

**IN MEMORIAM:  
PIERRE PICHARD (1936–2024)**



**FIGURE 1: Pierre Pichard, Bangkok, 31 March 2016**  
© The Siam Society

Pierre Pichard,<sup>1</sup> French architect and longtime member of the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), passed away on 22 August 2024 at the age of 88. Over a distinguished career spanning five decades, Pierre devoted himself to the conservation of architectural heritage across Asia. He is remembered not only for his technical brilliance and remarkable body of work, but also for

his moral clarity, generosity, and deeply human approach to both scholarship and life.

Born in 1936 into a family of artists, Pierre grew up in an environment steeped in creativity. His father was a painter, his mother an illustrator and arts and crafts teacher. This early exposure to art laid the foundation for his life's work. The family lived near the Beaux-Arts in Paris and the nearby atmosphere of artistic freedom and playfulness profoundly influenced him. Pierre loved to play with words and objects, evoking the spirit of Raymond

<sup>1</sup> This is a streamlined English version of an obituary originally published in French by François Lagirarde & Christophe Pottier in *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 111 (2025). Republished with permission.

Queneau—a master of literary wit and linguistic play—and the irreverent creativity of the Quat’z’Arts, all within the free-spirited atmosphere of postwar Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

He attended the École Alsacienne, a prominent Protestant institution, and was active in scouting, experiences that shaped his ethical sensibilities and civic engagement. After high school, he entered the School of Architecture on rue Bonaparte in Paris, where he met Françoise Boudignon, his life partner in both personal and professional endeavors. The couple formed a close bond through their shared love of art, architecture, and progressive politics. They were both deeply involved in the 1968 student movement, producing posters for the Beaux-Arts’ *atelier populaire*; later they helped set up similar community-based workshops in southern France, working with farmers, winegrowers, and Occitanist activists.

Pierre graduated as an architect in 1966. After early projects in France and Iran, a serendipitous opportunity led him to join Bernard-Philippe Groslier (1926–1986) in Cambodia, working at Angkor, in the late 1960s. Soon after, he was appointed co-director of the restoration of the Phimai temple in northeast Thailand, a collaborative Franco-Thai effort and the first full anastylosis of a Thai monument. This groundbreaking restoration, followed by work at Phanom Rung, marked the beginning of Pierre’s long engagement with Southeast Asia. His meticulous plans for Phimai became benchmarks in the field, while his practical and respectful collaboration with Thai colleagues earned him lasting admiration. During this period, he

forged ties with figures such as MC Yachai Chitrabhorn (1910–1996) and MC Subhadradis Diskul (1923–2003), key authorities in Thai architecture, art, and archeology.

In 1970, Pierre and Françoise were invited to teach architecture in Nantes, where their courses reflected their commitment to social justice, including a focus on workers’ housing. Their pedagogical methods, however, were deemed politically subversive and they were dismissed in 1972. Undeterred, they remained active in Brittany, launching a community workshop and publishing a wall newspaper devoted to local struggles. Pierre’s non-hierarchical, collaborative approach, evident in these projects, later defined his fieldwork style in Asia, where he emphasized cooperation with craftsmen and avoided the pretension of academic jargon.

After leaving Nantes, Pierre joined a series of UNESCO missions focused on damaged monuments in Italy, Montenegro, Guatemala, Bangladesh, and Vietnam. He developed expertise in assessing structural fissures and contributed to ICOMOS initiatives. His first mission to Burma (Myanmar) in 1975 proved decisive. Between 1982 and 1992, he coordinated the UNESCO program to safeguard Burmese cultural heritage, centered on Pagan (Bagan). This led to his magisterial *Inventory of the Monuments at Pagan* (1992–2001), describing 2,834 monuments, 2,217 of which were still standing. The work remains a foundational resource, guiding excavations and restorations by the Burmese Department of Archaeology to this day.

In 1979, Pierre formally joined the EFEO and was posted to Pondicherry. There, he expanded his research beyond

Buddhist architecture to include Hindu and civil architecture in South India. His studies of the great Chola temples of Tanjore and Gangaikondacholapuram offered a comparative view of their construction and urban contexts. He also documented the Padmanabhapuram Palace in Kerala and Brahmin villages around Kumbakonam. With Indian collaborators and students, he conducted a systematic inventory of colonial and Tamil houses in Pondicherry. These projects, grounded in team-based fieldwork, reflected his commitment to collective research and his deep respect for local knowledge.

In 1992, Pierre was promoted to Senior Research Fellow and began coordinating international projects. Notably, he established a training program at Phanom Wan in northeast Thailand, mentoring students and professionals from across South and Southeast Asia. He also contributed to EFEO missions in Angkor, Laos, and Bhutan. His work in Bhutan stands out for its originality. In 1988–1989, he surveyed two dzongs—Chapcha and Simtokha—on behalf of the Bhutanese Department of Culture. Later, he assessed damage to Tamshing Monastery and Drukylé dzong for UNESCO and documented Ogyen Choling Manor, a private mansion in Bumthang. His monograph on Ogyen Choling remains a model of voluntary, collaborative research.

