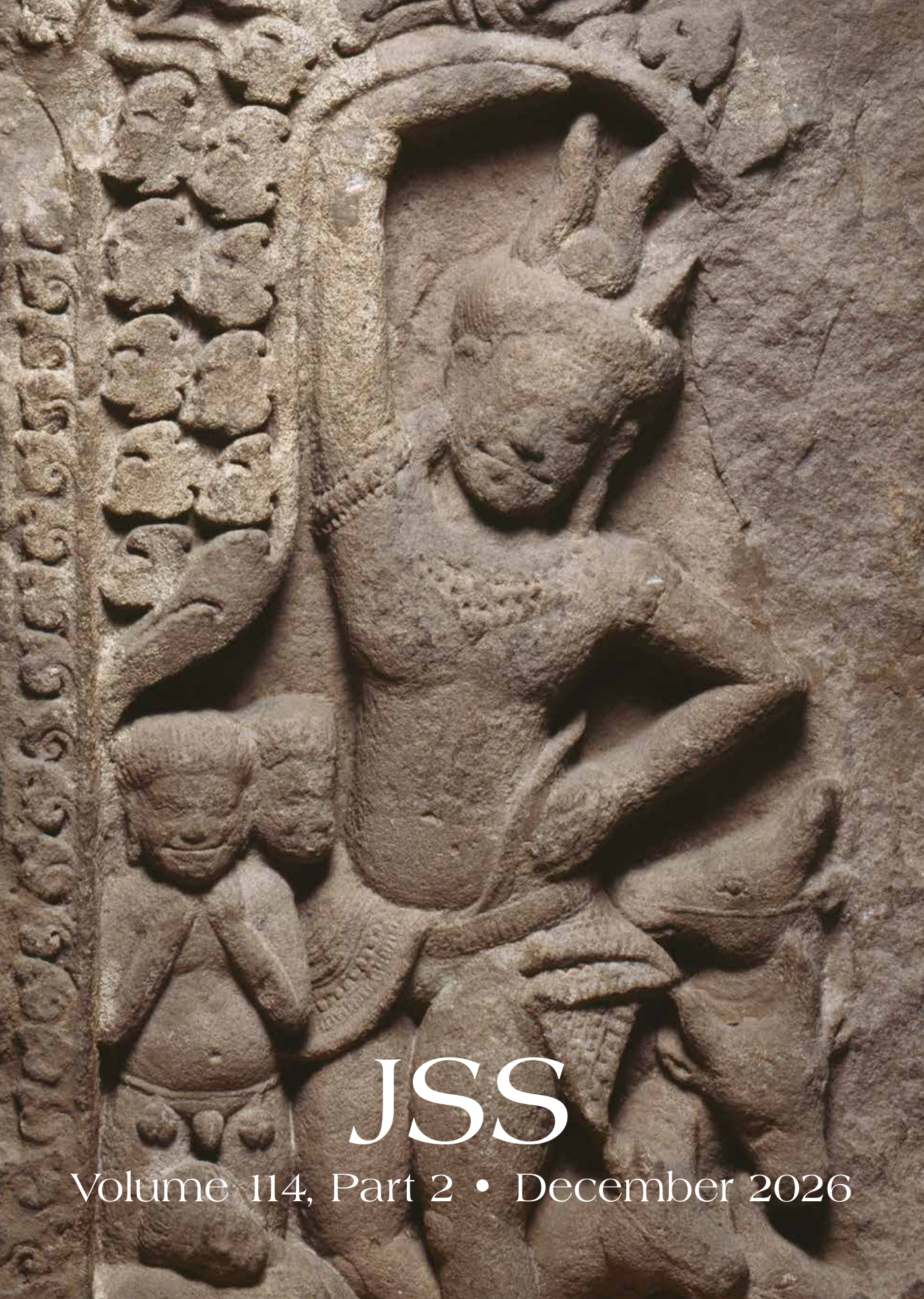


JSS

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December 2026



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COVER: 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

*For a discussion of this object, see Nicolas Revire's contribution in this Special Edition

Editorial

It is a particular pleasure to introduce this issue of the *Journal of the Siam Society*, which brings together an unusually broad range of scholarship, from manuscripts and archeology to cultural heritage, translation, printing history, and contemporary art. The issue begins with an *Obituary* for former member of The Siam Society Jacques Lemoine (1936–2026), written by Bernard Formoso. At the heart of the issue is a *Special Edition* devoted to "Cultural Heritage, Provenance, and Repatriation", guest edited by Melody Rod-Ari, to whom we are also grateful for her generous support, which has enabled us to publish the full issue in color. Such financial assistance is invaluable at a time of rising publishing costs and a welcome reminder of the generosity on which the continued quality and accessibility of the journal depend.

