facial expression is rather subtle. A few of the Thai manuscripts have very precise brushwork, for example the *kinnara* shown here, foreshadowing techniques used by the neo-traditional school of Thai artists over the past generation.

Only a couple of pages are devoted to artistic traditions and techniques, and even less to iconography, and only on the Thai part of the collection.

Regrettably, very few of the manuscripts have detailed provenance. Most are dated simply as "nineteenth century" and located to a general area such

as "Burma" or "Central Thailand." The text does not delve into any academic debate or religious controversy. The ordination of women, for example, is mentioned in passing in the historical account. The authors have decided to structure the book by subject, which limits the possibility of dealing with such matters as changes in iconography and technique.

The illustrations are the *raison d'être* of this book, and they are very beautiful.

Chris Baker