The Tale of Two Stones: Reuniting Khmer Fragments from Prasat Phanom Rung

Nicolas Revire[1]

Abstract—This article traces the intertwined stories of two Khmer architectural fragments from Prasat Phanom Rung, northeast Thailand, formerly held by the Art Institute of Chicago: (1) the well-known reclining Viṣṇu lintel repatriated amid controversy in 1988, and (2) a Kṛṣṇa pilaster deaccessioned more recently in 2024. Drawing on archival research, stylistic and iconographic analysis, material study, and on-site verification, this article demonstrates that both fragments originally framed the same doorway and belonged to a broader Vaiṣṇava sculptural ensemble now dispersed among other U.S. museum collections. Their parallel trajectories from Thailand to North America in the 1960s illuminate persistent challenges in provenance research, correct earlier misattributions, and underscore the ethical imperative, when possible, of reunifying displaced sacred sculpture with its original architectural and cultural context.

Keywords: Khmer Art and Architecture; Looting of Antiquities; Northeast Thailand; Prasat Phanom Rung; Provenance and Provenience; Restitution and Repatriation

"Take Michael Jackson back (เอาไมเคิล แจ็คสันคืนไป),
Give [us] back Phra Narai! (เอาพระนารายณ์คืนมา)"

Tap Lang (ทับหลัง; *The Lintel*), Carabao, 1988

Hidden Stories from Prasat Phanom Rung

Perched atop an extinct volcano in northeast Thailand, Prasat Phanom Rung in Chaloem Phra Kiat district, Buriram province (ปราสาทพนมรุ้ง, อ. เฉลิมพระเกียรติ, จ. บุรีรัมย์) has been listed as a National Heritage site of Thailand since 1935[2] and has been on the tentative UNESCO World Heritage list since 2019.[3] It is widely recognized, alongside Prasat Hin Phimai, as one of the most architecturally and symbolically ambitious Khmer monuments in Thailand (Piriya 1981: 29). From its summit, the temple commands sweeping views over the surrounding floodplains and south toward the Dangrek mountains along today's Thai–Cambodian border, a setting that underscores its strategic, political, and religious importance. Dedicated to Śiva, the site was likely established as early as the 10th century (Subhadradis 2517), with activity possibly dating back to the 8th century. Its present monumental form came about in the first half of the 12th century when the region was incorporated into the Angkorian kingdom

[1] École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), Bangkok. Email: nicolas.revire@efeo.net.

[2] See *Royal Gazette of Thailand*, 8 March 1935, vol. 52, chap. 75, site no. 1 (Isan).

[3] See: https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/6401/ (accessed on 23 Jan. 2026).

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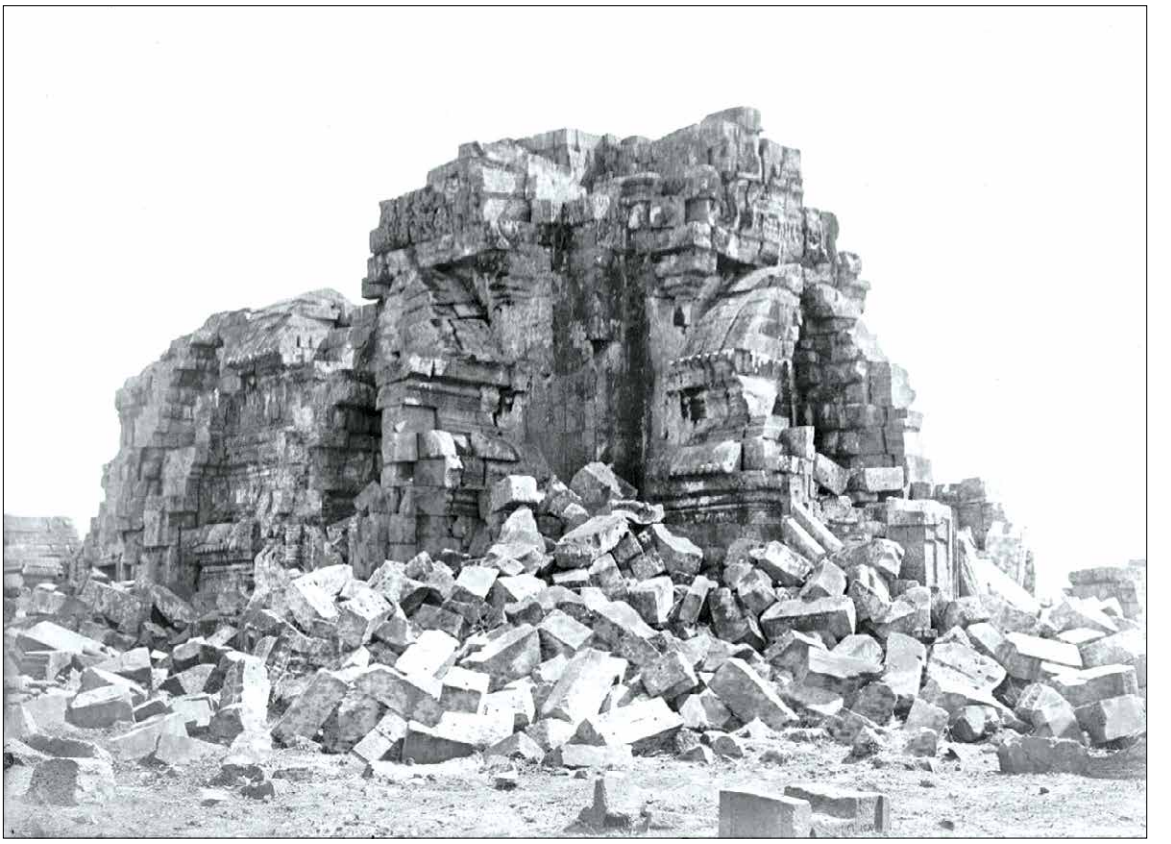


Figure 1: Heaps of stone at Prasat Phanom Rung, main sanctuary, photo by Emil Groote, Jan. 1930 © National Archives of Thailand

under Sūryavarman II (r. 1113–1150), the patron of Angkor Wat.

Prasat Phanom Rung occupied a critical position within imperial geography. It lay along the "royal road" linking Angkor, some 156 km to the southeast, with Phimai, approximately 90 km to the northwest and functioned as a provincial center governed by powerful local elites. Several inscriptions have been found at the site (Sirindhorn 2567). The most recent dated example is from 1150, identifying a certain Narendrāditya —a son of Sūryavarman II and potential claimant to the throne of Angkor—as the principal patron of the main sanctuary, where he is eulogized as Śiva himself (Goodall 2026). Under Narendrāditya and his son Hiraṇya, the temple developed into a major religious complex, sustained by a large community devoted to Śaiva ascetic practices and worship and the maintenance of the sanctuary. Architecturally, Prasat Phanom Rung is a temple-mountain distinguished by its axial east–west plan, extending nearly a kilometer from the lower processional causeway to the summit shrine, an arrangement that finds few close parallels in Khmer architecture. It can be compared to the Preah Vihear temple complex about 200 km to the east or Phnom Chisor in southern Cambodia.[4]

[4] For general art historical studies on Prasat Phanom Rung, see Hammond 1988; Suriyawut 2540; and Piriya 2012: 222–233.



Figure 2: Restored main sanctuary of Prasat Phanom Rung, view from the northwest, Dec. 2023 © Nicolas Revire

At the heart of the Prasat Phanom Rung complex stands the main sanctuary (*garbhagṛha*), built of high-quality pink sandstone. Although the central *liṅga* no longer survives, the water channel (*pranāla*) for ritual ablutions remains *in situ*, marking the shrine's original Śaiva focus. The sanctuary was once adorned with an elaborate sculptural program carved on lintels, pilasters, and pediments, depicting Hindu deities, episodes from the *Rāmāyaṇa* and possibly the *Kṛṣṇacarita*, ritual scenes, ascetics, and imagery that may allude to royal patronage and religious devotion. Much of this sculptural ensemble survived into the 20th century as heaps of fallen stones **[Figure 1]**. This exposed these pieces to looting and clandestine removal until decisive campaigns by Thai authorities in the 1970s and 1980s restored the monument's structural integrity and visibility **[Figure 2]**.[5]

This article focuses on two such "stones": (1) a lintel carved with a reclining Viṣṇu and (2) a pilaster depicting Lord Kṛṣṇa lifting Mount Govardhana. Both were removed from Prasat Phanom Rung, likely in the early 1960s, circulated through the Bangkok and

[5] See Hiram Woodward, writing under the pseudonym D.W. Ward, "The Tragedy of Phanom Rung" (*Bangkok World*, 20 November 1971: 14–15), which exposed the past neglect, looting, and destruction of the temple complex and helped catalyse significant preservation efforts at the site in the 1970s: https://circumambulating.soas.ac.uk/the-tragedy-of-phanom-rung-from-1971-by-hiram-woodward-under-the-pseudonym-d-w-ward/.

later New York art markets by the same dealer, before a famous Chicago collector and arts patron purchased them and ultimately gifted both of them to one of the most prestigious American art museums, the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC). At the AIC, they were unfortunately treated as unrelated works for decades and even attributed to different regions or countries. The Viṣṇu lintel, repatriated to Thailand in 1988 amid sustained public and diplomatic controversy, was eventually recognized as the crowning element of the eastern doorway to the main sanctuary. The Kṛṣṇa pilaster, by contrast, long attributed to Cambodia, remained quietly behind in the museum's collection and largely unexamined until recent research revealed that it had in fact once stood beneath the lintel, together framing the same doorway and forming a unified architectural and iconographic ensemble.[6]

By reconstructing the intertwined stories of these two objects, this study demonstrates how careful, methodologically rigorous research can correct entrenched misattributions and long-standing assumptions and restore coherence to monuments long understood through incomplete or distorted evidence. Such research fundamentally reshapes our understanding of Khmer monuments and their modern afterlives, extending beyond the modern political borders of Cambodia. It argues that issues of restitutions and repatriation cannot be approached lightly as a uniform or purely symbolic act,[7] but must rest on careful documentation, repeated verification, and close attention to material, historical, and architectural evidence. At a time when Khmer artworks are increasingly returned by U.S. museums and collectors through voluntary or negotiated processes,[8] often without full confirmation of their exact origin or authenticity, the Prasat Phanom Rung case highlights the necessity of treating each object on its own terms, with its own evidentiary burden.

