In Small Things Forgotten? Repatriating Small, Utilitarian Cambodian Artifacts

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Abstract—Cambodia has become a model for the successful repatriation of archeological heritage in Southeast Asia, with hundreds of major sculptural and architectural works returned in recent years. Yet many smaller artifacts—including pottery, spindle whorls, beads, bangles, and portable metal objects—were also looted. This article examines the recent repatriation of a collection of such objects and considers their significance. Although lacking secure provenience, the collection provided opportunities for documentation and research before its return. The article argues that repatriating these utilitarian artifacts is as important as returning more celebrated museum masterpieces.

Keywords: Archeological Artifacts; Cambodia; Cultural Heritage; Looting; Repatriation

Introduction

Cambodia's archeological heritage underwent serious looting during the Civil War (1970–1975), Khmer Rouge period (1975–1979), and subsequent rebuilding (Davis 2011; Davis & Mackenzie 2015). However, Cambodia has also been a model for repatriation within Southeast Asia, with successful court cases and public campaigns resulting in the return of over 1,000 objects in the last 10 years as of 2026 (Davis 2015; Hobbs & Rosslan 2024; Mackenzie & Davis 2025). Many of the objects—and certainly those that have received the most publicity—date from the Angkor period (9th–15th centuries CE) and include large sandstone sculptural pieces, architectural objects such as lintels, bronze statues, and gold ornaments (e.g., Mashberg 2023; Mashberg 2024). Many of these pieces are now on display in the National Museum of Cambodia (NMC) in Phnom Penh (Chheng 2024).

However, many less well-known pre- or protohistoric sites have been looted in the last 50 years including smaller and more utilitarian objects often removed from burial contexts. These sites, dating to the Neolithic (approx. 2000-1500/1000 BCE), Bronze Age (1500/1000-500 BCE), and Iron Age or protohistoric period (500 BCE-500 CE), included earthenware ceramics, stone and glass beads and ornaments, spindle whorls, stone tools, bronze adzes, and objects made from shell, among others. Although less visually stimulating, these objects represent important aspects of Cambodia's cultural heritage and were obtained using arguably more destructive methods, as entire burials were often destroyed to obtain a few pieces to sell on the market (O'Reilly 2007; Rachanie 2001).

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Figure 1: The Collector bringing his artifacts to the UO campus in Eugene, May 2019 © Pam Endzweig

Should these objects also be the focus of repatriation efforts? Several pre- or protohistoric objects such as glass beads and bronze pieces have been repatriated to Cambodia in addition to the larger pieces discussed above. In this article, we argue that there is value in returning these "small things forgotten" (Deetz 1977) to their country of origin and that doing so creates opportunities for student research, learning, and an appreciation for the ancient past.

Background

In May 2019, just as the lead author, Alison Carter, had arrived in Cambodia to begin archeological fieldwork, she received an email from a colleague at the University of Oregon (UO) Museum of Natural and Cultural History in Eugene, Oregon: a gentleman had stopped by wanting to donate a collection of artifacts he had obtained while living and working in Cambodia in the 1990s and early 2000s **[Figure 1]**. Were the objects authentic, our UO colleague asked, and what should be done?

This individual, whom we will refer to as "The Collector" (TC) due to his wish for privacy, was originally from Oregon, but was returning to Phnom Penh for his retirement. He had developed an interest in archeology and history while living in Cambodia earlier, making visits to local markets where antiquities were for sale. He felt that due to his health and advancing age he should find his collection a good home and did not wish to see the objects sold in the art market. We were able to discuss his collection in-person when he traveled to Cambodia a few weeks later. It was clear from photographs that the objects were authentic, and we recognized many of them, having seen similar examples as part of our own research. Although TC was initially interested in donating the collections for study to the University's museum, he understood that due to

the lack of precise provenience for the objects, the best option was to repatriate them to Cambodia or Thailand.[3]

"Provenience" is an archeological term that has had shifting meanings over time (Stein 2008), but it most commonly refers to the *in-situ* archeological context where an artifact was found (Barker 2012; Lyman 2012). During excavation, archeologists carefully record the three-dimensional location where an artifact is uncovered, noting any post-depositional processes that might have impacted its findspot (such as erosion or bioturbation of soil due to tree roots or rodent activity), as well as its association with other artifacts and features. These three factors, i.e., provenience, association, and context, are key components when interpretating the past. Careful excavation of a burial in a prehistoric cemetery can help archeologists understand the date of an artifact and the archeological culture with which it is associated. Recording provenience of a burial can further help a scholar determine the status of the person with whom the artifact is buried and their connections to others in the community and the region. When objects are removed from archeological context without recording these data, valuable information about the past is lost.

