Stewards Beyond Ownership: A Continuing Partnership Between the Cleveland Museum of Art and the National Museum of Cambodia

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Abstract—In 2015, the Cleveland Museum of Art transferred a monumental stone sculpture of Hanuman originally from Cambodia's Koh Ker temple complex to the National Museum of Cambodia in Phnom Penh. This event led to a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) establishing long-term cultural cooperation through joint projects, technical assistance, and professional exchange. Renewed in 2020, the MoU has supported landmark loans, a major conservation initiative, and collections management, particularly following the return of repatriated objects to Cambodia. The partnership demonstrates how stewardship can extend beyond ownership through sustained collaboration, capacity building, and mutual learning.

Keywords: Art Conservation; Cambodian Heritage; Collections Management; Cultural Cooperation; Professional Exchange; Restitution and Repatriation

Introduction

In 2015, the Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA) transferred a monumental stone figure of the monkey deity Hanuman, originally from Prasat Chen at the 10th-century temple complex of Koh Ker, to the Kingdom of Cambodia.[3] Though the Hanuman figure was an audience favorite in Cleveland, Ohio, and a highlight of the CMA's galleries, its transfer was not the end of the story. Instead, it marked a new beginning, planting the seeds for a wide range of collaborative projects that continue under a series of renewable Memoranda of Understanding (MoU). These documents guide and formalize the ongoing relationship between the CMA and the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts (MCFA) of the Kingdom of Cambodia and, more specifically, with the National Museum of Cambodia in Phnom Penh (NMC), the primary institutional partner.

Beyond the written documents, however, people, ideas, and projects together build the foundation for long-term mutual support and productive collaborations. This article looks at the projects and interpersonal relationships that have grown out of the Hanuman transfer over the past ten years. First, it outlines the priorities included in the two MoUs between the CMA and the NMC. Second, it traces the development

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[3] See CMA press release, 12 May 2015, announcing the "voluntary return" of the sculpture: https://www.clevelandart.org/about/press/cleveland-museum-art-and-government-kingdom-cambodia-announce-voluntary-return-10th; for more information on the provenance of this sculpture, see also Noce 2015.

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of the relationship between the institutions through two major collaborations and exhibitions. Finally, third, it provides a report of the activities of the CMA–NMC Collections Management Training Program (CMTP) team between 2023 and 2026. This program, developed by staff members from both institutions, provides training and support for Cambodian museum staff of the NMC and provincial museums, with particular attention to collections management skills and processes and the development of a countrywide museum professionals network.

This work builds on a history of international collaborations and support of cultural heritage preservation activities in Cambodia. Recent agreements have been entered into with American museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met), the Norton Simon Museum, and the Denver Art Museum, resulting in many exchanges of objects and sculptural fragments. Numerous groups and government agencies have provided significant technical support to the NMC and the MCFA of Cambodia, including the Leon Levy Foundation and the Friends of Khmer Culture Inc. The list of international agencies supporting excavation, preservation, and cultural tourism work at important sites around Cambodia is too extensive to list here. Within the context of U.S. assistance, ongoing backing for museum conservation is provided by the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Asian Art, among other groups and institutions. Building on this list, the CMA's MoUs emphasize support and training to strengthen the staff capacity and operational infrastructure of Cambodian museum professionals throughout the country.

The Koh Ker Hanuman

The transfer of the Hanuman sculpture **[Figure 1]** from Cleveland to Cambodia was initiated in January of 2014, when Sonya Rhie Mace (formerly Sonya Rhie Quintanilla), George P. Bickford Curator of Indian and Southeast Asian Art at the CMA, traveled to Koh Ker to investigate claims published by French archeologist Éric Bourdonneau from the École française d'Extrême Orient (EFEO) that the Cleveland Hanuman had been taken from Prasat Chen (Noce 2013). Her enquiry ultimately led to an excavation by French archeologist Dominique Soutif, also from the EFEO, in partnership with Huot Samnang (MCFA) of a portion of the site that located fragments of Hanuman's pedestal and right earring, confirming that the figure had once been part of an impressive sculptural group that stood in the east gate of the temple (Noce 2015). The CMA's agreement to send the sculpture to Cambodia was a significant step in a long-term international effort to recover and reconstruct the monumental sculptural programs at Koh Ker, a city abandoned centuries ago and subjected to looting and dispersal of its important sculptural elements in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Koh Ker, located approximately 112 km northeast of Angkor, became the capital of the Khmer kingdom under Jayavarman IV, who moved the royal court there in 921 CE and ruled from Koh Ker between 928 and his death in 941. The east gate of Prasat Chen displayed multiple large-scale figures in a distinctive Koh Ker style, depicting a dramatic scene described in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The focus of this episode is the battle between the

monkey brothers Sugrīva and Vāli, who face off at the center. They are observed by Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, and Hanuman, the monkey general who supports Rāma and Sugrīva. This scene has now been reconstructed in a gallery at the NMC. Facing the brothers, Hanuman (formerly at the CMA) kneels by Rāma's left side. Rāma, now headless, was returned from the Denver Museum of Art in 2016 (Duray 2016). On Rāma's right side, only a pedestal that once held the kneeling figure of Lakṣmaṇa is present; the whereabouts of the statue are unknown.