The article analyses, in separate parallel sections, the provenance (ownership history) and provenience (original findspot) of the Viṣṇu lintel

[6] For a preliminary study, see Nicolas Revire, A Sacred Pilaster Returns Home, Online Blog article: https://www.artic.edu/articles/1151/a-sacred-pilaster-returns-home.

[7] The terms *restitution* and *repatriation* are often used interchangeably but denote distinct, if closely related, processes. Following Gordon et al. (2026: 39, n. 1), *repatriation* refers primarily to the legal, administrative, and logistical process of returning an object across national borders, whereas *restitution* emphasizes the restoration of an object to its rightful owner or custodian through legal, ethical, and historical redress. Although many recent Southeast Asian cases involve both (e.g., Tythacott & Ardiyansyah 2021; Murphy 2024), the two do not necessarily coincide temporally or procedurally. The Prasat Phanom Rung pilaster illustrates this distinction: following its deaccession by the Art Institute of Chicago in 2024, ownership was formally transferred to the Kingdom of Thailand, thereby effecting its restitution, although its physical repatriation remains pending at the time of writing (2026). More broadly, Rassool & Gibbon (2023) argue that *restitution* is the preferable concept because it encompasses the deeper meanings of return as a process of restoration and transitional justice, while Gordon et al. (2026) further advocate a model of *collaborative restitution*, emphasizing sustained cooperation among museums, governments, scholars, and source communities throughout the restitution process.

[8] See two recent returns, both dated 11 December 2025: (1) https://about.asianart.org/press/asian-art-museum-transfers-ownership-of-13-objects-to-cambodia-agreement-allows-artworks-to-remain-at-museum-on-a-two-year-loan/, and (2) https://asia.si.edu/about/press/releases/cambodia-return-2025/. See also contributions by Alison Carter & Chhay Visoth, Brice Vincent et al., and Beth Edelstein & Alyssa Morasco, this Special Edition.



FIGURE 3: The Viṣṇu lintel from Prasat Phanom Rung, formerly at the Art Institute of Chicago, H.: 87 cm, W.: 137.2 cm, acc. no. 1983.521 © AIC

and the Kṛṣṇa pilaster, incorporating new archival evidence, tracing their removal, circulation, and acquisition before reassessing their original placement through stylistic analysis, measurement, material study, and on-site investigation. A subsequent section widens the lens to consider additional missing architectural fragments from Prasat Phanom Rung now held in two other American museum collections, which raise unresolved questions about potential future claims and repatriation pathways. These dispersed remains provide a broader framework for reassessing the site's sculptural and iconographic program, which emerges as more consistently and deliberately Vaiṣṇava in character than previously recognized. The conclusion considers the broader implications of this case study for interpreting Khmer religious architecture and for current debates on restitution and repatriation involving Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam, arguing that the careful reunification of fragments—both material and intellectual—offers a valuable model for the stewardship of Khmer heritage in Southeast Asia.

The Lintel

The modern history of the Viṣṇu lintel from Prasat Phanom Rung is inseparable from the emergence of a transnational market for Khmer architectural sculpture in the decades following the Second World War. Long before its spectacular return to Thailand in 1988, the lintel had acquired a second life in Chicago as a displaced art object:



Figure 4: Main fragment of the Viṣṇu lintel lying on the ground *in situ* at Prasat Phanom Rung, photo by Emil Groote, Jan. 1930 © National Archives of Thailand

detached from its architectural setting, aestheticized as an autonomous sculpture **[Figure 3]**, and absorbed into the display circuits that shaped Western perceptions of Khmer art in the mid-20th century.

Surveys conducted in the region by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and the Fine Arts Department (FAD) documented and photographed the object and the site of Prasat Phanom Rung as early as January 1930; the photographs taken at that time were made by the German court photographer Emil Groote (Bautze 2015).[9] These early records confirm that the lintel was already broken, though in a less damaged condition **[Figure 4]**, and that it still lay *in situ* on the ground in front of the eastern entrance doorway of the central sanctuary as late as 1961 (FAD 2510: figs 10–11). These photographic records would later prove decisive in reconstructing the AIC lintel's origin; although, for several years, their evidentiary value remained largely unexploited.

By the early 1960s, Prasat Phanom Rung, like many Khmer sites in northeast Thailand, had become increasingly vulnerable to looting, clandestine excavation, and the systematic removal of select architectural elements, especially lintels.[10] The AIC

[9] Several albums titled *The Archaeological Exploration of the Ruins at Phimai, Phnom Rung, Muang Tam, Raengaeng, Kampaeng and Phra Viharn under the Leadership of H.R.H. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, Jan.–Feb. 1930* exist from this expedition to northeast Thailand in both public and private collections. The album that once belonged to George Cœdès has been acquired by the National Library of Australia in Canberra, Australia: http://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/1585578.

[10] For several lintels formerly in the collection of Avery Brundage (1887–1975), later donated to the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco and subsequently returned to Thailand, see Murphy 2025. For two lintels formerly owned by Douglas A.J. Latchford, also

piece appears to have been removed sometime between 1961, when it was last observed on site, and late 1965, entering the Bangkok art market at a moment when Khmer architectural sculpture was in growing demand among international collectors. During this period, Bangkok's art market operated in a liminal space between legal trade, opportunistic acquisition, and outright clandestine removal (Tanongsak et al. 2024; Revire 2025).

The lintel's dispersal unfolded in two parts. The right-hand fragment (from the viewer's perspective) depicts a standing Garuḍa, the celestial mount of Viṣṇu, holding two *nāga*s above a *kāla* (monster) face. A floral pendant extends beneath, flanked by two parrots, one on each side. This independent fragment was symmetrical to the opposite side of the larger lintel, as seen in the 1930 photograph taken at Prasat Phanom Rung **[Fig. 4]**. It was also photographed *in situ* by Groote in 1930 **[Figure 5]**, later seized by Thai authorities at the Capital Antique Store in Bangkok in August 1965 (FAD 2531: 74), and subsequently displayed at the National Museum, Bangkok. The larger, though incomplete central fragment (now missing the left-hand portion)[11] was sold on 14 January 1966 by an unnamed Thai gallery to Jerome Eisenberg of Royal-Athena Galleries, New York City.[12]



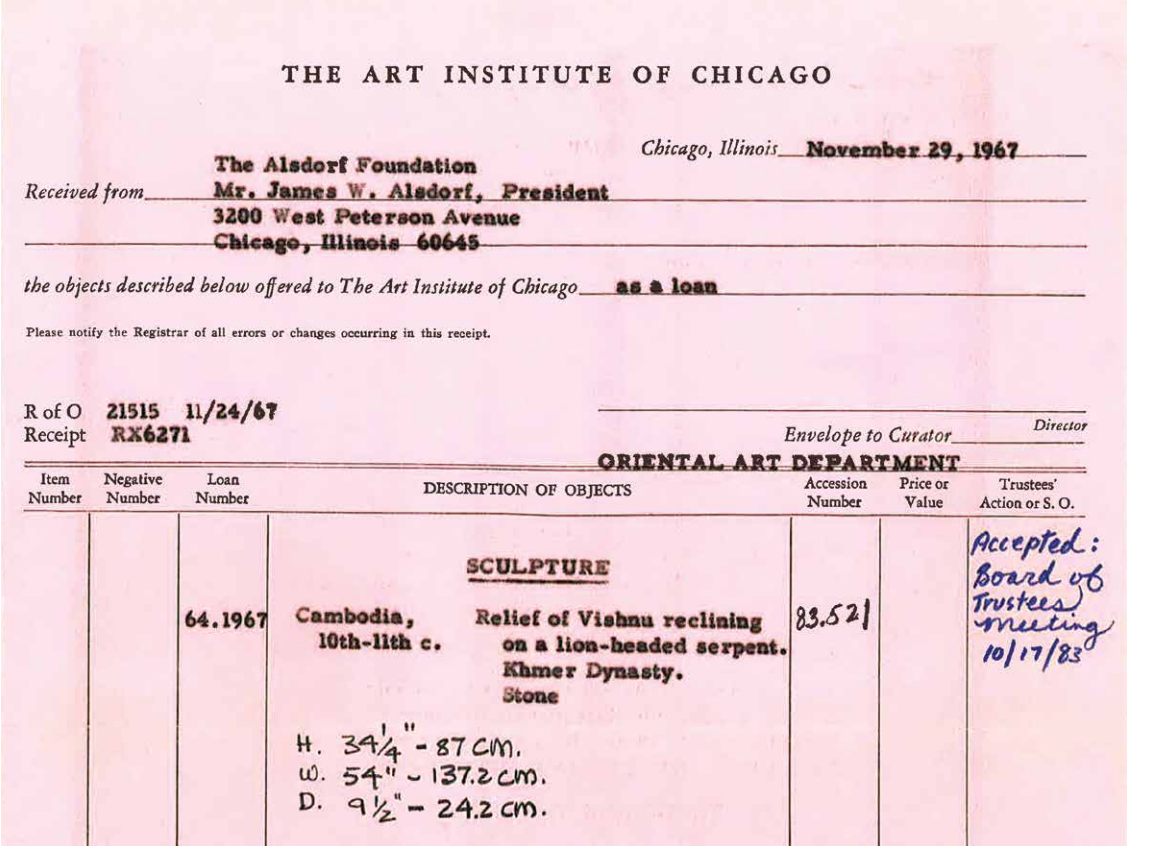
Figure 5: Right fragment of the Viṣṇu lintel lying on the ground *in situ* at Prasat Phanom Rung, photo by Emil Groote, Jan. 1930 © National Archives of Thailand

Eisenberg subsequently sold it on 18 November 1967 to the Alsdorf Foun-

known as Pakpong Kriangsak (ภัคพงษ์ เกรียงศักดิ์; 1931–2020), donated to the British Museum in 1971 and currently the subject of repatriation claims by the Thai government, see: https://circumambulating.soas.ac.uk/two-ancient-khmer-lintels-donated-by-latchford-in-1971/.