Melody Rod-Ari's introduction, "Shared Stewardship", provides an appropriate framework for considering the issues explored in this *Special Edition*. Rather than treating repatriation simply as the conclusion of a dispute over ownership, the articles explore possibilities for collaboration, shared research, and continuing relationships between institutions and the countries and communities whose heritage they hold. Joyce C. White et al. first examine archeological damage resulting from illicit excavation of Prehistoric sites in Thailand; Alison Kyra Carter & Chhay Visoth then draw attention to the often-overlooked histories and significance of small, utilitarian objects recently returned to Cambodia; Beth Edelstein & Alyssa Morasco discuss institutional collaboration between the Cleveland Museum of Art and the National Museum of Cambodia; my own contribution examines the dispersal and tentative reunification of Khmer architectural fragments from Prasat Phanom Rung in northeast Thailand; Brice Vincent et al. reassess the history of the Angkorian bronze known as the so-called Golden Boy, found in Buriram; while Bronwyn Campbell traces the collaborative research and repatriation of three Cham bronzes recovered in Cambodia. Together, these studies highlight the importance of provenance and provenience research and the complexities of interpreting archeological findspots located along modern national borders. Rebecca S. Hall, finally, considers the Cambodian diaspora in the United States and the ethics of return through the art of Phung Huynh. These contributions demonstrate how much can be learned when provenance is treated not simply as an administrative or legal exercise, but as a field of historical and ethical inquiry.

The other contributions outside this *Special Edition* continue the wide geographical and disciplinary scope of JSS. Xu Siwen et al. examine, in *Archeology in Progress*, changing glass-exchange networks at Phromthin Tai, Lopburi, within the Mekong Interaction Sphere during the Late Iron Age and Early Historic periods, while Trent Walker, in *Manuscript Study*, introduces and indexes the Peter Koret Collection of Tai Narrative Manuscripts kept at the University of California, Berkeley, supplemented by online appendices. The two concluding *Research Notes*

turn to Siamese intellectual and publishing history, with Doug Liao revisiting Samuel Milton's early Bible translations in Siam and Chris Baker & Pasuk Phongpaichit adding a note on Nai Mot's printing of the *Three Seals Laws* in 1849/50. We also feature in *Events & Exhibitions* two reviews by Vipash Purichanont on (*In*)*visible Presence* at Dib Bangkok and Sébastien Tayac on *The Bouquet and the Wreath* at MAIIAM Contemporary Art Museum in Chiang Mai.

Finally, a wide range of recensions in *Book Reviews* covers subjects ranging from paleoanthropology and Portuguese–Siamese relations to Chiang Mai, Protestant missions, Cambodia, Angkor, the Cold War, tourism, and Burmese cinema, reflecting the geographical and disciplinary breadth that remains a strength of the journal. We hope that readers will find in this issue not only new research, but also opportunities to reconsider some familiar questions—and perhaps to ask new ones.

Nicolas Revire
Managing editor
journal@thesiamsociety.org

Journal of the Siam Society

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With many thanks for your continuing support and interest.

In Memoriam: Jacques Lemoine (1936–2026)



Figure 1: Jacques Lemoine, in the late1980s © Louis Gabaude

Former Siam Society member Jacques Lemoine passed away on 17 May 2026 in Bangkok, where he had resided for many years. A French senior researcher in social anthropology at the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS), he established himself as one of the world's foremost specialists on the Hmong and Yao peoples, to whom he devoted most of his career and several important publications. He also conducted pioneering research on the political systems of the non-Buddhist Tai populations of southern China and northern Vietnam.

A gifted linguist and true polyglot, Lemoine studied Japanese and Chinese at the Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales (INALCO) in Paris after completing his secondary education. These linguistic skills led to his appointment as a librarian at the Institut des hautes études chinoises of the Sorbonne in the late 1950s. In 1960, while participating in the French cultural mission to Laos, he first encountered the country that would shape the course of his scholarly life. Between 1962 and 1963, he briefly served in the French Navy, notably acting as a French–Japanese interpreter during the expedition off the coast of Japan that enabled the bathyscaphe *Archimède* to set a world record for deep-sea diving.