The objects in TC's collection can be largely described as having been looted, defined as "the undocumented removal of antiquities from their context without proper scientific documentation" (Antoniadou 2014: 7592). Objects can be removed from their archeological context for a variety of reasons including natural processes such as erosion, opportunistic or accidental discovery, or deliberate removal for sale. In the case of TC's collection, most of these objects likely entered the art market during the post-Khmer Rouge period when intentional and opportunistic looting activities were widespread (discussed further below).[4]

While most of TC's objects were in the U.S., a small number were still in his apartment in Phnom Penh. We were able to begin the repatriation process when our colleague, Prof. Miriam Stark (University of Hawai'i), brought these Cambodia-based artifacts to the NMC for anonymous donation on TC's behalf in July 2019. During this meeting, NMC staff encouraged the return of the rest of his collection. In September 2019, the collector returned to Oregon to bring the objects to the UO Southeast Asian Archeology Lab where we agreed that Carter would work with students to document and research the collection as part of the repatriation process. TC provided a small amount of money to support supplies and costs related to preparing the collection for its return. In both Phnom Penh and Oregon, TC's collection contained over 700 Cambodian objects **[Table 1; Figure 2]**.[5]

[3] The collection also included objects from Thailand, purchased in Bangkok. These objects are currently under study and also undergoing repatriation to Thailand. The present article focuses exclusively on the Cambodian portion of the collection.

[4] For a discussion of how the loss of archeological context through undocumented removal can be assessed as "archeological damage", see White et al., this Special Edition.

[5] The complete database has not been made publicly available since decisions regarding dissemination of this information are under the jurisdictions of the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts (MCFA) in Cambodia and the Fine Arts Department (FAD) of Thailand.

Table 1: Objects in TC's collection

Category	Objects
Bronze objects	Bells, bangles, bowl, earrings, ear spools, palanquin hardware, bronze and wood pipes, rings
Ceramic objects	Angkorian stoneware vessel, anvils for shaping pottery, beads, epaulette, portable stove, earthenware pottery vessels, slingshot pellets, and spindle whorls
Faunal remains	Antlers, teeth
Glass objects	Earrings, bangles, and a hair ornament (?)
Iron objects	Agricultural tools
Metallurgy	Crucibles, ingots and molds
Shell objects	Bangles and beads
Stone objects	Adzes, grinding stones, mortar and pestle, rollers, scale weights, and whetstones

How Did These Objects End Up in the Marketplace?

Networks for looting large sculptural and architectural pieces from Cambodia have been well documented in recent years (Davis & Mackenzie 2015; Mackenzie & Davis 2014, 2025; Miura 2016). However, the looting of pre- or protohistoric sites, primarily burials, has been less well-studied (O'Reilly 2007). In some cases, these sites were identified accidentally, such as during road construction as at Phum Snay (ភូមិស្នាយ) in northwest Cambodia, which exposed burials and led to widespread looting of this site (O'Reilly et al. 2004). In other cases, villagers dig on their own land or rent land from others to dig in areas where burials and artifacts are suspected (Griffin et al. 1996; Stark & Griffin 2004; Reinecke et al. 2009). This can become semi-professionalized through the use of metal-detectors with middlemen coming to sites to coordinate purchasing artifacts (O'Reilly 2007). During a survey in Battambang province in 2022, Carter was told about a burial site that had been accidentally found and looted. People had subsequently used long metal poles to push into the earth to search for additional burials. Artifacts would then be brought to markets such as the Tuol Tom Pong market (ផ្សារទួលទំពូង; also known as the "Russian Market") in Phnom Penh or smuggled to Thailand for sale in Bangkok (Glover 2015; Tasdelen 2016).