[11] This portion of the central lintel, visible in the 1930 photograph **[Fig. 4]**, is now missing and its current whereabouts remain unknown.

[12] As we learn from the AIC press release, dated 22 July 1988. Jerome Martin Eisenberg (1930–2022), PhD, was director of the Royal-Athena Galleries (est. 1958, NYC and London; closed in 2020), which specialized in ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern antiquities and sold or donated hundreds of works to many U.S. and European museums. A founding member of the International Association of Dealers in Ancient Art (IADAA, 1993), he served on its executive board until 2002. He authored numerous books and sale catalogues, including *Art of the Ancient World* (30 vols, from 1965 to 2019) and was the founder, publisher, and editor-in-chief of the archeological magazine *Minerva* (1990–2009). In 2012, he was awarded Italy's "Order of the Star" for his contributions to the return of Italian antiquities. Ironically, he was later involved in controversies concerning the sale of looted or illicitly acquired artifacts through his gallery in Manhattan (Tsirogiannis 2021).



THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

Chicago, Illinois November 29, 1967

Received from The Alsdorf Foundation
Mr. James W. Alsdorf, President
3200 West Peterson Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60645

the objects described below offered to The Art Institute of Chicago as a loan

Please notify the Registrar of all errors or changes occurring in this receipt.

R of O 21515 11/24/67
Receipt RX6271

Envelope to Curator _____ Director

ORIENTAL ART DEPARTMENT

Item Number	Negative Number	Loan Number	DESCRIPTION OF OBJECTS	Accession Number	Price or Value	Trustees' Action or S. O.
		64.1967	SCULPTURE Cambodia, 10th-11th c. Relief of Vishnu reclining on a lion-headed serpent. Khmer Dynasty. Stone H. 34¼" - 87 cm. W. 54" - 137.2 cm. D. 9½" - 24.2 cm.	83.521		Accepted: Board of Trustees meeting 10/17/83

FIGURE 6: Receipt of the Viṣṇu lintel on loan at the Art Institute of Chicago, 29 Nov. 1967 © AIC

dation,[13] represented by the prominent Chicago-based collector James Alsdorf,[14] who acquired the piece with the intention of eventually donating it to the AIC, following a long-term loan. From 29 November 1967 onward, the lintel was placed on loan to the AIC through the Alsdorf Foundation and remained on public view for many years before formal acquisition as a permanent gift in 1983 **[FIGURE 6]**.

Upon its arrival in the U.S., crucial information about the lintel's true origin and the circumstances of its illegal removal was either lost or deliberately obscured through wilful ignorance. As was common practice at the time, the object's museum documentation was minimal, privileging stylistic assessment and iconographic identification over precise findspot data or the circumstances of its removal. In any case, it would have been nearly impossible to identify the lintel in the U.S. using the published resources then available.[15] The first English publication to mention the lintel appeared several years later,

[13] Letter from Eisenberg to the Alsdorf Foundation, dated 25 April 1988.

[14] James W. Alsdorf (1913–1990) of Winnetka, Illinois, was a businessman, collector, and prominent arts patron. He served as a trustee of the Art Institute of Chicago from the 1970s through the 1980s, including as chairman of the Board of Trustees from 1975 to 1978, and was later listed as a life trustee. See: https://www.chicagotribune.com/1990/04/24/investor-art-collector-james-w-alsdorf-76/. Together with his wife, Marilynn B. Alsdorf (1925–2019), he amassed an important collection of South and Southeast Asian art over several decades, most of which was loaned or donated to the AIC in the 1990s and 2000s. For an overview of the Alsdorf collection, see Pal 1997.

[15] *Report of the Survey and Excavations*, Part 2 (FAD 2510), did not appear until 1967 and was unlikely to have been accessible outside Thailand for several years thereafter.

broadly identifying it as "Cambodia, 12th century" (Munsterberg 1972: pl. 54), negating consideration of its possible architectural origin in northeast Thailand or its relationship to a specific monument. Such imprecision was not exceptional; rather, it reflected a wider historiographic tendency to incorporate Khmer monuments located in present-day Thailand within an undifferentiated "Cambodian" or "Khmer" artistic sphere, thereby obscuring regional contexts of production and use.

Munsterberg's publication listed the lintel as belonging to the Alsdorf Collection, Winnetka, near Chicago, although it was in fact already on loan to the AIC. It was in this context that the lintel gradually came to the attention of scholars, most notably Hiram Woodward, then a visiting instructor at the University of Michigan, who promptly alerted U.S. authorities and Thai colleagues.[16] Around the same time, Mom Chao (Prince) Subhadradis Diskul (1923–2003), then Vice President of the Siam Society and Dean of the Faculty of Archeology at Silpakorn University in Bangkok, viewed the lintel on display at the AIC during a courtesy visit to Chicago, in connection with a U.S. touring exhibition on Thai art. This identification slowly launched a protracted process of negotiations involving the AIC, the Alsdorf Foundation, and the Thai Fine Arts Department.[17] However, long delays, shifting positions, stonewalling tactics, and incomplete disclosures meant that the case remained unresolved for many years.[18] Only in spring 1988—more than two decades after the lintel's arrival in Chicago, and after it had, in the meantime, already entered the AIC's permanent collection—did the situation start to dramatically change (Lee 1989; Subhadradis 1989: 9–11).

By this time, Thai heritage authorities were nearing completion of a nearly two-decade restoration of Prasat Phanom Rung, initiated in 1971 under UNESCO supervision (Pichard 1972, 1974), for which the lintel was rhetorically described in the news as the "last piece of a cultural jigsaw" (*Bangkok Post*, 28 Feb. 1988) needed to complete the renovation of the temple **[Figure 7]**.[19]

[16] In a letter dated 20 May 1972 to Mr Chin You-di of the National Museum, Bangkok, Woodward wrote: "What remains of the Vishnu part of the lintel is in a private collection near Chicago". His first correspondence with the AIC presenting evidence of the lintel's removal from the temple at Phanom Rung dates to Jan.–Feb. 1973 and was followed by a renewed letter of protest in Aug. 1982, after the lintel, still on loan at the time, had been put back on display: "The destruction at this temple [Prasat Phanom Rung] is of such a magnitude, so tragic, that no American museum should appear to condone such destruction by putting on display its fruits".

[17] The Thai government first contacted the AIC and Alsdorf Foundation in June 1976 officially seeking its return. See also "Priceless Artifact Traced to Chicago", *Bangkok Post*, 25 July 1977. For a summary of the "rediscovery" of the lintel and the various positions held by different stakeholders at the time, see Pisit 1989: 8–12.

[18] A letter dated 23 February 1988 from Eckhart, McSwain, Silliman & Sears, a Chicago-based law firm providing legal counsel to the AIC, sets out the "statute of limitations" in unambiguous terms: "In Illinois the limitation period is five years. While some court decisions suggest that the five-year period will not begin until the owner discovers, or should have discovered, the location of the stolen object, the Thai authorities had official knowledge of the whereabouts of the lintel since 1976, if not earlier—clearly beyond five years". A common joke at the time held that the lintel had already been in the U.S. for so long that it might as well have acquired "American nationality".

[19] This lintel, however, was far from being the only missing architectural element at Prasat Phanom



Figure 7: Missing central fragment of the Viṣṇu lintel *in situ* at Prasat Phanom Rung, eastern entrance of the main sanctuary, April 1988 © Thai FAD

Drawing on the same archival documentation and photographs, the FAD formally advanced a claim for repatriation, articulated most clearly in a White Paper that emphasized that an object removed from a listed monument without official permission was *ipso facto* a stolen object (Pisit 1989). Internal memos from this period reveal that the AIC, by then the *de facto* custodian of the lintel, was initially reluctant to release it, out of concern that its return might set a precedent.[20] Yet Thai archival and photographic evidence left no room for doubt: the lintel's provenience and its architectural fit within the Prasat Phanom Rung doorway were incontrovertible.[21]

Feeling domestic and international pressure, the museum eventually agreed in principle to return the lintel to its original site, but only as a bargaining chip, on the express condition that "the sculpture be replaced with a work of art of the same importance and artistic quality".[22] This was, in essence, a direct reference to Article 7(b)(ii) of the 1970 *Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property*, which provides for "fair compensation" to a good-faith (*bona fide*) holder or "innocent purchaser" to offset potential loss.[23] Such compensation might have taken the form of an exchange for another artwork—an impossible proposition for the Thai FAD, which was not permitted to transfer a national treasure. Several plaster casts were initially offered to the AIC but to no avail (*Bangkok Post*, 15 March 1988). Longterm loans of objects of comparable artistic

Rung, as already mentioned in the reference cited in note 5; see also *infra*.