Under Denys Lombard's leadership, the EFEO sought to expand its presence in Southeast Asia. In 1997, Pierre was appointed founding director of the new EFEO Center in Bangkok, made possible through a partnership with Silpakorn University and the Sirindhorn Anthro-

pology Center, under royal patronage. Settling in Taling Chan to avoid Bangkok's traffic, Pierre launched the "Buddhist Monastery" project—a cross-cultural study of monastic space drawing on anthropology, architecture, and archeology. Focusing on central Thailand, a relatively understudied region, he undertook extensive surveys and organized an international workshop in 1999. The resulting publication, *The Buddhist Monastery* (2003), became an immediate success and was later reissued by Silkworm Books.

Pierre's Bangkok years were also marked by an explosion of academic publishing. With the advent of Macintosh computers and the nearby Amarin printing house, he and Françoise, with support from the French Embassy in Thailand and the Sirindhorn Center, established a highly productive editorial unit at the EFEO center in Bangkok. Together, they produced landmark volumes such as *Études birmanes* (1998), *Arikamedu* (1998), *Buddhist Legacies* (2006), and *Les apparences du monde* (2007). In 1998, they also launched the journal *Aséanie*, devoted to the human sciences in Southeast Asia. Pierre coined the title; Françoise oversaw layout until her passing in 2006; and the author of this obituary served as its Editor-in-Chief until the journal's final issue in 2017. *Aséanie* served as a platform for students and young scholars, many of whom went on to become leading voices in the field.

Even after officially retiring, Pierre remained intellectually active. He explored and documented sites across Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos,

Vietnam, and Bhutan. His photographic and architectural archive—meticulously organized and donated to the EFEO photo library in Paris—is a treasure trove for future researchers. He also returned to Vietnam in 1997 to assist with the World Heritage nomination of Mỹ Sơn, working alongside Patrizia Zolese and Mara Landoni on the restoration of the Cham monuments of Group G, completed in 2016.

Pierre's final major undertaking was in Laos, at Wat Phu, a monumental Khmer temple-mountain inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2001. Often driving from Bangkok to Champasak with characteristic zeal, he proposed the site's first comprehensive restoration plan to UNESCO in 1997. For a decade, he helped coordinate work with teams from Laos, France, Italy, Japan, India, and Korea. Though optimistic in spirit, Pierre remained cautious. For instance, he questioned the viability of reconstructing the nearby Hong Nang Sida temple with anastylosis, citing the difficulty of identifying its scattered blocks—a skepticism rooted in decades of experience.

In 2014, Pierre was called back to Angkor to direct the interim restoration of the West Mebon temple during the maternity leave of Maric Beaufeïst, successor to the late Pascal Royère (1965–2014). At a time of institutional uncertainty, his calm presence and firm grasp of logistics helped keep the project on track, despite competing pressures from partners.

His final field mission, at the age of 80, was to Bagan, following the August 2016 earthquake. Accompanied by Predrag Gavrilovic and Christophe

Pottier, he assessed the damage to hundreds of monuments with remarkable speed and discernment. While younger colleagues handled the climbing, Pierre provided strategic oversight, selecting which monuments merited immediate attention. Notably, he was untroubled by the partial destruction of “brand-new old buildings”—reconstructed monuments from the junta era—whose proliferation he had long criticized as superficial and unsustainable. For Pierre, authenticity and thoughtful stewardship always surpassed cosmetic restoration.

Though he claimed not to enjoy writing, Pierre's bibliography is extensive and distinguished by clarity and a powerful sense of description. He preferred visual documentation—plans, sketches, maps, and photographs—which he produced with a mastery few could match. His digital maps of Asia, freely distributed, remain widely used. He disdained academic jargon, digressions, footnotes, and distractions; his guiding principle was always what he called the “convenient”—a practical, intelligent economy of means. His photographic and bibliographic databases exemplify this principle: accessible, precise, and richly informative. As a photographer, he captured only what was useful—images that illuminated the architectural and human history of Asia.

Pierre lived with restraint, surrounding himself with only the essentials. Yet his generosity to others was boundless. What he lent, he usually gave away, saying that once something was “out”, one learned to do without. He was modest in appearance and

bearing, yet immensely charismatic in his quiet way. Detached, a little distracted, a dreamer by temperament, he nonetheless possessed remarkable discipline, vision, and moral clarity.

Pierre Pichard was a man of great constructions and greater reconstructions—but also, fundamentally, a man

of gentle and ironic deconstruction. He opened parentheses in history—often with a smile, always without pretension—and closed them with grace.

François Lagirarde  
EFEO, Paris (*Emeritus*)  
francois.lagirarde@efeo.net

## KEY PUBLICATIONS<sup>2</sup>

- 1976. *Pimay, étude architecturale du temple*. Paris: EFEO.
- 1991. *The Pentagonal Monuments of Pagan*. Bangkok: White Lotus.
- 1992–2001. *Inventory of Monuments at Pagan*. 8 volumes. Paris: UNESCO/EFEO.
- 2003. *The Buddhist Monastery: A Cross-cultural Survey*, ed. with François Lagirarde. Paris & Bangkok: EFEO/Amarin.
- 2008. The Mondop at Wat Si Chum. In *Past Lives of the Buddha: Wat Si Chum Art, Architecture and Inscriptions*, ed. by Peter Skilling et al., 41–57. Bangkok: River Books.

## PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVES

Pierre Pichard's photographic archives are available for consultation on the

EFEO photo library website, under the “Fonds Pierre Pichard”: [collection.efeo.fr](http://collection.efeo.fr).

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed list of his publications, see BEFEO 111 (2025).