Scholars have noted that in some dramatic cases large sculptural and architectural pieces were looted to order by collectors and dealers based overseas



Figure 2: Examples of some of the objects in TC's collection; top row (from a to d): bronze bells, bronze bangle, bronze palanquin hook, ceramic anvil; middle row (from e to g): ceramic spindle whorls, iron tool, earthenware vessel; bottom row (from h to j): stone adze, bronze pipe with broken stem, glass earring © Alison Carter

(Stark & Griffin 2004; Mackenzie & Davis 2014; Hardy 2015). However, smaller scale collecting can also lead to looting to order. TC recounted that he had bought spindle whorls from a Tuol Tom Pong seller who had supposedly gotten them from the site of Angkor Borei in southern Cambodia. He recalled telling the seller that, if they acquired more objects, he would be interested in purchasing them, and he subsequently returned multiple times to acquire additional spindle whorls and other objects from this and other vendors. Statements such as these likely created a new market for these utilitarian objects and spurred

additional looting of archeological sites to find additional spindle whorls to sell. "Looting on order" is not unique to Cambodia, as other scholars have documented similar examples for small objects in the Middle East (e.g., Topçuoğlu & Vorderstrasse 2019; Kersel 2023).

Importing Artifacts into the U.S.

This raises the next question: How was TC able to bring so many archeological artifacts from Cambodia into the U.S.? During our initial conversation with him, he was clear that he did not believe he had broken any laws nor wished to have done so. He mentioned that when he was living in Southeast Asia in the late 1990s and early 2000s, he would regularly frequent markets, such as the Phnom Penh Tuol Tom Pong Market and find antiquities for sale. He purchased these objects due to his fascination with archeology and the past. He also recounted that one stall frequently had objects purportedly looted from the archeological site of Angkor Borei, a pattern also reported by archeologists Rachanie Thosarat (2001), and Miriam Stark & P. Bion Griffin (2004). Other times, he bought objects from people directly, such as when traveling near the Iron Age site of Phum Snay, which likewise suffered extensive looting as documented by Dougald O'Reilly (2007).

TC stated that he had hand carried artifacts through U.S. customs and had an inventory and pictures to share with customs officials upon request; however, nothing was ever flagged or confiscated. The early 1990s was a period of widespread looting within Cambodia. Although in 1992 and 1996 Cambodia enacted laws criminalizing the export of antiquities and looting of archeological sites, they were rarely enforced (Davis 2011). In 1999, the U.S. put import restrictions in place beginning with "stone sculpture and architectural elements"; in 2003, restrictions expanded to "stone, metal, and ceramic archeological materials"; and in 2008, the agreement was further extended to include archeological materials dating from the Bronze Age through "the Khmer era" in the 16th c. (Davis 2011: 170).[6] Subsequently, the International Council of Museums published their *Red List of Cambodian Antiquities at Risk* (ICOM 2009). These Red Lists are meant to assist a variety of authorities, including customs officials, in identifying illegally exported artifacts.[7] Much of TC's material left Cambodia during the period prior to the explicit restriction on importing non-sculptural/architectural elements. Even if some had been imported after 2003, customs officials were likely unaware of the nature and antiquity of the artifacts without a reference such as the Red List.

Working with Collectors and Looted Collections

In recent years, multiple institutions and Western organizations developed

[6] The complete text of the current and previous import restriction agreements between the U.S. and Cambodia can be found at: https://www.state.gov/current-agreements-and-import-restrictions (accessed 22 July 2026). The current agreement extends coverage beyond the previous 16th-century cutoff, encompassing archeological materials dating from 2500 BCE to 1750 CE.

[7] Prior to the Red List, ICOM & EFEO (1997) jointly published *One Hundred Missing Objects: Looting in Angkor*. A more recent publication is *Missing Objects from the Wat Po Veal and Battambang Provincial Museums* (Khun et al. 2015).

guidelines and best practices for dealing with looted collections housed in universities and museums (e.g., ICOM 2021). U.S.-based organizations such as the Foundation for Ethical Stewardship of Cultural Heritage (FESCH) and the related Mediterranean Antiquities Provenance Research Alliance Project (MAPRA) aim to build a database of looted or unprovenanced artifacts in public and private collections, train students and stakeholders to research these objects, and publish their results.[8] One goal of this work is to create a protocol for provenance research of academic collections by students (Lee 2025). In Europe, the Circumambulating Objects: on Paradigms of Restitution of Southeast Asian Art (CO-OP) project at SOAS, University of London, has undertaken a series of seminars to discuss restitution processes for Southeast Asian art and heritage in "locally meaningful and globally aware" ways.[9]

These projects focus on looted collections in major Western institutions, but fewer guidelines for archeologists looking to facilitate stewardship of smaller, private collections exist. Many archeologists may find working with collectors ethically complex, since they fear their collaboration might be seen as endorsing collecting; their research used to increase the monetary value of a collection or even encourage further collecting of looted artifacts. However, others have recognized the knowledge that can be gained through careful study of looted collections (Glover 2015).