[20] Letter from James Wood (AIC) to Michael Rabe (adjunct professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago), 4 October 1988: "As I mentioned to you when we talked last month, our primary concern is that just compensation be realized so that existing international law is not undercut and a dangerous precedent be created for all museums". See also "Art Institute Wants No Thai Precedent", *Chicago Tribune*, 8 August 1988.

[21] Letter from Michael Rabe (SAIC) to James Wood (AIC), 29 September 1988: "I can't think of a single sculpture in any Western collection whose [geographic] provenance can be so clearly traced to a registered national monument anywhere in South or Southeast Asia".

[22] Minutes of a meeting of the AIC Board of Trustees, held on 14 March 1988, with the notable presence of James Alsdorf. See also "US Institute Demands Gift for Return of Lintel", *Bangkok Post*, 1 March 1988.

[23] See: https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/convention-means-prohibiting-and-preventing-illicit-import-export-and-transfer-ownership-cultural; also "Art Institute Acted in Good Faith", *Chicago Tribune*, 13 September 1988. Of course, the UNESCO Convention does not technically apply in this case, as the lintel entered the U.S. prior to its adoption. Moreover, to date—perhaps because of provisions such as this one—Thailand has not yet signed the Convention (see also Pisit 1992: 9, Appendix B). Finally, the AIC was not technically a *bona fide* purchaser, but rather the recipient of a gift from the Alsdorf Foundation, which raises the ethical question of whether "fair compensation" would apply to an object it did not actually pay for.

merit and from approximately the same period—then still believed to be around the 10th century—were therefore discussed,[24] but again these negotiations ultimately collapsed. The ensuing controversy unfolded on both scholarly and public stages and was widely reported in the press for months,[25] with protests and public campaigns intensifying throughout the summer in both Thailand and the United States, including street demonstrations outside of the AIC (Lee 1989; Amolwan 2004). The case attracted substantial media and political attention[26] marked by strong sentiments and even inspired a protest song and album, *Tap Lang* (ทับหลัง; *The Lintel*), by the renowned Thai rock band Carabao.[27]

By fall 1988, the dispute had reached an apparent impasse[28] until the intervention of the Chicago-based Elizabeth F. Cheney Foundation, which offered to mediate and provide financial compensation to the AIC to facilitate a peaceful resolution.[29] Ultimately, the AIC consented to the return;[30] on 10 November 1988 the lintel was ceremonially received in Thailand (*Bangkok Post*, 11 Nov. 1988) and subsequently reinstalled at Prasat Phanom Rung in December with great pomp (*Bangkok Post*, 7 Dec. 1988). The event resonated far beyond the site itself, prompting public debate and inspiring popular cultural responses in Thailand. Thai media narratives often framed the lintel as a recovered "national treasure", a perception that has persisted—and, at times, been exaggerated—as a symbolic victory for Thailand asserting its cultural heritage over foreign institutions. The episode

[24] One such piece, considered for a long-term loan by the FAD to the AIC, was a large carved *sīmā* stone depicting the Buddha's return to Kapilavastu, originally from Mueang Fa Det Song Yang in Kalasin province and now in the Khon Kaen National Museum (inv. no. 225/2516; Piriya 2012: 338, fig. 2.347). See letter from James Wood, Director of the AIC, to Marut Bunnag, Thai Minister of Education, 3 May 1988: "A reciprocal loan agreement under which the lintel would be returned to Thailand as a permanent loan and a stone sculpture of interest to us would be exhibited here at the Art Institute under an equivalent long-term loan is a possible solution of interest to us" (Amolwan 2004: 18, fig. 7). Several other options for loan objects were considered, but the Thai ministry ultimately backed away from this proposal.

[25] See for example "The Lintel Scandal: A Case of Imperial Chicanery?", *Bangkok Post*, 23 May 1988; also "Temple Lintel Pits Thais Against an Art Museum", *The New York Times*, 17 July 1988.

[26] See letter of protest by an Illinois State Senator to the AIC, dated 13 June 1988, calling on the Art Institute to voluntarily, in good faith, and in the spirit of international goodwill, give up this "priceless Thai treasurer [*sic*] to the Thai people to whom it belongs" (Amolwan 2004: 55–56, Appendix 5). Similarly, a local alderman in Chicago introduced a resolution to the city council accusing the AIC of harbouring stolen property and demanding the unconditional return of the lintel (25 May 1988).

[27] For a song video clip and an English translation of the lyrics, see: https://carabaoinenglish.com/song-translations/tap-lang.

[28] Letter no. 704/38879 from General Mana Ratanakoses, then Thai Minister of Education, to Mr Marshall Field, President of the Board of Trustees at the AIC, 13 September 1988: "I have learned from our representatives, Prince Subhadradis Diskul and Mr. Pisit Charoenwongsa, that the negotiations of July 21, 1988, were unfortunately broken off".

[29] See "Art Institute of Chicago Returns Khmer Lintel to Thailand", *Museum International* 41(2), 1989: 113; also, Lee 1989. The Cheney Fund subsequently helped the purchase of a 10th-century Khmer sculpture of Goddess Durgā slaying the Buffalo Demon (Mahiśāsuramardinī), acc. no. 1996.32, bought from Shirley Day in London, but still of uncertain origin.

[30] See "Art Institute Agrees to Return Thai Sculpture", *Chicago Tribune*, 25 October 1988. In its press release dated 8 November 1988, the Art Institute ironically recorded the lintel as a donation to the Kingdom of Thailand, effectively casting the AIC as the benefactor of an object whose prior provenance and ownership had long been contested. As the Latin maxim states, "one cannot give what one does not have" (*nemo dat quod non habet*).

also catalysed a broader public recognition of Prasat Phanom Rung and heightened Thai awareness of Khmer heritage as an integral part of national identity (Keyes 1991).

Crucially, the 1988 repatriation established a methodological benchmark. The success of the claim for Thailand rested not on generalized assertions of cultural patrimony, but on the convergence of multiple forms of evidence: archival photographs, early inventories, architectural logic, and stylistic coherence. In retrospect, the lintel's case demonstrates that provenance—its movement through the art market—and provenience—its precise architectural origin—are inseparable analytical categories. Only when both were reconstructed in tandem did the object's history become legible.

Were a museum to place such an object on display in 2026 under comparable circumstances, the ethical implications would be far clearer than they were in the 1960s. Professional standards regarding due diligence, transparency, and the publication of collection histories have evolved considerably. Legal repercussions, however, depend on jurisdiction, the applicable statute of limitations, and the strength of documentary evidence linking the object to a protected monument. While moral expectations have crystallized, the enforceability of claims would still hinge on demonstrable proof and the willingness of institutions to act upon it.

As the following section shows, this same evidentiary framework proves decisive in identifying the Kṛṣṇa pilaster. For many years, however, the lintel's story was treated as a closed—and at times painful—chapter, often cited as a singular success in the early history of repatriation of Southeast Asian art (Tythacott & Ardiyansyah 2021: 18–19). In truth, the lintel was never an isolated fragment, but part of a larger architectural ensemble whose dispersal—and partial recovery—continues to reshape our understanding of Prasat Phanom Rung and the ethical stakes of Khmer art history in Thailand.

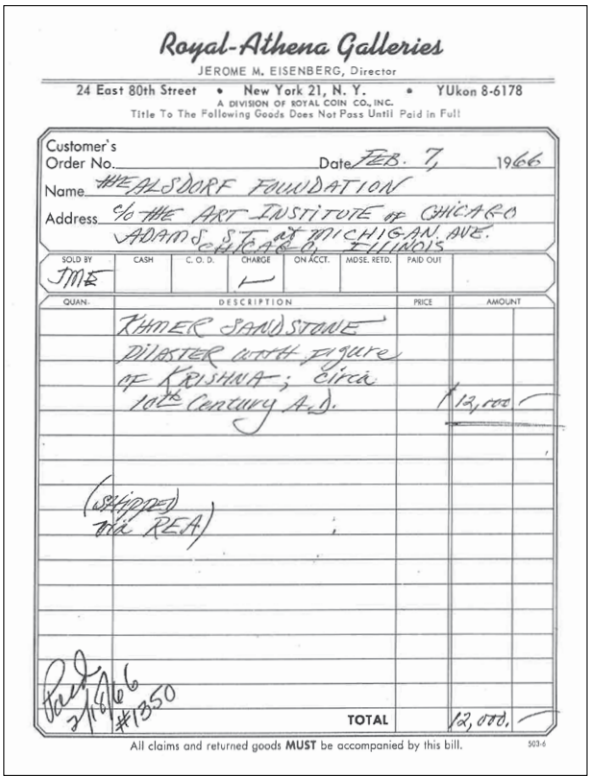
The Pilaster

The Kṛṣṇa pilaster, formerly held at the AIC under accession 2017.88 **[Figure 8]**, provides a paradigmatic case study of how sustained archival research, material analysis, and field verification can resolve long-standing uncertainties surrounding Khmer architectural fragments dispersed by the mid-20th-century art market. Unlike the celebrated Viṣṇu lintel repatriated in 1988—which became a public *cause célèbre* in Thailand—the Kṛṣṇa pilaster remained largely overlooked: long on loan, intermittently displayed, sparsely published, and effectively detached from its architectural, geographic, and historical contexts.