In an adjacent gallery at the NMC, a related tableau from the west gate of Prasat Chen is also composed of sculptures brought together from museums, auction houses, private collections, and an off-site storage facility. The scene depicts the duel between Bhīma and Duryodhana described in the *Mahābhārata*, in which the two rival cousins face each other, observed by seven kneeling and seated figures. The statue of Bhīma was at the Norton Simon Museum until 2014 (Boehm 2014); Duryodhana was returned by Sotheby's that same year.[4] Two of the kneeling figures, Nakula and Sahadeva, were returned by the Met in 2013, and a further stone guardian deity was returned in 2026.[5] Excavations continue today at Koh Ker. The reconstruction of the 5-meter-tall dancing Shiva sculpture, recovered in an estimated 10,000 pieces from Prasat Krahom in 2012, has just been completed (Chhorn 2026).



Figure 1: Hanuman from Prasat Chen, Koh Ker, Cambodia, 921–945; formerly at the Cleveland Museum of Art, acc. no. 1982.46, now at the National Museum of Cambodia, inv. no. NMC.259; sandstone, H.: 115.5 cm © CMA

Sonya Rhie Mace's provenance research and onsite investigation leading to the transfer of the Hanuman established long-term relationships between individuals at the NMC and the CMA.

[4] United States Attorney's Office, Southern District of New York, press release, 7 May 2014: https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/manhattan-us-attorney-announces-return-10th-century-sandstone-sculpture-kingdom.

[5] See the Met press releases announcing these restitutions: https://www.metmuseum.org/press-releases/cambodian-returns-2013-news (3 May 2013), and https://www.metmuseum.org/press-releases/cambodia-return-2026 (10 June 2026).

She shared with NMC colleagues the information that had taken her two years to learn: that the CMA bought the sculpture from Robert Hatfield Ellsworth (1929–2014), who had acquired it from the estate of Christian Humann (1929–1981). Humann had purchased the head and body separately, the former in 1973 and the latter in 1976, from Claude de Marteau (1935–2016), who bought the former from Douglas A.J. Latchford (1931–2020) in 1969 and the latter in 1972. Her colleagues at the NMC then reciprocated by explaining how different people at Koh Ker, for different reasons, first removed the head and then the body, broken into three parts, from its monolithic pedestal.

Mace's collaboration with Bertrand Porte, stone conservator with the EFEO, then in residence at the NMC in Phnom Penh, soon gave rise to further investigations into another major Cambodian sculpture in the Cleveland collection, Lord Kṛṣṇa lifting Mount Govardhana from Phnom Da. The foundation of trust developed by information-sharing during the Hanuman investigation was a fundamental step in establishing the official relationship between the CMA and the Cambodia MCFA; it opened the door to ongoing information-sharing between professional colleagues that has continued to illuminate the histories of Cambodian objects at the CMA.

MoU, 2015–2020

At the ceremony in May of 2015 during which the Hanuman was officially transferred from the CMA to the Kingdom of Cambodia, the CMA and the NMC signed their first MoU, in which they affirmed that the museums wished to enter into "a series of cultural exchanges" for the benefit of both institutions and their respective audiences. Taking the transfer of the Hanuman as a first step, the MoU outlined plans for cooperative activities and technical assistance and for loans from the NMC to the CMA.

Cambodian Minister of Culture and Fine Arts, Her Excellency Mrs Phoeurng Sackona noted at the time that this was the first MoU with an American museum that focused on reciprocal collaboration and technical assistance. Mr Kong Vireak, then Director of the NMC, added, "I look forward to working with our American colleagues to identify specific projects [...] that I know will be of benefit to our museum and to visitors to Cleveland".[6]

The first objective of the MoU contemplated enhanced cooperation and exchange between the United States and Cambodia and specifically between the NMC and CMA. The MoU offered a range of potential categories for collaboration and exchange, such as collections management, exhibition design, security, conservation, and digital technology. The intention was to leave room for the NMC to determine exactly what kind of collaborative activities or assistance from the CMA would be most applicable to their work.

In the second objective, loans from the NMC to the CMA were envisioned as a means to educate broad audiences about Cambodia's cultural heritage, an important goal for the MCFA. The

[6] See CMA press release, 12 May 2015: https://www.clevelandart.org/about/press/cleveland-museum-art-and-ministry-culture-and-fine-arts-kingdom-cambodia-announce.



FIGURE 2: Portion of the Banteay Chhmar wall depicting a standing ten-armed Lokeśvara in bas-relief, Cambodia, Bayon period, late 12th–early 13th century; exhibited at the Cleveland Museum of Art in 2017–2018 © CMA

intent was to provide opportunities for American museumgoers to view and appreciate Cambodian cultural heritage in the context with that of other cultures around the world. The first loan anticipated in this MoU quickly moved into the planning stages for an exhibition that opened in 2017.