In 2018, the Society for American Archeology (SAA) released a statement on "Collaboration with Responsible and Responsive Stewards of the Past", encouraging ethical collaboration between archeologists and collectors (Pitblado et al. 2018). The SAA's recommendations focus on archeologists and collectors in the U.S. but can be applied to those working with foreign collections as well (Marlowe 2022a). In taking on TC's collection, we follow many of SAA recommendations including:

- Encourage TC to work with a professional archeologist (Carter) to record and document the collection (Recommendation #2) and donate the collection for repatriation to Cambodia (Recommendation #4).
- Work with undergraduate archeology students to educate them about the collection as a source of information about archeological cultures (Recommendation #1) and gather archeological data that may otherwise have been lost (Recommendation #3).

TC's collection can be described as "orphans" in two ways: (1) the items lack archeological context and (2) because current laws and ethical guidelines mean that most U.S. museums will not accept them as donations (Marlowe 2022b).[10] TC was concerned that his collection would be sold or discarded if he did not find a home for them. Although we can wish that the objects had never been removed from their

[8] Unfortunately, the U.S. National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) funding for FESCH, MAPRA, and many similar programs was suspended in 2025. The cancellation of these funds is currently the focus of a lawsuit.

[9] CO-OP, "What We Do": https://circumambulating.soas.ac.uk/about/ (22 July 2026).

[10] This is the case for the University of Oregon's Museum of Natural and Cultural History, which has a policy against accepting archeological artifacts that are not clearly legally obtained.

archeological context in the first place, knowledge can still be gained from their study. Additionally, by not accepting the collection for documentation and repatriation, the objects risk disappearing again. As the materials studied here were removed from Cambodia without explicit permission, and given the Cambodian government's clear position in recent years that such materials should be returned, repatriation of this collection was the only appropriate course of action.

Researching the Collection: An Opportunity for Student Involvement

Following TC's delivery of the material to the UO Southeast Asian Archeology Lab in 2019, Carter, along with her students, undertook a compete inventory and analysis of this material. Receiving the collection with repatriation in mind provided a unique opportunity for student involvement **[Figure 3]**. As part of the repatriation process, a complete inventory of artifacts was necessary; this included basic background research on the objects. This process began during the Winter 2020 term, when students in Carter's "ANTH 346: Archeology of Southeast Asia" course undertook the first phase of research. Approximately 30 undergraduate students were divided into small groups of 4–5 people, with each group assigned an artifact type: modified antlers, bronze bells, bronze tools, objects associated with bronze production (e.g., molds and crucibles), earthenware pottery anvils, earthenware ceramic vessels, and shell objects and ornaments **[see Table 1]**. Students worked together to measure and photograph the objects and undertake basic background research, including attempting to identify the time period from which the objects came and, if possible, finding similar objects from other sites for comparison and contextualization. Students produce an academic research poster on their findings. Unfortunately, the final poster session, where students could have presented the results to their classmates, was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, students were able to share their results online and wrote individual reflections on the project. As part of the course, we also discussed issues related to the looting of the Southeast Asian archeological heritage and ethical issues surrounding the study of looted collections.

This project allowed student for involvement in hands-on active learning using actual archeological artifacts. They gained experience in how to conduct academic archeological research, including identifying peer-reviewed scholarly sources and the writing of an academic research poster. Although they were limited in the amount of work that could be done during a 10-week term, this project provided basic background knowledge on objects so that these were not returned to Cambodia as "ungrounded" artifacts—looted materials totally deprived of context or information. Students also developed an appreciation for Cambodian cultural heritage and many expressed a hope that other Cambodian students and stakeholders would gain some insight from their work. As one student eloquently noted:



Figure 3: Students in Carter's "Archeology of Southeast Asia" course researching the Cambodian artifacts, Feb. 2020 © Alison Carter