Archival documentation reveals a chain of ownership strikingly parallel to that of the Viṣṇu lintel. By early 1966, the pilaster was in the possession of Jerome M. Eisenberg, director of the Royal-Athena Galleries in New York. An invoice dated 7 February 1966 correctly describes the object as a "Khmer sandstone pilaster with figure of Krishna" but misdates it to the 10th century CE. The relief corresponds precisely to catalog no. 132 in Eisenberg's *The Art of the Ancient World*, Volume 1 (1965: 82–83), where it is illustrated both in full and in detail. The measurements given in



FIGURE 8: The Kṛṣṇa pilaster fragment from Prasat Phanom Rung, formerly on display at the Art Institute of Chicago, H.: 92.7 cm, W.: 30.4 cm, acc. no. 2017.88 © AIC



Royal-Athena Galleries

JEROME M. EISENBERG, Director

24 East 80th Street • New York 21, N. Y. • YUkon 8-6178

A DIVISION OF ROYAL COIN CO., INC.

Title To The Following Goods Does Not Pass Until Paid in Full

Customer's Order No. Date FEB. 7, 1966

Name THE ALSDORF FOUNDATION

Address % THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO ADAMS ST. at MICHIGAN AVE. CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

SOLD BY	CASH	C. O. D.	CHARGE	ON ACCT.	MDSE. RETD.	PAID OUT
JME			—			

QUAN.	DESCRIPTION	PRICE	AMOUNT
	KHMER SANDSTONE PILASTER WITH FIGURE OF KRISHNA; circa 10th Century A.D.		12,000 —
	(SHIPPED via REA)		
	TOTAL		12,000, —

All claims and returned goods MUST be accompanied by this bill. 503-6

Figure 9: Invoice for the Kṛṣṇa pilaster from the Royal-Athena Galleries, New York City, paid by James Alsdorf on 18 February 1966 © AIC

that catalog (36 x 11 1/2 inches or approx. 91 x 30 cm) closely match those recorded in the AIC database (92.7 x 30.4 cm). Although the Royal-Athena catalog bears a December 1965 imprint, circumstantial evidence suggests that it was slightly backdated. Eisenberg almost certainly acquired the pilaster in Bangkok on 14 January 1966,[31] at the same time as several other Thai and Khmer objects, including the Viṣṇu lintel from Prasat Phanom Rung (see *supra*). The pilaster was likely part of the same lot and shipment from Bangkok to New York, although no travel or export documentation survives from this pre-1970 UNESCO Convention era. In any case, such transactions would have directly contravened Thailand's Act on Ancient Monuments, Antiques, Objects of Art and National Museums (1961), which prohibits the removal or export of antiquities or objects of art without a license from the Director-General of the Fine Arts Department.[32]

On 18 February 1966, the pilaster was sold in New York City by Eisenberg to the Alsdorf Foundation, represented by James Alsdorf, for US$12,000 **[Figure 9]**, predating the sale of the lintel in November 1967 (see *supra*). Shipping instructions on the extant invoice specify delivery directly to the AIC, where the relief arrived via Railway Express Agency on 15 February, registered and officially entering the museum on long-term loan on 11 March 1966. Although acquired with the explicit intention of eventual donation, the object remained on loan for over half a century. The object was exhibited and published in Chicago for the first time in *Collecting Odyssey* (Pal 1997: 47, cat. 48) and was publicly promised then by Marilynn Alsdorf as a gift. The promised gift was formalized through successive agreements in 2002, 2008, and 2010, but the object was not officially accessioned into the permanent collection until 2017, following a lengthy period of internal curatorial research

[31] Letter from the AIC curator Madhuvanti Ghose to Jerome Eisenberg of the Royal-Athena Galleries, New York, 21 September 2016, requesting additional information regarding the provenance of the object. In a reply dated 20 October 2016, Suzanne George, office manager at the Royal-Athena Galleries, stated that "Dr. Eisenberg thought he might have purchased this object in Bangkok, Thailand". No further information could be obtained regarding the name of the Bangkok-based dealer.

[32] For the English text (Section 22), see: https://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/legislation/details/10933.

and subsequent approval by the Committee on Asian Art and the Board of Trustees.

For decades, and until recently, the object was assumed to form part of a doorjamb and was stylistically linked to the Baphuon temple at Angkor (Pal 1997: 283). Closer analysis, however, reveals that the fragment is the lower register of a decorative pilaster—a projecting wall element flanking an entrance or false doorway—rather than a section of a structural doorframe. Extensive comparative studies of Baphuon material and other contemporary Khmer temples in Cambodia yield no parallels to support the presumed connection with the AIC object. Moreover, the pilaster's vertical orientation contrasts sharply with the horizontal panels depicting Kṛṣṇa's life cycle at the Baphuon (Royère 2016: 153–155, figs 87–89). Given that the EFEO oversaw the Baphuon restoration from 1960 until the onset of Civil War and the Khmer Rouge period in 1972, it is highly improbable that the pilaster could have been removed clandestinely from Cambodia prior to that date without attracting notice.

In addition, the relief is carved in fine-grained pinkish-red sandstone, characteristic of many Khmer temples in northeast Thailand, including Prasat Phanom Rung (see *supra*), consistent with quarries in the Buriram region, rather than the gray or yellowish sandstone typical of Angkor proper (Uchida et al. 2010; Carò et al. 2014). This material evidence further supports the attribution of the Kṛṣṇa pilaster as well as the former lintel to northeast Thailand, rather than Cambodia.



Figure 10: East entrance to the main sanctuary of Prasat Phanom Rung under reconstruction in 1980, with the missing south pilaster base visible at lower left and the missing decorative lintel at top center © EFEO/Fonds Pichard, PICP00361

A photograph taken in 1980 during the UNESCO-supervised restoration of Prasat Phanom Rung shows the eastern entrance of the main sanctuary prior to the return of the Viṣṇu lintel, with a plain stone block inserted at the base of the southern pilaster as part of the anastylosis process **[Figure 10]**. The floral scrollwork and flying geese preserved on the upper register of the



Figure 11: Lower portion of the Kṛṣṇa pilaster fragment from the upper register, *in situ* at the eastern entrance of the main sanctuary, south side, Prasat Phanom Rung, Dec. 2023 © Nicolas Revire



Figure 12: Upper portion of the Kṛṣṇa pilaster fragment from the lower register, on display at the Art Institute of Chicago, April 2023 © Nicolas Revire

pilaster, still *in situ* **[Figure 11]**, match precisely the ornamentation of the AIC fragment, confirming that the latter represents the missing base element **[Figure 12]**. My on-site inspection conducted at Prasat Phanom Rung in December 2023 verified the fit of the pilaster in scale, exact measurements of heights (91 cm) and width (30 cm), profile and stone condition, leaving little doubt as to the museum fragment's original placement.

Conservation records at the AIC provide further circumstantial evidence for the pilaster's removal from a collapsed or ground-level context. Early museum condition reports and visual observations noted abrasion along the edges, traces of mud along the upper surface, and later—despite cleaning—residual soil and grass embedded in recesses on the right side. Together, these features strongly suggest that the fragment had been buried or left lying on the ground for some time prior to its removal, consistent with conditions documented at Prasat Phanom Rung in the early 1960s when many architectural elements remained collapsed and exposed to looting and subsequent smuggling.[33]

The exact circumstances of the pilaster's removal from the protected national monument remain undocumented. No paper trail or visual evidence has shown the pilaster *in situ*; it was probably found upside down among the heaps of fallen stones. It is likely that, as with the lintel, it was extracted from Prasat Phanom Rung between 1961 and 1965, a period marked by regional instability and expanding

[33] The plain stone *in situ* is about 29 cm thick, whereas the AIC pilaster measures only 18.3 cm; careful examination, however, reveals extensive chisel marks on the back, indicating deliberate removal of material—almost certainly to reduce weight for transport and sale, a common practice among illicit traffickers—leaving only the carved and most valuable surface intact.

U.S. military presence in northeast Thailand during the Lao Civil War and escalating Vietnam War.[34] The restoration program at Prasat Phanom Rung did not begin until 1971, leaving a decade-long window during which sculptures and architectural fragments were particularly vulnerable to clandestine removal.[35]

While no forensic photograph of the AIC pilaster *in situ* has ever been located, the cumulative stylistic, material, archival, and contextual evidence overwhelmingly supports the identification of the museum piece as originating from Prasat Phanom Rung[36] and was removed in violation of Thai cultural heritage law. Based entirely on the research presented here, its findings, and the formal recommendations that followed, the AIC leadership and Board of Trustees approved the deaccessioning of the object on 11 June 2024. Without having been asked or legally bound, the museum extended an offer of return to the Kingdom of Thailand, which was accepted in principle.[37] At the time of writing, however, the pilaster is still awaiting physical repatriation.

Lost Narratives

The re-identification of the Kṛṣṇa pilaster as originating from Prasat Phanom Rung makes it possible, for the first time, to reconstruct the iconographic logic of the eastern entrance of the antechamber (*maṇḍapa*) to the main sanctuary. Moreover, it invites a broader reconsideration of related architectural fragments now dispersed among various U.S. museum collections. When viewed in isolation, such reliefs have generally been treated as independent works of Khmer sculpture, broadly attributed to Angkor-period production and interpreted primarily through stylistic criteria.