First Loan Exhibition: Banteay Chhmar in Cleveland (2017–2018)

The first of the special exhibitions anticipated in the 2015 MoU was *Beyond Angkor: Cambodian Sculpture from Banteay Chhmar,* held at the CMA from 14 October 2017 to 25 March 2018. This exhibition provided a rare opportunity for the American public to experience a treasure of Cambodian material cultural heritage. The NMC loaned a 2.7 × 3.7 m section of the temple's outer precinct wall from the site of Banteay Chhmar, depicting a massive ten-armed Lokeśvara (Avalokiteśvara) carved in bas relief **[FIGURE 2]**. Curator Sonya Rhie Mace complemented the installation with other objects from the CMA collection that tell the story of this temple site and period. The exhibition included a digital reconstruction of Banteay Chhmar by Olivier Cunin, a montage of photographs from the EFEO of the wall prior to its dismantling, and Jaroslav Poncar's more recent photographs of the site. Mace produced a small publication with

art-historical interpretations of the extensive bas relief carvings, based on the work of the late Thomas Maxwell.

Banteay Chhmar was built in the late 12th century by King Jayavarman VII as his "second Citadel", following his significant building projects at Angkor (Sharrock et al. 2014). During his reign, Jayavarman VII effected the largest expansion of the Khmer Empire, dominating most of mainland Southeast Asia between 1181 and 1218. The wall around the Banteay Chhmar temple precinct presents over 518 meters of complex bas reliefs that depict historical battles as well as religious subjects. Most of the wall scenes are depicted in two or three horizontal registers. At the far west end, adjacent to the west gate, the stories culminate in a series of eight impressively sized Lokeśvaras carved side by side.[7] This series is unique not only in the surviving corpus of Cambodian art, but also to date anywhere in the Buddhist world (Mace 2017). The *Beyond Angkor* exhibition featured one of these Lokeśvara bas-relief sculptures, loaned to the CMA for its first international exhibition.

The logistics of shipping the 53 individual stone blocks that make up the Lokeśvara relief to Cleveland involved an extensive collaborative effort between the NMC and the CMA; the effort offered practical opportunities for developing relationships among staff. CMA Chief Conservator Per Knutås traveled to Cambodia to assist in the packing of the relief by NMC personnel. Crates, packing materials, and supplemental handling were provided by non-museum professionals from two foreign shipping and logistics companies, as required by insurance coverage. In Cleveland, the blocks were reassembled one by one in the gallery by NMC Stone Conservator Mr Sok Soda and CMA installation staff **[Figure 3]**.

This installation was the first time Sok Soda had worked closely with the CMA team of art handlers, exhibition designers, and production staff; he quickly formed a close connection with the group. During the installation, CMA staff shared the design changes and decisions that were made in preparation for the installation, including reinforcing the wall of the gallery to support the weight of the stone and designing footlights simulating the candlelight that would have highlighted the bas relief figures when *in situ* at the time it was built at Banteay Chhmar. These types of practical, technical exchanges are an important benefit of loan collaborations such as this, in that they allow colleagues to learn from each other's decisions, processes, and solutions. Opportunities to actively work together towards a shared goal provide an organic and productive avenue for mutual learning quite different from formally arranged meetings or virtual discussions.

The end of the Banteay Chhmar exhibition in the spring of 2018 brought Sok Soda back to Cleveland at the same time as the conservation of another important Cambodian cultural heritage object was beginning, as described in the following section.

[7] In 1998, four of the eight Lokeśvaras were forcibly removed from their places in the surrounding wall at Banteay Chhmar. Two of them remain in undisclosed locations, and two were seized at the border with Thailand and subsequently transported to the NMC in Phnom Penh. In 2017, one of these was displayed in Cleveland, and in 2022, both were re-erected at the site in their original location.



Figure 3: Staff from the CMA and the NMC installing the Lokeśvara from the perimeter wall of Banteay Chhmar at the Cleveland Museum of Art, Oct. 2017 © Elizabeth Saluk

The Kṛṣṇa Govardhana Project (2017–2022)

The 2015 MoU had opened the opportunity to discuss an exchange of fragments from works at the NMC and CMA that resulted in one of the most significant collaborative projects in the development of the relationship between the two institutions: the re-evaluation and reconstruction of the 7th-century stone sculpture of Kṛṣṇa lifting Mount Govardhana in the CMA collection (1973.106). Originally created for the temple site of Phnom Da in Takeo province, southern Cambodia, this sculpture is a cornerstone of the CMA's collection of Southeast Asian art. The stories of the CMA Kṛṣṇa and information on the other sculptures discovered at Phnom Da are explained in *Revealing Krishna* (Mace & Porte 2021), the catalog accompanying the 2021 CMA exhibition.