> It is my hope that by just putting effort into organizing, recording, and gaining any information on them [the artifacts they studied] they will be seen as valuable upon their return—and worth putting more research into. Even if they are never truly understood, our work was productive not only for our own learning experiences, but (also) for giving these objects the chance to be seen in a new light. With their return to their [country of] origins, I would hope these artifacts are truly given back to the people. By that I mean either they are researched and that research is shared with the common people, or they are curated in a museum giving the opportunity for communities to view them and see them alongside other objects from their culture (written comment by an anonymous UO student, March 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic limited opportunities for a similar classroom-based project, but several students were able to take a deeper dive into parts of this collection through independent study research. One student wrote a senior thesis on the over 300 spindle whorls in the collection, matching them with existing types and identifying several possible new forms (LeRoux 2020). Another student wrote her senior thesis on earthenware ceramics in the collection, identifying vessels that seemed similar to those from the Phum Snay site and may have originated from that area (Miner-Paul 2023). A third student examined glass ornaments from the collection for a senior thesis that later resulted in a peer-reviewed journal article (Beyer et al. 2025; see also Brown 2026). Three students were

also involved in helping photograph and record the collection, with two also assisting with the careful packing of materials. This process was completed in Spring 2024, nearly five years after receiving the materials from TC.

There are, of course, limitations to student research of looted collections. In a 10-week quarter or 12–15-week semester, insufficient time is available for students to develop the expertise to write a comprehensive report. The more detailed research noted above was accomplished only because the students were able to dedicate multiple terms to research, writing, and revision of a paper. Additionally, as all teachers are likely aware, variation in the quality of student output occurred. In an ideal situation, all objects would have had a detailed research report on their likely date and archeological culture. In reality, limitations of the academic term and ability for students to dedicate time on such projects do not often allow for this. Students may also graduate, leaving research unfinished. For this reason, those wishing to undertake a similar project should be realistic about the nature and depth of research that can be conducted on a collection. Few reports will likely be of publication quality. Nevertheless, preparing some documentation on the collections is recommended and valuable so that this burden does not fall entirely on successive institutions receiving these collections.

Returning Home: The Logistics of Repatriating Artifacts

Once documentation of the collection was complete, in May 2024, Carter reached out to her co-author, Chhay Visoth, Director of the National Museum of Cambodia (NMC), and the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts (MCFA) of Cambodia to formally request permission to repatriate the objects from TC's collection kept in Oregon. This was coordinated through the NMC and Thomas International Services, a private company that had previously worked with the NMC and institutions, such as the Smithsonian, to coordinate the return of repatriated objects. A complete database of objects and their photographs was provided, which NMC staff carefully went through. In doing so, they identified a few small errors within the collection documentation; after corrections, NMC staff provided an estimate of the collection's total value as part of the commercial invoice and packing list needed for the export and customs clearance process.

Coordinating the shipment of the objects was complicated. Typically, physical repatriations went through the Cambodian Embassy in Washington D.C. However, as Carter had received the materials directly and had a pre-existing relationship with Chhay Visoth at the NMC and people from the MCFA, she contacted them directly. Fortunately, Thomas International Services was able to help with organizing the shipment using a U.S.-based shipping company and assisting with customs clearance and paperwork. Other logistical issues must be considered when repatriating collections within a university, such as insurance and liability. Who in the institution will sign off on the shipment and act as the shipper? At the University of Oregon, this involved discussions with the General Counsel. Because the

collection was large, Carter also had to consider other details, such as the construction of a crate for shipment and finding a location on the main campus in Eugene to safely and securely store the crate and artifacts while finalizing shipment details. Depending on the size and weight of the shipment, this could easily cost several thousand US dollars. Thus, finances should be considered when taking on a collection for repatriation. In the case of the current collection, the small donation from TC covered these expenses.

What Happens When These Artifacts Return to Cambodia?

Once this and other repatriated collections return to Cambodia, the NMC/MCFA staff must carefully inspect the collection to evaluate the status of the artifacts and their condition. For example, they must determine if any materials should be flagged for repair or restoration or if any items in the collection may be fakes or modern reproductions. This is done prior to determining where the objects will be stored. Information on repatriation is also shared in the news and/or on social media to celebrate the objects' return and encourage others to return their looted materials.

The NMC staff may also decide if the objects would be ideal for a special or temporary exhibit in Phnom Penh, and/or in provincial museums, and/or as an opportunity for research for Cambodian archeology students. Even if a collection includes modern forgeries, these can be used in an exhibit where visitors—including those with visual disabilities—can touch and physically interact with the objects. The NMC is currently in need of more space to store and exhibit repatriated collections, and a future museum expansion in Phnom Penh is planned for that purpose (Ives 2025). Ultimately, the goal is for the objects to be made as accessible as possible to the wider public, helping to tell the story of Khmer culture and heritage rather than remaining locked away in storage.