Considered together, these now dispersed fragments reveal the remains of a carefully conceived and iconographically coherent sculptural program structured around protection, cosmic

[34] A radar station was established on Phnom Rung Hill, with road access cutting across the temple precinct. Military helicopters frequently flew in and out. According to village rumors, soldiers in foreign uniforms were observed causing damage to the temple (FAD 2531: 74). These allegations, however, were never substantiated and were explicitly refuted by U.S. authorities at the time of the lintel controversy. See "US denies involvement in removal of lintel", *Bangkok Post*, 9 February 1988.

[35] Recent research indicates that in 1964–1966 Douglas Latchford resided for periods near Prasat Plai Bat Hill 2, close to Prakhon Chai, also in Buriram province (Tanongsak et al. 2024; Revire 2025), and would almost certainly have visited Prasat Phanom Rung on multiple occasions during this time. Although no evidence of his direct involvement in the events discussed here exists, it is possible to surmise that he may have drawn attention to the site's potential for illicit removal of antiquities. A related consideration is the possibility of malfeasance within the Nakhon Ratchasima branch of the Thai FAD: an official capable of suppressing information in the Prakhon Chai case might likewise have failed to report widespread looting at Prasat Phanom Rung. See also Brice Vincent et al., this Special Edition, for Latchford and his Thai accomplice Bunloet's involvement in the smuggling of a bronze male deity from Ban Yang Pong Sadao in the nearby Lahan Sai district, Buriram province.

[36] Hiram Woodward already noted in a letter dated 27 February 1979 to the Peabody Museum in Cambridge, Massachusetts, that the Art Institute of Chicago held two pilasters—though in fact only one—that "look as if they came from Phnom Rung too but I have no photographs of proof".

[37] See the AIC press release: https://www.artic.edu/press/press-releases/356/art-institute-of-chicago-returns-pilaster-to-phanom-rung-temple-in-thailand, and "US to return 900-year-old ancient artefact to Thailand", *The Nation*: https://www.nationthailand.com/news/general/40038936 (18 June 2024).

order, and divine intervention, once articulating multiple entrances of the main sanctuary at Prasat Phanom Rung. This program was not merely decorative but functioned as a visual articulation of key moments in Hindu cosmology and myth, guiding ritual movement and devotional perception through successive narrative thresholds.

Positioned above the eastern *maṇḍapa* doorway, the lintel depicts a four-armed Viṣṇu (or Nārāyaṇa) reclining on the multi-headed serpent Ananta (or Śeṣa), itself resting on a *makara* (dragon) and floating upon the primordial waters between cycles of creation. This pose, known in Sanskrit as *anantāśayana* and in Thai as *phra narai bantomsin* (พระนารายณ์บรรทมสินธุ์), evokes the cosmic moment immediately preceding the renewal of the universe. From Viṣṇu's navel emerges a blooming lotus supporting the four-faced Brahmā, the god of creation, while his consort Lakṣmī, barely visible, massages his legs **[Figs 3–4]**. This is the principal lintel at Prasat Phanom Rung, evoking the moment when from this state of yogic sleep, Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa—"the abode of all beings"—awakens and initiates a new cosmic era. According to Purāṇic tradition, this awakening inaugurates the renewed cycle of existence within the Third Age (*dvāparayuga*), a period when virtue declines, marked by renewed struggle between divine and demonic forces. Within this cosmological framework the descent of Kṛṣṇa as an avatar acquires its full theological significance. The lintel shares key features with the Angkor Wat style and may be dated to the early 12th century (Moore 1996; Smitthi & Moore 2001: 288–290).

Originally, directly below and to the south of the lintel, the vertical pilaster base depicts Lord Kṛṣṇa lifting Mount Govardhana, a central episode in Vaiṣṇava cosmology symbolizing divine protection and cosmic regulation commonly found in Khmer art (Narayanan 2015; Zéphir 2021). Kṛṣṇa stands in an elegant pose, with his right leg slightly bent behind the straight left leg, conveying both poise and ease as he lifts the mountain with his right hand while bracing his left against his hip. He is adorned with elaborate jewelry, a finely pleated garment, and a distinctive hairstyle of three upright braids. Four cowherds are arranged to his lower right, while four seated cows are stacked beneath the mountain, emphasizing the pastoral setting **[Fig. 8]**. The elaborate floral scrollwork filling the mountain is especially noteworthy, incorporating birds and *haṁsa*s (mythical geese), a rare motif in Khmer art, which also appears elsewhere in the towers and walls at Prasat Phanom Rung (Hammond 1988: 62, 65, fig. 39). Together, the figure, attendant animals, and decorative elements demonstrate both the sophistication of the temple's iconographic program and the local adaptation of Angkor Wat–style in northeast Thailand.

Here, the god shelters devotees and animals from the torrential forces of Indra, echoing accounts in the *Harivaṃśa*, *Viṣṇupurāṇa*, and especially the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*. The episode asserts Kṛṣṇa's identity as the human manifestation of Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa, bringing the protective power of the cosmos to the terrestrial world and shielding it from periodic diluvian chaos (Austin 2015). The relief also resonates with the



Figure 13: Dancing Śiva pediment and Viṣṇu lintel *in situ* at Prasat Phanom Rung, eastern entrance, main sanctuary, Dec. 2024 © Nicolas Revire

narrative of Kṛṣṇa's defeat of the water serpent Kāliya, often represented in Khmer art, including at the temple on the upper pediment in the northern side of the *maṇḍapa* (Piriya 2012: 230, fig. 2.173). Both episodes celebrate divine victories that restore order and establish an *axis mundi*, symbolically stabilizing the earthly and cosmic realms (Hawley 1979). In this way, the Kṛṣṇa Govardhana scene reinforces the centrality of Viṣṇu and his avatar within the ritual and devotional experience of the sanctuary.

Importantly, this Vaiṣṇava program at Prasat Phanom Rung functioned in close dialogue with the Śaiva imagery crowning the front pediment of the eastern *maṇḍapa* entrance, where, immediately above the reclining Viṣṇu lintel, the colossal ten-armed dancing Śiva presides over cosmic dissolution and regeneration **[Figure 13]**. The juxtaposition of Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava elements suggests that the sculptural program of Prasat Phanom Rung was not narrowly sectarian. Rather, it articulated complementary dimensions of Hindu cosmology: Śiva governs destruction and transformation, while Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa ensures preservation, continuity, and protection. Within this integrated theological system, the Kṛṣṇa pilaster is not merely an isolated devotional image but a structurally and conceptually indispensable component of a dynamic, multideity iconographic ensemble concerned with regulating cosmic cycles and human destiny.

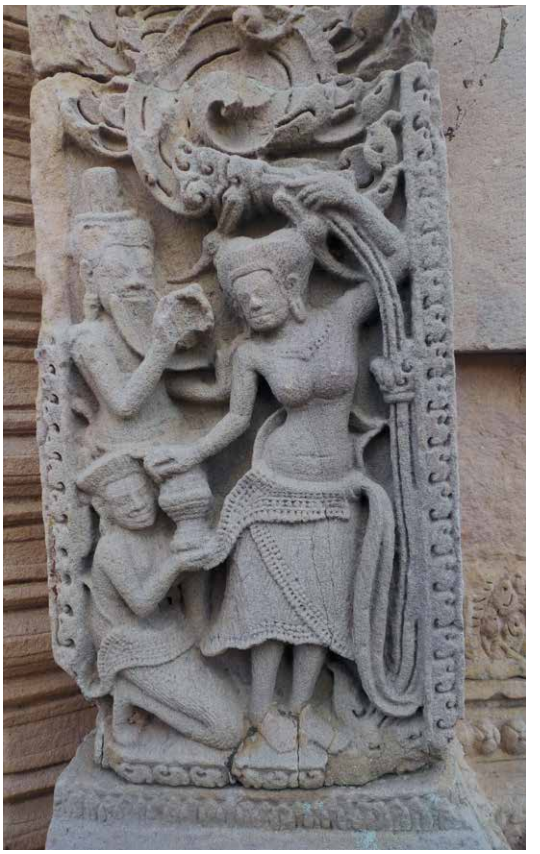


Figure 14: North pilaster base possibly depicting the transfer of the embryo of Balarāma or Kṛṣṇa at Prasat Phanom Rung, eastern entrance of the main sanctuary, Dec. 2023 © Nicolas Revire

This sequence also resonates with the broader narrative of Kṛṣṇa's descent and birth (Couture 2009). Following Viṣṇu's awakening from cosmic sleep, the demon Kalanemi was reborn as Kaṁsa, who illegitimately seized the throne of Mathurā and endangered cosmic stability. In response, Viṣṇu resolved to descend into the world as Kṛṣṇa, incarnating in the womb of Devakī, wife of Vasudeva and half-sister of Kaṁsa. Forewarned by prophecy that Devakī's eighth son would bring about his death, Kaṁsa systematically murdered her first six children. To circumvent this threat, Viṣṇu is said to have implanted two of his hairs—one black and one white—into Devakī's womb, which were destined to become Balarāma (also known as Saṁkarṣaṇa) and Kṛṣṇa. Through the agency of Māyā, or Yogamāyā—"illusion" personified as the goddess Mahāmāyā—these embryos were miraculously transferred to the wombs of two separate surrogates: Rohiṇī, another wife of Vasudeva, and Yaśodā, the wife of Nanda the cowherd, thereby escaping Kaṁsa's tyranny. According to the *Viṣṇupurāṇa*, Rohiṇī subsequently gave birth to Balarāma and Yaśodā to Kṛṣṇa, whose destiny was to restore cosmic and moral order (trans. Wilson 1840: 440).