His fascination with Asian cultures, together with the lasting impression made by his first stay in Laos, led him to undertake doctoral studies at the École pratique des hautes études (EPHE, VIe Section) in Paris. His dissertation focused on a Green Hmong village in Xayaburi (Sainyabuli; ໄຊຍະບູລີ) province, Laos, and was based on nearly three years of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 1964 and 1967 under the difficult conditions of the Laotian Civil War. Defended in 1968 and published by the CNRS in 1972, the dissertation immediately established him as a leading authority on Hmong society. Having recently joined the CNRS, Lemoine remained in Laos and continued his research among Hmong and Yao communities, concentrating increasingly on cosmology, ritual practices, and shamanic traditions. He pursued this work until 1975, when the Communist takeover of Laos forced him to seek refuge in Thailand.

From the late 1970s through the mid-1980s, Lemoine became deeply involved in assisting Hmong refugees as they adapted to life in France. This commitment allowed him to develop enduring friendships within Hmong clan networks and reflected a rare combination of scholarly engagement and personal dedication.

In the early 1980s, he founded the Centre d'anthropologie de la Chine du

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Sud et de la péninsule indochinoise (CACSPI), a CNRS research unit that he directed until 2001. Under his leadership, the center played an important role in establishing scientific partnerships with the People's Republic of China during the country's gradual reopening to Western scholarship. This opportunity enabled him to extend to China the research he had previously conducted in Laos with Hmong, Yao, and Tai-speaking populations. In 1986, together with Professor Chao Chien of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, he organized the first international conference devoted to Yao studies.

Alongside his personal research, administrative responsibilities, and efforts to promote international scholarly exchange, Lemoine maintained an extraordinarily prolific publication record. During the 1970s, he founded Vithagna Publishing House in Vientiane, which issued a number of influential works on China and Southeast Asia that have since become classics, including Charles Archaimbault's *Structures religieuses lao* (1973) and Stephan Feuchtwang's *An Anthropological Analysis of Chinese Geomancy* (1974). In the 1980s, he established Pandora Press in Bangkok, which published such notable studies as Richard B. Davis's *Muang Metaphysics* (1984) and Gehan Wijeyewardene's *Place and Emotion in Northern Thai Ritual Behaviour* (1986). Later, in the 2010s, he created OI Publishing, which issued, among other works, *Bouddhas, nāgas et lieux de mémoire en R.D.P. Lao* together with *Chefferie lao*, a collection of previously unpublished texts by Charles Archaimbault (2014).

Lemoine remained passionately committed to the study of languages throughout his life. In addition to Japanese and Chinese, he spoke Thai and Lao fluently and developed an exceptional command of several Hmong dialects. His linguistic expertise is reflected in one of his final books, *Parlons* (*H*)*mong* (2013).

A tireless scholar of remarkable intellectual curiosity, Jacques Lemoine continued to analyze and publish his extensive field materials until the very end of his life. His passing leaves a profound void in the study of the Miao–Yao peoples and among the many colleagues, students, and friends who benefited from his scholarship, generosity, and enduring commitment to the peoples whose lives and cultures he dedicated himself to understanding.

Bernard Formoso
Université de Montpellier—Paul Valéry
bernard.formoso@univ-montp3.fr

Key Publications

• 1972. *Un village hmong vert du Haut Laos. Milieu technique et organisation sociale*. Paris: CNRS.
• 1975. *Khoi Tan Seou: A Yao Manuscript*. Vientiane: Vithagna Press.
• 1982. *Yao Ceremonial Paintings*. Bangkok: White Lotus.
• 1983. *Kru'a ke (Showing the Way): A Hmong Initiation of the Dead*. Bangkok: Pandora Press.
• 1987. *Entre la maladie et la mort. Le chamane Hmong sur les chemins de l'Au-delà*. Bangkok: Pandora Press.
• 1991. *The Yao of South China. Recent International Studies* (co-edited with Chiao Chen). Paris/Pangu: Association française des études Yao.
• 2013. *Parlons* (*H*)*mong : langue et culture.* Paris: L'Harmattan.
• 2014. *Bouddhas, nāgas et lieux de mémoire en R.D.P. Lao. Essais à la mémoire de Charles Archaimbault suivis d'un inédit : Chefferie lao, cosmogonies, structures religieuses et rituel par Charles Archaimbault* (co-edited with Bernard Formoso). Bangkok: OI Publishing.
• 2016. *Le triptyque taoïste des San Diu du Viêt-Nam : naissance, ordination, mort.* Bangkok: OI Publishing.