The sculpture depicts Lord Kṛṣṇa, major avatar of God Viṣṇu, slightly larger than life, raising his left arm while leaning to the right from the effort of lifting Mount Govardhana above. The figure was connected by stone struts to a stela forming an open-sided niche behind, above, and below it **[Figure 4]**. Standing floor-to-ceiling inside a rock-hewn cave temple at Phnom Da, the figure would have literally supported the Mount overhead. The original design effectively created a space in which followers could personally experience the moment in which the young deity miraculously lifted the Mountain to shelter villagers and animals from God Indra's stormy punishment.

Acquisition and First Reconstruction (1973–2005)

Kṛṣṇa's torso was acquired by the CMA in 1973 having left Cambodia around 1910 and entered into a private collection in Brussels in 1920. A group of 17 additional fragments were collected around 1935 at Phnom Da and sent to Brussels as well. Significantly, the group of eight sculptures at Phnom Da included a second figure of similar proportions to the CMA figure, with left arm upraised and also identified as Kṛṣṇa, now on display at the NMC. In 1977, the 17 fragments were recovered in Brussels and brought to Cleveland, sparking a complete reconstruction of the CMA Kṛṣṇa by CMA conservators.

Although other sculptures from Phnom Da—including the second Kṛṣṇa—had been recovered and brought to the NMC in the 1940s, in 1977 under the Khmer Rouge the CMA had no way to communicate with museum professionals in Cambodia or to exchange information about the site and its sculptures. As a result, CMA conservators



Figure 4: Digital reconstruction of the complete Kṛṣṇa Govardhana created by Dale Utt & Sonya Rhie Mace; originally from Phnom Da, Angkor Borei district, Takeo province, Cambodia, ca. 600 CE; Cleveland Museum of Art, acc. no. 1973.106, sandstone, H.: 203.1 cm © CMA

at that time had to make decisions without the benefit of local context or collaboration with those who knew the sculptural group best. Reports from this time show that the conservators faced difficulties in assembling some of the fragments with the torso, especially in aligning the upper and lower sections of the stela. To resolve this, they chose to prioritize a standing figure, assembling the base fragment with feet, four leg fragments, and the torso, using epoxy resins and steel rods to secure the fragments together in what was meant to be their permanent configuration **[Figure 5]**.

The large upper stela fragment with left hand was not used in this reconstruction, nor were eight other smaller pieces. These nine fragments were kept at the CMA until 2005 when then-Curator Stanislaw J. Czuma was able to return them to the NMC, where they were reunited with other figures from Phnom Da. At that time, the large upper stela fragment and a lower proper right leg fragment were paired with the second Kṛṣṇa torso that had remained in Cambodia **[Figure 6]**.

Conservation Project (2014–2021)

By 2014, communications between Bertrand Porte and Sonya Rhie Mace established during their earlier work at Koh Ker led to a collaborative reinvestigation of the nine returned fragments.

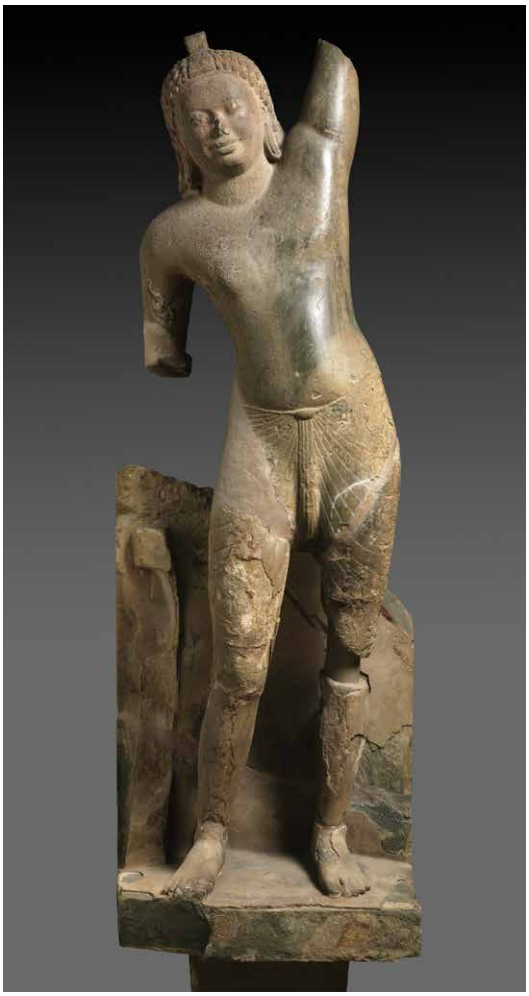


Figure 5: The CMA Kṛṣṇa Govardhana, shown prior to the 2018–2021 restoration, including the three lower leg fragments and base that were later reunited with the NMC Kṛṣṇa © CMA



Figure 6: The NMC Kṛṣṇa Govardhana, shown prior to the 2020–2021 restoration, including the large upper stela fragment with left hand that was later reunited with the CMA Kṛṣṇa; National Museum of Cambodia, inv. no. Ka 1641, sandstone, H.: 209 cm © NMC

Porte believed that the large upper stela fragment with left hand did in fact belong to the CMA Kṛṣṇa, not the Kṛṣṇa at the NMC. After further research by the CMA conservation team confirmed this suspicion, this fragment was transferred to Cleveland in 2015, and a large-scale conservation project began in 2017.