This logic is further reinforced by the symmetrical north pilaster base of the same eastern entrance, still preserved at Prasat Phanom Rung **[Figure 14]**.[38] Long misunderstood in early scholarship as a Buddhist scene—specifically the Birth of the Buddha (e.g., Boeles 1960: figs 4–5)—this relief is more plausibly interpreted within the Vaiṣṇava narrative framework of the temple. The standing female figure grasping a branch belongs to a well-established repertoire of auspicious and fertility attendants in Hindu temple art, variously identified as *śālabhañjikā*, *surasundarī*, or *dalamālikā* figures (Piriya 2012: 230). Such representations are closely associated with notions of fecundity, transition, and divine mediation. Within the specific narrative cycle unfolding at Prasat Phanom Rung, the scene may

[38] This fragment was first documented *in situ* (Seidenfaden 1932: 99–100), lying on the ground within the ruined temple. It was later removed by Thai authorities and displayed at the National Museum, Bangkok, in the 1950s (Boeles 1960: fig. 4), before being reinstalled in the temple architecture, where it can be seen today.

represent Mahāmāyā in the act of transferring the embryo of Balarāma or Kṛṣṇa from Devakī to Rohiṇī or Yaśodā. The female figure adopts the *śālabhañjikā* posture with her left arm supporting herself on a branch—a pose traditionally associated with miraculous births—while her right hand appears to hold a small vessel, possibly symbolizing the transport of the divine embryo.[39] This interpretation gains further resonance from Buddhist tradition, in which Māyā or Mahāmāyā, names of the Buddha's mother, reflecting shared conceptions of creative potency and sacred gestation across religious traditions.

If correct, this reading would mark an exceptionally rare episode in Khmer art. Its presence at the site would therefore attest to an unusually sophisticated engagement with Purāṇic narrative.[40] Moreover, in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, both Balarāma and Kṛṣṇa are regarded as joint incarnations of Viṣṇu, with Balarāma in some traditions identified as an avatar of Śeṣa, the cosmic serpent upon whom Viṣṇu rests. This association creates an additional layer of symbolic coherence linking the reclining Viṣṇu lintel, the birth cycle, and the Kṛṣṇa Govardhana episode in a tightly integrated visual theology.

Taken together, these reliefs indicate that the eastern entrance articulated a continuous narrative sequence encompassing cosmic creation, divine descent, miraculous birth, and salvific action. The significance of this identification becomes even clearer when considered alongside other scenes at the site depicting miraculous episodes from the life of Kṛṣṇa, including the lifting of Mount Govardhana, shown again high on the eastern pediment of the main sanctuary at the summit of the central tower (Smitthi & Moore 2001: 302). The broader iconographic program centered on Kṛṣṇa at the temple thus begins to unfold in a more coherent and intelligible manner.

Two additional pilaster fragments now held in California collections appear to belong to this same program and likewise depict episodes associated with Kṛṣṇa's celestial exploits: one in the Norton Simon Museum (NSM), Pasadena, and another in the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco (AAMSF). Both share the same rectangular-sectioned format, scale, sandstone type, and ornamental vocabulary as the AIC pilaster, including deeply carved figural bases, luxuriant foliage, parrots, squirrels, and animated vegetal motifs. During the 11th century, large figural forms—whether human or animal—were introduced at the bases of such pilasters, as seen here, and became a common feature in Khmer temples of northeast Thailand in the 12th century (e.g., Piriya 2012: 220, figs 2.158–2.159; 317, fig. 2.303). Parrots, though relatively rare in Khmer art, occur frequently at Prasat Phanom Rung (Smitthi & Moore 1992: 290).

According to Pratapaditya Pal (2004: 194, cat. 152), the scene represented on the NSM fragment depicts Kṛṣṇa cutting down or uprooting the Pārijāta tree in

[39] Comparable representations of embryo transfer are exceedingly scarce in South Asian visual culture and are otherwise known primarily from later Indian or Jain manuscript painting, such as the *Kalpasūtra* folio in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (acc. no. 55.121.38.3).

[40] The more common story in the *Purāṇa*s and in artistic renderings, including in Khmer art, is that of the birth of Kṛṣṇa to Devakī and the physical transfer of the infants by Vasudeva between Devakī and Yaśodā, who then raises Kṛṣṇa (Couture 2009).

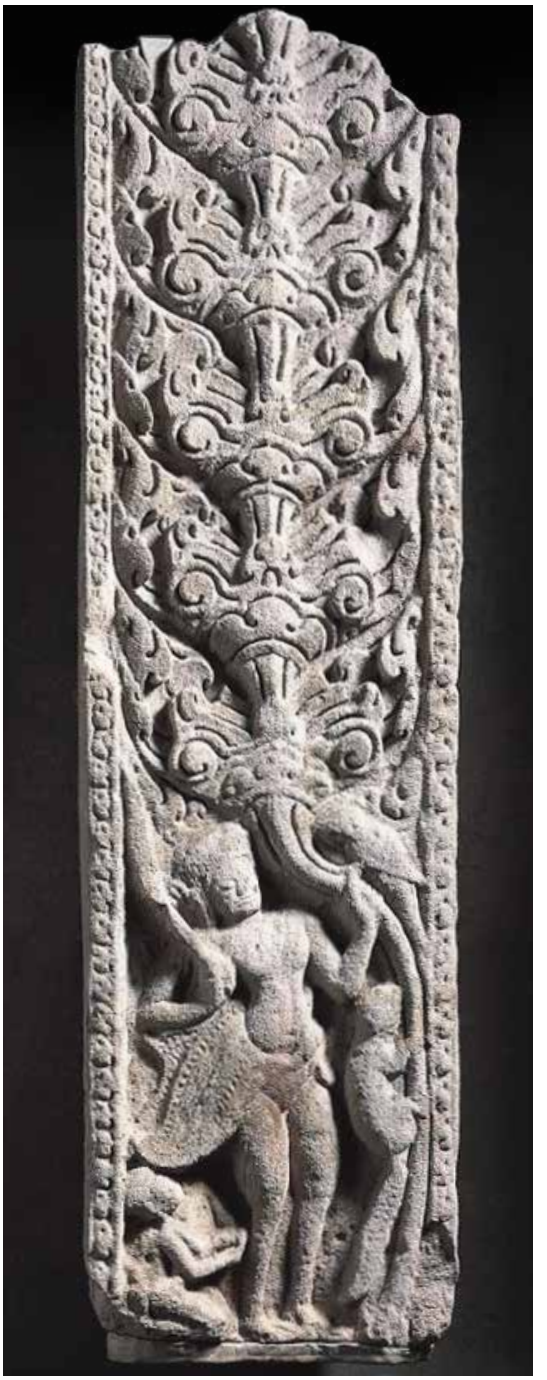


Figure 15: East pilaster base possibly depicting Kṛṣṇa uprooting the Pārijāta tree at Prasat Phanom Rung, northern entrance of the main sanctuary; Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena, H.: 97.8 cm, W.: 27.6 cm, acc. no. F.1975.11.5.S © NSM

Indra's celestial garden at the insistence of Rukmiṇī, his spouse **[Figure 15]**. In the narrative, Kṛṣṇa subsequently returns to earth and plants the tree in his city of Dvārakā, where it assumes a distinctly auspicious presence within the women's quarters. The tree is said to have originated during the churning of the Ocean of Milk (e.g., *Viṣṇupurāṇa* 1.9.93) and later became a favored motif in Vaiṣṇava contexts (Austin 2020). While Pal attributed the pilaster to a temple in Cambodia, he nevertheless noted its striking resemblance to the AAMSF piece and conceded that it "may have belonged to the same monument" (Ibid.).[41] Archival photographs and FAD documentation (2510: fig. 8), however, remove any doubt: they conclusively demonstrate that the AAMSF fragment originated from Prasat Phanom Rung and was removed from the central sanctuary in the early 1960s, during the same period as the Viṣṇu lintel and the Kṛṣṇa pilaster formerly at the AIC.[42] The Pasadena and San Francisco pilasters also came from Prasat Phanom Rung but, by contrast, framed a different doorway of the central sanctuary's *maṇḍapa*, immediately to the north of the eastern entrance.

The AAMSF pilaster fragment is slightly smaller and more damaged

[41] The NSM object was acquired in 1975 from C.T. Loo Paris (Campbell 2010: 380, cat. 1180).

[42] See also letter from Hiram Woodward to René-Yvon Lefebvre d'Argencé, curator at the AAMSF, dated 11 September 1980, stating: "You have undoubtedly learned by now that a Khmer pilaster illustrated in that booklet [devoted to new acquisitions at the AAMSF] came from the temple of Phanom Rung, where it was photographed in 1960". See also Suriyawut 2540: 228. The piece was acquired in 1968 from Robert Rousset (1901–1981), Compagnie de la Chine et des Indes, Paris.

than both the previous NSN example and the AIC piece. It nevertheless displays the same stylized narrow borders and luxuriant foliage pattern. As in the Pasadena example, two deeply carved human figures occupy the base. The taller diademed and standing female figure holds the thick stalk of a stylized flower in her left hand, through which a lively squirrel runs, in pursuit of a parrot **[Figure 16]**. The scene may likewise represent the Pārijāta tree narrative, continuing (or preceding) the relief depicted on the NSM pilaster, with which it formed a pendant on the opposite side of the doorway. The NSM fragment stood on the left and the AAMSF example on the right, from the viewer's perspective.[43]

In conjunction with the Kṛṣṇa Govardhana pilaster, these works further demonstrate that narrative pilaster bases formed part of a coordinated Vaiṣṇava sculptural program framing the sanctuary entrances at Prasat Phanom Rung. Their dispersal across different collections obscured this architectural and iconographic coherence for decades, reinforcing the tendency to interpret each fragment as an autonomous artwork rather than as part of a unified sacred environment.