Shared Stewardship: Cultural Heritage, Provenance, and Repatriation in Mainland Southeast Asia

Melody Rod-Ari[1]

Abstract—Discussions of cultural heritage and repatriation often center on what has been lost—artifacts, archeological contexts, or museum collections. This Special Edition instead explores evolving perspectives on the cultural heritage of mainland Southeast Asia through contributions by scholars, museum professionals, and conservation scientists. This introduction surveys key international conventions and recent developments shaping heritage policy, museum practice, and academic debate. Together, these contributions emphasize collaboration, provenance research, and shared stewardship while addressing the complexities of returning ancient objects to modern nation-states with intertwined histories. The Edition advocates a nuanced and constructive dialogue on heritage protection and care.

Keywords: Archeology; Cultural Heritage; Museum Studies; Provenance; Repatriation; Shared Stewardship

International Conventions and National Laws

If one looks to the past for watershed moments that have impacted the preservation of tangible cultural heritage, the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict likely comes to mind first. The convention was established in reaction to the atrocities of World War II; specifically, the destruction and displacement of cultural property throughout much of Europe. As defined by the 1954 Hague Convention, cultural property is:

> moveable or immoveable property of great importance to the cultural heritage of every people, such as monuments of architecture, art or history, whether religious or secular; archaeological sites; groups of buildings which, as a whole are of historical or artistic interest; works of art; manuscripts, books and other objects of artistic, historical or archaeological interest; as well as scientific collections and important collections of books or archives or of reproductions of the property defined above (14 May 1954, Article 1).[2]

[1] Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles. Email: melody.rodari@lmu.edu.

[2] See: https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/convention-protection-cultural-property-event-armed-conflict-regulations-execution-convention (accessed 28 July 2026).

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The 1954 Hague Convention was not the first treaty of its kind, but it was the first international agreement that exclusively focused on the protection of cultural heritage during wartime.[3] Specifically, it sought to establish the rule that damage of cultural property of any people was damage to the cultural heritage of all humanity. This shifted the legal focus from one of property rights to one of historical preservation (Keane 2004). Moreover, it acknowledged that all world art was worthy of preservation, a sentiment that today seems obvious but at the time was not universally shared.

In principle, the 1954 Hague Convention was noble in its pursuits; however, in practice, it failed and continues to fail to safeguard cultural heritage during wartime. One need only look at recent wars that have resulted in the devastation of our shared cultural patrimony.[4] Such failure is due, in part, to the very premise of international conventions which are not laws, but agreements made by voluntary parties and therefore not enforceable. While international agreements do not have the toothsome repercussions of laws, some conventions have resulted in legislation by ratifying nations. One such example is the 1970 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property.[5]

The 1970 UNESCO Convention is the most significant international agreement protecting cultural heritage.[6] It was established in reaction to increased looting and movement of cultural property from newly independent countries in the Global South into international art markets fueled by the demands of collectors and institutions in the Global North. The 1970 UNESCO Convention sought to regulate the international movement of art by encouraging signatory nations to establish rules to prevent the illicit import and export of cultural property. As stated:

[3] The Leiber Code, adopted in 1863, was a military law that governed the Union Army during the American Civil War (1861–1865). The Leiber Code explicitly states that works of art, libraries, scientific collections, and hospitals must be protected during wartime; however, it did allow for victorying parties to confiscate property belonging to hostile nations. See, Articles 34–36, General Orders no. 100, Instructions for the Government of Armies of the United States in the Field (Leiber Code), Correspondence, Orders, Reports, and Returns of the Union Authorities from 1 January to 31 December 1863, 7, O.R., series III, vol. III [S 124]. The Leiber Code went on to influence the Declaration of Brussels of 1874, which in turn laid the groundwork for the Hague Convention Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land (1907). Subsequent treaties and conventions followed, especially post-World War II, which include the 1954 Hague Convention (see note 2). UNESCO considers the 1954 Hague Convention a sequel to the 1907 Hague Convention.

[4] For example, according to the Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communications of Ukraine, over 1,600 cultural heritage monuments have been destroyed or damaged since escalating Russian aggression in March 2022. See: https://mincult.gov.ua/news/1612-pamyatok-kulturnoyi-spadshhyny-ta-2427-ob/ (accessed 28 July 2026).