This second conservation treatment involved the complete disassembly of the CMA Kṛṣṇa, and the reassessment of all fragments of the two sculptures. This time, the outcome was changed by the insights and evidence shared openly by colleagues in Cambodia and the U.S. and by digital technologies not available in 1977. Sok Soda and Bertrand Porte both visited Cleveland during this time to consult and share their experience and observations. Porte and his colleague



Figure 7: Exhibition view of *Revealing Krishna*, 2021, showing the reunited CMA Kṛṣṇa (left) and NMC Kṛṣṇa (right) after fragment exchange and restoration © CMA

Nicolas Josso provided photogrammetry models of sections of the Kṛṣṇa figure at the NMC that were digitally compared with the fragments in Cleveland. Recent research into Cambodian stone sculpture (Carò & Douglas 2014) provided important context to the analysis of stone samples conducted by materials scientist Christian Fischer. In the end, the team determined that the entire right leg, lower left leg, and lower stela section with feet were from the NMC Kṛṣṇa. The CMA returned these to Cambodia in August 2020. A few months later, a single right lower leg fragment in Phnom Penh was shipped to Cleveland and reunited with the CMA figure. This exchange of fragments as long-term loans allowed each team to properly assemble the currently known pieces of each figure for the first time. The two figures were then displayed side-by-side in a remarkable exhibition that included unprecedented loans of Phnom Da and related sculptures from Cambodia and Paris **[Figure 7]**.

Revealing Krishna *Exhibition* (*2021–2022*)

As with the Banteay Chhmar exhibition in 2017–2018, *Revealing Krishna: Journey to Cambodia's Sacred Mountain* (14 November 2021–30 January 2022) not only supported the goal outlined in the MoU of bringing Cambodian material culture to U.S. audiences, but also provided important personal connections and collaborations between CMA and NMC staff.

The groundbreaking digital components of the exhibition included an immersive video of the approach to Phnom Da by river and large-scale annotated digital projections of all eight Phnom Da sculptures, bringing the experience of Cambodia to Cleveland audiences. The exhibition also offered audiences an augmented-reality (AR) Hololens™ experience telling the story of the CMA Kṛṣṇa sculpture. These components were produced by a CMA team that traveled along with external

partners to Cambodia to film and scan the sculptures, temples, and countryside, with the full support and collaboration of the NMC and the MCFA.[8]

During the exhibition installation, NMC stone conservator Chea Socheat accompanied the loans from Cambodia and worked together with CMA art handlers to assemble and install the NMC Kṛṣṇa **[Figure 8]** and the Balarāma statue from Phnom Da. These experiences again built personal relationships and enabled an exchange of approaches between the two institutions.

The exhibition also included many other loans from the NMC and the Angkor Borei Museum to provide context for understanding the development of the Phnom Da style of sculpture and architecture. Transporting these massive stone statues from Cambodia for this exhibition was a significant undertaking that helped CMA staff understand some of the challenges faced by NMC colleagues in developing their outgoing loan program. For example, precedent for fine arts insurance coverage requires an established and reputable packing and shipping company with which insurers are familiar. Though these skills exist in Cambodia, the primary shipment and logistics company working in the country is based in the United Kingdom. This company can face challenges fulfilling the specialized requirements of fine art shipments, such as the availability of conservation-approved packing materials. In 2021 and still today, there are no known Cambodian companies providing services that are generally accepted by the underwriters and insurance brokers for many borrowing institutions. This creates significant challenges for the NMC's international loan capabilities. Understanding this chain of cause and effect helped guide the CMA's plans to meet the "technical assistance" commitment outlined in the 2015 MoU.

MoU Renewal and Collections Management Training Program (2020–2026)

Though the COVID-19 pandemic brought delays in the planning and installation of the *Revealing Krishna* exhibition, the renewal of the MoU was already underway in early 2020 and a new version was signed in March of that year. This



Figure 8: Installation of the NMC Kṛṣṇa at the Cleveland Museum of Art, Nov. 2021, by CMA art handlers and NMC conservation staff © Beth Edelstein

[8] See CMA blog post "Pushing the Digital Boundaries: Behind the Scenes of Revealing Krishna" by Haley Kedziora & Anna Faxon, 19 November 2021: www.clevelandart.org/articles/pushing-digital-boundaries.

second agreement noted the exchange of sculptural fragments as described above and reiterated the 2015 MoU language regarding cooperative activities and technical assistance.

Following the successful *Revealing Krishna* exhibition closing in 2022, focus turned in earnest to the development of specific plans for these activities and assistance. Conversations between Sonya Rhie Mace, Alyssa Morasco, CMA Director of Collections Management, HE Mrs Phoeurng Sackona, Chhay Visoth, Director of the NMC, and Muong Chanraksmey (Raksmey), Chief of Education and Publication Office at the NMC, led to Morasco's suggestion of a three-phase plan for a Collections Management Training Program (CMTP).