Finally, positioned above the same temple doorway on the northern side, a large sandstone lintel—formerly in



Figure 16: West pilaster base possibly related to the Pārijāta tree episode at Prasat Phanom Rung, northern entrance of the main sanctuary; Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, H.: 73.7 cm, W.: 29.2 cm, acc. no. B68S16 © AAMSF

[43] First-hand examination of the two pilaster fragments in their respective museum collections revealed complementary traces of carved decoration preserved along their lower lateral edges (on the lower left side of the NSM fragment and the lower right side of the AAMSF fragment, respectively). When compared with the surviving architectural ensemble at Prasat Phanom Rung, these traces confirm their original placement within the monument, leaving no plausible alternative reconstruction.



Figure 17: Kumbhakarṇa lintel, likely from Prasat Phanom Rung, northern entrance of the main sanctuary; Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, H.: 88.9 cm, W.: 188 cm, acc. no. B66S7 © AAMSF

the Avery Brundage collection and now long donated to the AAMSF—would have occupied a place of pride, complementing the Vaiṣṇava iconographic program outlined above. It depicts the giant Kumbhakarṇa battling the monkey armies from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The scene represents a later episode in the story: Sītā, the beloved wife of Rāma, has been abducted by Rāvaṇa, the demon king of Laṅkā. Rāma and his allies, the monkeys, attack Laṅkā to rescue her. During the ensuing battle, Rāvaṇa's brother Kumbhakarṇa—the largest central figure on the relief[44]—fights the monkey warriors **[Figure 17]**. Despite their numbers, the monkeys cannot overcome Kumbhakarṇa who wounds and devours hundreds of them. The carnage continues unresolved until Rāma himself (possibly the figure with the broken head to the left) joins the fray.

Comparable *Rāmāyaṇa* scenes involving Kumbhakarṇa appear frequently in Khmer temples across Thailand and Cambodia, often marking secondary or lateral entrances (Giteau 1995). The AAMSF lintel is datable on stylistic grounds to the early 12th century and is likewise carved in pink sandstone consistent with temples in northeast Thailand. When the Kumbhakarṇa lintel is considered alongside the two pilasters now in San Francisco and Pasadena, a coherent sculptural ensemble emerges. Direct observations made at Prasat Phanom Rung firmly establish the placement of the two pilasters and strongly support the association of the

[44] The prior owner had apparently entirely restored the face and crown of the central figure before the museum's founding donor Avery Brundage bought the lintel (Lee 1969: 109, cat. 40). The piece also came from Rousset, Paris, in 1966.



FIGURE 18: Prasat Phanom Rung, northern entrance of the antechamber, main sanctuary, with missing lintel and pilaster bases, Dec. 2024 © Nicolas Revire

Kumbhakarṇa lintel with this architectural setting. The two pilasters would have flanked the entrance, while the lintel crowned the doorway above, where corresponding gaps remain visible **[FIGURE 18]**. Measurements taken on site and compared with those of the lintel and the two pilaster fragments further corroborate this arrangement. The museum pieces are all slightly smaller than the corresponding empty spaces preserved *in situ*. Rather than undermining the proposed reconstruction, however, this discrepancy is entirely consistent with the loss of adjoining structural or decorative stonework and demonstrates that the surviving elements could readily have been accommodated within their original architectural setting. The representation of Kumbhakarṇa's death at the hands of the monkey troops on the pediment immediately above the same doorway (Suriyawut 2540: 291; Piriya 2012: 230,

fig. 2.173) further reinforces the deliberate narrative relationship among these sculptural elements.

This configuration closely parallels the documented arrangement of other entrances at the site, where pilasters and lintels worked together as integrated sculptural programs to define ritual thresholds. The thematic distribution of imagery further supports this interpretation. Whereas the eastern entrance foregrounded Hindu cosmology and divine protection through Viṣṇu and Kṛṣṇa narratives, the northern entrance appears to have combined epic conflict with complementary Vaiṣṇava themes. The Kumbhakarṇa lintel introduces a dramatic episode from the *Rāmāyaṇa* centered on crisis and violence, while the flanking pilaster fragments depict miraculous episodes from the story of Kṛṣṇa (*Kṛṣṇacarita*). Together, these elements reveal a coherent iconographic program in which martial imagery in the upper register was complemented by narratives of divine protection and the restoration of cosmic order immediately below.

Removed from their architectural context, all these fragments have long been interpreted as isolated reliefs. Reassembled conceptually, they reveal a carefully planned sculptural program executed by regional workshops and integrated into a single monument. Their shared material features, stylistic affinities, and complementary narrative roles argue against coincidental similarity and instead point to the partial dismantling of a complex architectural and iconographic system at Prasat Phanom Rung, now dispersed across distant institutions. Reconstructing these ensembles is therefore not merely an exercise in connoisseurship, but a necessary step toward recovering the monument's original meaning, function, and integrity.[45]

Beyond Two Stones

The reconstruction of the Prasat Phanom Rung sculptural program goes far beyond the study of individual objects. It challenges the long-standing habit of subsuming monuments in northeast Thailand under a generalized "Angkorian" or "Cambodian" label. Regional workshops in northeast Thailand were not mere imitators of Angkor Wat–style models: they adapted iconography, materials, and compositional strategies to local devotional priorities, architectural constraints, and the geological resources of the Khorat Plateau. Misattributing these works to Angkor or Cambodia obscures this creative agency and distorts our understanding of regional Khmer artistic production across centuries and beyond the modern borders of Cambodia.

The history of the above fragments also expose how vulnerable such monu-

[45] In recent years, significant progress has been made by Thai authorities in tracking down looted artifacts from Khmer archeological sites in Thailand that are now in the U.S. For example, see *Matichon Online*, ไทยจ่อได้คืนโบราณวัตถุ 119 รายการ [Thailand is Poised to Receive 119 Ancient Artifacts Back], 8 Feb. 2018: https://www.matichon.co.th/region/news_833938. In addition to the above lintel and pilasters presently in California collections, the origins of another lintel (acc. no. B72S3) and a pilaster base (acc. no. B68S15) at the AAMSF are also in question; they almost certainly came from northeast Thailand. Finally, a free-standing sandstone horse—the vehicle of Vāyu—also at the AAMSF (acc. no. B68S10) is likewise attributed to Prasat Phanom Rung (Suriyawut 2540: 212). As of Sept. 2026, the AAMSF has initiated the process of deaccessioning its pilaster and horse fragment. The related lintel remains under study by the museum (Natasha Reichle, Pers. Comm.).

ments were during the mid-20th century. The pilasters and lintels were removed at a time when political instability, fallen architectural elements, and unprotected sites created opportunities for spoliation. The presence of these and other fragments in U.S. museum collections—generally acquired through well-established dealers—reveals how aesthetic judgment generally outweighed documentary rigor, as the prestige of acquiring exceptional and "unique" objects frequently took precedence, a pattern that as complicated the historiography of Khmer art for decades.

From the Kṛṣṇa pilaster to the Viṣṇu lintel formerly in Chicago and related fragments in California, these works emerge not as isolated trophies, but as integral components of a living cultural and architectural landscape. The contrast between the 1988 repatriation of the Viṣṇu lintel and the 2024 deaccessioning of the Kṛṣṇa pilaster at the AIC is striking. Whereas the former arose from an external claim and public controversy, the latter emerged from proactive, research-driven internal scholarship, combining meticulous archival investigation, stylistic reassessment, material analysis, and field verification. Collectively, these cases illustrate a profound shift that is truly needed in international museum practice: from reactive compliance to research-led ethical stewardship.

For provenance research in Khmer art, the lessons are clear: understanding what an object is depends fundamentally on understanding where it comes from—materially, geographically, and ritually. Fragments long considered untraceable can, through interdisciplinary methods, sometimes be connected to their original monuments. On-site verification is often indispensable in regions where sandstone types, carving techniques, and iconographic programs can vary subtly yet meaningfully. Any premature decisions on restitution or repatriation without thorough physical verification carries real risks, especially in a field complicated by longstanding misattributions and forgeries.[46]

Taken together, the stories of these fragments from Prasat Phanom Rung point toward a constructive path for the study and stewardship of Khmer art. Reuniting dispersed elements—conceptually and, where possible, physically—demonstrates that restitution and repatriation can restore not only objects, but also historical knowledge, architectural coherence, and cultural meaning , while helping to rectify past injustices. Therefore, this is not simply the story of two stones, but of how monuments become fragmented, how assumptions harden into scholarly convention, and how those conventions are revised through sustained, evidence-based research.

While much work remains and other Khmer fragments in Western and Japanese collections await systematic study, this case offers a methodological and ethical model. Through transparency, collaboration, and rigorous scholarship, dispersed Khmer architectural sculptures can be recontextualized and, where appropriate, returned to their rightful homes, affirming their place within the shared and enduring cultural heritage of mainland Southeast Asia.

[46] The Viṣṇu lintel, for instance, became the subject of multiple modern replicas that circulated on the art market since the 1960s, including one formerly in the Avery Brundage collection (Lefebvre d'Argencé 1969: cat. 50).

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