Benefits and Challenges to Accepting Looted Collections

Overall, many benefits accrue to receiving looted collections. The return of artifacts can be viewed as a joyful experience that helps relieve suffering caused by decades of civil war, genocide, and poverty. Although it has been noted that sculptures are believed by many Cambodians to contain the spirits of their ancestors (e.g., Warrack 2011; Miura 2015), this is also true for smaller objects, such as broken stone fragments and ceramics. According to Chhay Visoth, these objects can also be viewed as having a spirit inside them that connects people with their ancestors and history. After decades of war and poverty, many people thought they would never see the return of these missing objects.

For centuries, archeological sites were damaged and destroyed through abandonment, looting, and warfare. In recent decades, however, sculptures have sometimes been ripped from their bases or hacked from temple walls for sale on the art market and many artifacts have been smuggled out of the country. These acts can be seen as a material manifestation of Cambodia's recent

instability. Therefore, their repatriation becomes an act of restoration and a symbol of peace, while also providing an opportunity for healing (Sullivan 2004; Colwell 2019). From a Cambodian perspective, restitution is often perceived as a homecoming for ancestral spirits whose material representations had been scattered around the world due to war and conflict.

There are also challenges to accepting repatriated collections. Labor is needed to assess the collections and, in some cases, work to restore or repair items. Around the world, storage space for objects is a perpetual need for archeological collections (Bawaya 2007; Kersel 2015) and Cambodia is no different. Another challenge is negotiating with individuals and institutions for the return of their looted artifacts, including accepting their terms and conditions to receive the objects. In many cases, there is little room to negotiate, and the collections must be taken even if the conditions for doing so are not ideal. Still, Cambodians wish to have their objects back and will work with any and all collectors to complete this process.

Concluding Remarks

Although not comprehensive, we can offer some recommendations based on our experience with this modest case study and repatriation project. First, those U.S. institutions wishing to take on unprovenienced or orphaned collections from private donors should follow the SAA's guidelines for ethical collaborations between archeologists and collectors (Pitblado et al. 2018).[11]

Second, stakeholders should be consulted from the beginning. This includes institutions in the home country to ensure they are willing and able to receive the artifacts and provide instructions or guidelines for the process. Authorities within a university should also be consulted regarding any legal implications for taking on such a collection. A safe and clean space is also needed for storing objects and for students to properly document and record the collection.

Third, given the considerable amount of time and resources required to properly document, pack, and ship a collection, funds should be requested from the donor to support these activities.

Fourth, if students are involved in documenting the collection, the professor/supervisor should be realistic about how much research can be undertaken and the nature of student output. Parts of a collection might be prioritized for deeper research and publication, but professors should be cognizant of the time it takes for students to undertake this work. Nevertheless, the collection should be returned with at least preliminary information on the objects in the collection.

The Cambodian part of this collection was successfully returned to the NMC in October 2025 **[Figure 4]** and similar discussions are underway to begin the repatriation process with the Fine Arts Department of Thailand. These small

[11] We acknowledge that the SAA recommendations are primarily geared toward U.S.-based archeologists and modern museum collections, many of which were assembled through purchases or philanthropic donations. European public collections often contain objects acquired in colonial-era contexts and involve different and more complex legal and ethical considerations that cannot be addressed here.



Figure 4: National Museum of Cambodia (NMC) staff unpacking artifacts, Oct. 2025 © NMC

pieces—spindle whorls, pottery anvils, stone adzes, and earthenware ceramics—may not be as exhibit-worthy or financially valuable as the multi-million-dollar sculptural pieces that have been returned by major donors and museums. However, as Deetz (1977: 161) observes: "in the seemingly little and insignificant things that accumulate to create a lifetime, the essence of our existence is captured". Many locals feel these small pieces carry with them the spirits of Cambodia's ancestors.[12] In repatriating this collection, American students were able to research Cambodia's cultural and archeological pasts and begin to re-contextualize these objects. It is hoped that upon their return, these artifacts will continue to be studied and appreciated by the Cambodian people.

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[12] See Byrne 2011, Work 2022, Harris et al. 2023, and Sun 2024 for discussions of the spiritual power of such artifacts.

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