Phase 1 of the CMTP brought the authors of this article (Beth Edelstein & Alyssa Morasco) and Sonya Rhie Mace to Cambodia for three weeks in December and January 2023–2024 for visits to the NMC and a selection of provincial museums, accompanied by Mr Muong Raksmey and Mr Sytha Visaradaputra from the Inventory and Document Office. This phase was envisioned as a familiarity-building and informational visit, to help clarify the Cambodian partners' expectations and priorities and assess how the CMA might best plan to meet them. Phase 2 brought Muong and Sytha to Cleveland during May and June of 2025, embedding with staff from various departments at the CMA to observe this museum's staff organization, communication methods, and established procedures for a range of daily activities. Phase 3, planned for November 2026, will unite staff from provincial museums for a weeklong seminar in Siem Reap.

CMTP Phase 1: Cambodia (*Dec. 2023–Jan. 2024*)

Phnom Penh and the National Museum of Cambodia

In late December 2023, we (Edelstein, Morasco, and Mace) traveled to Phnom Penh in the first phase of the CMTP, where three weeks were spent visiting museums and historic sites and meeting with local museum staff and administrators. Our travels began at the NMC where colleagues introduced us to the museum and ongoing projects. At that time, projects in the planning stages included an exhibition featuring 14 objects to be returned from the Met.[9] Another initiative involved sending the massive bronze reclining Viṣṇu from the West Mebon in Angkor to France for scientific analysis and restoration, with an initial exhibition at the Guimet Museum in Paris (Biard 2026), before touring the United States. Originally measuring over five meters in length, this 11th-century statue is among the largest Khmer bronze sculptures known.

The visit to the NMC offered an opportunity to learn about current collections care and documentation procedures, as well as earlier museum projects supported by national and international partners. For example, the NMC maintains environmentally controlled storerooms for its archives and conducts ongoing digitization projects there and in the library. Its collection of glass negatives is housed in stable storage materials from a French

[9] See Met press release announcing this return, 23 December 2023: https://www.metmuseum.org/press-releases/return-of-khmer-works-2023-news.

rehousing project in the 1990s. Between 2004 and 2013, the Leon Levy Foundation, in collaboration with the Center for Khmer Studies, funded a comprehensive project to inventory the NMC collection and create an online database. In 2021, with support from the United States Embassy through the Cultural Antiquities Task Force's Cultural Property Agreement Implementation Grants, the project was expanded to include a database for six provincial museums.[10]

The NMC, like most collections worldwide, has ongoing plans to update and upgrade storage methods and materials; collections care and registration projects are always necessary. One of the most useful and underrated resources in attending to these needs is collaboration with colleagues facing the same challenges in collections care and management. As the goals of the CMTP developed over the course of our visit, it became clear that one of the primary aims of CMA collaboration could be to support the expansion and solidification of professional networks to share resources, ideas, and information, both among provincial museums and in terms of international networks of museum colleagues. No one place or person can hold all the answers; knowledge and resource sharing can be the most productive path forward.

Examples of specific needs for technical assistance included options for direct object labeling, updates to archival storage of glass-plate negatives, and discussions around the potential expansion of the museum to an offsite location for more exhibition space. We offered to provide support by reviewing potential sites for collections risk management concerns and participating in design-build conversations to make sure exhibition spaces took installation and collections needs into account. As we proceeded, we took note of other questions and concerns and made plans to address these during the following phases of the program.

Provincial Museums and Others

We continued from Phnom Penh on a circuit to visit seven provincial museums and other select institutions. Cambodia has 25 provincial museums operating under the auspices of the MCFA. The NMC functions as a central communication and administration node. Many other museums throughout the country are privately funded or represent international collaborations. In addition to the provincial museums, we visited and met with colleagues at the Angkor Borei Museum, a district museum within the province of Takeo (which has its provincial museum in the provincial capital), and the Preah Norodom Sihanouk–Angkor Museum in Siem Reap, built with the support of a Japanese corporation and university together with the Cambodian APSARA National Authority, the entity overseeing the Angkor Archeological Park. We also learned that a significant proportion of cultural heritage objects are held not in museums, but within the numerous Buddhist monasteries throughout the country.

On each visit to a provincial museum, we met with staff to discuss their challenges and needs, toured galleries and storage spaces, and heard about

[10] See "U.S. Government Support for Cambodian Cultural Heritage Preservation" since 2001: https://kh.usembassy.gov/u-s-assistance-for-cambodian-cultural-preservation/ (accessed 23 July 2026).



Figure 9: Creating connections with Cambodian staff in the main gallery at the Kampong Thom provincial museum, Jan. 2024 © Beth Edelstein

plans and projects **[Figure 9]**. Many of the provincial museums have a generally standardized layout and architecture that includes spaces for display of archeological and historic collections as well as a separate space for traveling or contemporary exhibitions and public workshops. We learned that the design of these buildings also incorporated plans for outreach and connection to local audiences; many provincial museums used these spaces for photography exhibitions or public gatherings.

It quickly became clear that each museum had unique strengths as well as areas of potential growth. Some museums had well organized and climate-controlled storage areas, while others excelled in photo documentation, housekeeping, or exhibition didactics **[Figures 10–11]**. We met many young and dedicated leaders and museum staff eager to bring in new audiences, reach student groups, and expand and update exhibitions. These local professionals are connected through a text chat that has laid the groundwork for the type of collegial networking that we all rely on daily in our own work.

Phase 1: Conclusion

Towards the end of the trip, the CMA team met again with Muong, Sytha, and NMC Director Chhay Visoth. Visoth shared his vision for a collaborative and professional organization among the 25 provincial museums and for ongoing collaborations with the CMA as well as other museums with which the MCFA had entered into MoUs.[11] We provided a written report of our observations and outlined short- and long-term goals for our collaboration. Short-term goals included providing custom boxes for rehousing a small group of palm leaf manuscripts at the Kampong Thom and Kampong Chhnang museums and providing Hobo™ dataloggers to begin

[11] To date, the Smithsonian NMAA and the MCFA for the Kingdom of Cambodia have signed a similar MoU (31 October 2023) for professional exchanges, exhibitions, research, and heritage preservation. See: https://asia.si.edu/about/press/releases/national-museum-of-asian-art-announces-memoranda-of-understanding/. See also Bronwyn Campbell, this Special Edition, for a different example of collaboration between Cambodian authorities and the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) in the context of provenance research and restitution.



Figure 10: Bilingual labels at the Battambang Museum, Jan. 2024 © Beth Edelstein



Figure 11: Reviewing storage of archeological metals at the Kampong Chhnang provincial museum, Jan. 2024 © Sonya Rhie Mace

gathering environmental data on gallery and vitrine environments at two provincial museums. Our defined long-term goals focused on the execution of the second and third phases of the project.

CMTP Phase 2: Washington, D.C., and Cleveland (May–June 2025)

The second phase of the CMTP reunited us with Muong and Sytha in the U.S. **[Figure 12]** for two months to work in Cleveland directly with CMA staff in diverse areas of museum operations. We intended this as an opportunity for them to identify processes or approaches that could help them reach their own goals for the NMC and gather ideas to share with their colleagues at Cambodian provincial museums.

Washington, D.C., Visit

Phase 2 began with a weeklong visit to Washington, D.C., with a variety of activities to introduce our guests to the capital city. We planned meetings in advance with colleagues at the Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art (NMAA) and the National Gallery of Art to open conversations about museum administration and policies and introduce new colleagues. On the agenda were discussions of museum organization and administration, loans, collections care and conservation, and exhibitions planning.

Our colleagues at the NMAA shared some of the ways that the 21 museums and eight research centers that make up the Smithsonian Institution connect



Figure 12: From left to right, Sonya Rhie Mace, Muong Chanraksmey, Cecily Hughes, Sytha Visaradaputra, Alyssa Morasco, and Beth Edelstein at the Cleveland Museum of Art, 27 June 2025 © David Brichford

with each other, including centralized committees and forums and an annual "Share Fair" where museum staff gather to share ideas and solutions to common challenges. These ideas provided potential models for growing and supporting the network of museum professionals in the 25 provincial museums in Cambodia. Visits to storage and conservation labs sparked discussions of proper storage for different materials and approaches to prioritizing conservation treatment needs. Finally, a tour of the *Delighting Krishna: Paintings of the Child-God* exhibition with curator Debra Diamond was a chance for us all to explore the ways digital media and community-written labels help make exhibitions meaningful and accessible to diverse audiences **[Figure 13]**.

During a daylong visit to the National Gallery of Art we met with colleagues in loans administration, collections management, object conservation, photograph conservation, photography storage, digital imaging, and packing. Muong and Sytha asked in-depth questions about loan policies, indemnity, and insurance, and were introduced to The Museum System (TMS), a collections database software used by many museums in the U.S. The Legal Issues in Museums Administration (LIMA) conference was underway in the city at the same time, providing an opportunity for our two Cambodian guests to meet with U.S. and U.K. insurance brokers to further discuss how Cambodia might establish insurance coverage for loans packed and shipped out of their country without the added costs of hiring European shipping or logistics companies. These conversations and more are ongoing, but the busy days are evidence of the time and preparation required to facilitate meaningful and useful experiences and help open the door to further personal and professional relationships.

Cleveland and the CMA

The following weeks in Cleveland began with introductions, orientations, and shadowing experiences within the museum. We scheduled time for Muong and Sytha to observe daily procedures —art handling, art installation, photography, 3D modeling, packing, object rehousing, collection inventory, regis-



Figure 13: Gallery tour at the National Museum of Asian Art, May 2025 © Sonya Rhie Mace



Figure 14: Collections rehousing workshop at the Cleveland Museum of Art involving CMA and Cambodian staff, June 2025 © Cecily Hughes

tration, and object labeling. We planned personal meetings for them with staff in philanthropy, school and teacher programs, exhibitions, and marketing, and they attended regular meetings of the rotations committee, the design department, the art handlers, and the collections management department. Registrars, art handlers, and the collections manager created dedicated written resources and presented workshops on outgoing loan processes, object storage and rehousing, collections database use, and exhibition/rotation production schedules **[Figure 14]**.

Conservation staff presented workshops on preventive conservation, matting and framing, onsite emergency response policies, and stone conservation. The museum's Collections Emergency Team had scheduled a hands-on wet salvage emergency response workshop organized by ICA Art Conservation during this timeframe so that Muong and Sytha could participate **[Figure 15]**.

Special events were planned or coincided with their time in Cleveland. The CMA hosted a public lecture and conversation between Sonya Rhie Mace and Muong Raksmey discussing the history of collaborations between the CMA and the NMC, giving museum audiences an opportunity to ask questions and engage with the speakers. We attended a luncheon and panel discussion at the City Club of Cleveland titled "Reconciliation in America's Museums: Understanding Cultural Patrimony and the Path to Rebuilding Trust", featuring senior representatives from the National Museum of the American Indian, the American Museum of Natural History, and the Toledo Museum of Art. At the Art Institute of Chicago, Muong and Sytha attended the annual Spring Colloquium, which featured a presentation by Research Fellow Nicolas Revire on the Khmer art pilaster from Prasat Phanom Rung to be returned to Thailand (see also this Special Edition), followed by a forum at the University of Chicago on the digitization of Chinese art in museum practice.

We visited museums around the region to provide added opportunities for networking and observation, while



Figure 15: Emergency response object salvage workshop at ICA Art Conservation, Cleveland, Ohio, 12 June 2025 © Beth Edelstein

social excursions and events including dinners with Cleveland-based Cambodian friends further established trust, collegiality, and understanding. We met with CMA Director William Griswold and Deputy Director and Chief Curator Andria Derstine, allowing the team to review the activities of Phase 2 and discuss plans for next steps, including the renewal of the MoU in 2025. Finally, we intentionally reserved funding in the Phase 2 budget for tools and equipment that may be difficult or more costly to purchase in Cambodia and worked together with Muong and Sytha to identify what would be most helpful.

Phase 2: Conclusion

This phase of the project required a substantial investment of time by the entire CMA team to plan and execute activities that would provide a range of experiences and learning moments, while allowing flexibility to respond and adapt as the weeks went on. CMA curatorial intern Cecily Hughes supported the team, kept up-to-date documentation, and was a consistent source of information and assistance for our Cambodian colleagues. The importance of this dedicated staff position in this type of exchange cannot be underestimated. Muong and Sytha were active partners in the development of this phase's goals by observing working processes at the museum and asking questions, providing feedback on the utility and applicability of potential activities, and considering how we could best document the CMA's practices and procedures for them to take back to their colleagues at home. Finally, their professional responsibilities in Cambodia continued during this time; it was important for us to remember to leave flexibility in the program's schedule to accommodate Cambodian work hours.

CMTP Phase 3: Cambodia (2026)

Phase 3 of the CMTP will convene staff from provincial museums to present an onsite weeklong workshop in Cambodia, scheduled from 16–20 November 2026. This workshop is envisioned as a means

for Muong and Sytha to disseminate some of the ideas, procedures, or structures that they learned or observed during their time at the CMA, focusing on those they think will be most constructive for the smaller museums. The workshop will also function as a community building moment, bringing staff together in person to further develop their professional relationships.

While working together in Cleveland, the CMTP team's conversations often expanded beyond technical knowledge and work processes to include the people-focused aspects of our respective roles: communication, setting shared goals, managing staff, and keeping colleagues informed, engaged, and excited about the work ahead. We discovered that though our countries' administrative structures may be different, we face many similar challenges in our roles as museum managers. Muong's understanding of the needs and interests of his colleagues in Cambodia were key in providing a direction for the content and structure of the Phase 3 workshop. We currently envision this as an active and engaging exercise: developing strategies for planning and executing exhibitions. This structure provides participants with a motivating and exciting goal while allowing us to integrate a wide range of museum processes and procedures, including loans, didactics, public engagement, object handling and transport, installation and mounts, and conservation into the week's structure.

Concluding Remarks

The activities, relationships, and plans that have developed under the framework of the MoUs between the CMA and Cambodia represent both significant achievements and a foundation for future endeavors. The positive outcomes thus far have relied on the value placed by all participants in cultivating trust, engaging with different perspectives, and understanding and supporting one another's priorities. This work is neither quick nor straightforward, but requires sustained commitment, careful listening, and the dedication of individuals acting as representatives of their institutions.

That this collaboration began with the transfer of a sculpture from a Western museum to the country of origin underscores a crucial point: addressing issues around restitution need not be moments of conflict, but can serve as the basis for durable, mutually beneficial relationships. In this sense, the CMA–Cambodia partnership offers an example of stewardship that extends beyond ownership, in which institutions act not only as caretakers of objects, but also as stewards of relationships, knowledge, and shared cultural goals.

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