[5] In 1983, the U.S. passed the Convention on Property Implementation Act that enacts the 1970 UNESCO Convention for this country. Australia also enacted this landmark convention through the Protection of Moveable Cultural Heritage Act in 1986; Cambodia established the Law on the Protection of Cultural Heritage in 1996.

[6] The Convention was established in 1970, but it was not enforced until 1972.

> The States Parties to this Convention also undertake, consistent with the laws of each State: a) To prevent by all appropriate means transfers of owner-ship of cultural property likely to promote the illicit import or export of such property; b) To ensure that their competent services co-operate in facilitating the earliest possible restitution of illicitly exported cultural property to its rightful owner; c) To admit to actions for recovery of lost or stolen items of cultural property bought by or on behalf of the rightful owners; d) To recognize the indefeasible right of each State Party to this Covention to classify and declare certain cultural property as inalienable which should therefore *ipso facto* not be exported, and to facilitate recovery of such property by the State concerned in cases where it has been exported (14 November 1970, Article 13).[7]

The 1970 UNESCO Convention provides guidelines on how to combat the illicit trafficking of cultural property, including rules to establish laws and regulations that address the protection and ownership of cultural objects; the establishment and upkeep of national inventories; the development of scientific and technical institutions (museums, libraries, archives, etc.); and the organization of archeological excavations. However, as with the 1954 Hague Convention, its goals were not fully realized for some of the same reasons. While some nations such as the U.S. (1983), Australia (1986), and Cambodia (1996) ratified the 1970 UNESCO Convention into law, other signatories such as China have not; thus, making its implementation uneven. Continued clandestine excavations, trafficking of illicit objects, and burgeoning black markets resulted in the adoption of subsequent agreements such as the 1995 Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects established by the International Institute for the Unification of Private Law.

The 1995 UNIDROIT Convention was enacted as a supplement to the 1970 UNESCO Convention. Specifically, it sought to address shortcomings of the previous convention by including explicit language regarding the restitution and repatriation of stolen or illegally exported cultural property. This included all illicitly traded cultural property, not only those objects that were part of inventories or those declared by state parties. It also provided provisions to allow claims to be processed directly through national courts. The intent was to modify the behaviors of those directly involved in the trade of illicit objects: looters, dealers, and buyers who could be tried in the courts from which looted or stolen objects were seized. Moreover, it closed loopholes that existed in the 1970 UNESCO Convention. First, it allowed buyers of illicit cultural property to be held responsible even if they purchased the objects in "good faith". Second, it extended or removed the statute of

[7] See: https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/convention-means-prohibiting-and-preventing-illicit-import-export-and-transfer-ownership-cultural (accessed 28 July 2026).

limitations for claims. Specifically, the general three-year window to bring a claim to court was extended to 50 years for most cultural property. Furthermore it removed the statute of limitations for objects recovered from monuments, archeological sites, or public collections.[8] While the language and guidelines put forth by the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention have the most potential to preserve and protect cultural property, the Convention's stringent requirements for action left many nations unwilling to become signatories (Fitz-Gibbon 2005).[9] Cambodia became a signatory in 1995 and ratified the convention into law in 2003.[10] Thailand, the U.S., and Australia have not signed the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention.

These landmark conventions reflect the sentiment and realities of the time period when they were written and adopted, which were focused on the real and immediate loss of cultural heritage to war, conflict, and looting. In turn, government officials as well as museum professionals and scholars took on retentionist positions to protect and preserve their cultural heritage, particularly source countries whose monuments were most at risk. Examples of this can be seen in Cambodia and Italy.[11] While countries may have simultaneous bilateral agreements with other nations, for the purposes of this article, focus is placed on agreements with the U.S. as repatriation cases discussed in this Special Edition primarily examine U.S. institutions with the exception of three Cham bronze statues once housed in the National Gallery of Australia, discussed in Campbell's article.[12]

The Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Kingdom of Cambodia Concerning the Imposition of Import Restrictions on Khmer Archaeological Material, first enacted in 1999, defines Khmer cultural property as objects comprised of stone, metal (mainly gold, silver, and bronze), and ceramic dated approximately from the 6th to the 16th centuries.[13] This represents nearly all artistic production covering the span of one millennium. In 2023, the MoU was updated: archeological materials included the above along with wood and bone, covering

[8] UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects, 24 June 1995, Chapter II, Article 3: https://www.unidroit.org/instruments/cultural-property/1995-convention/ (accessed 18 July 2026).

[9] As of the publication of this Special Edition, 56 nations have signed the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention; 149 nations have signed the 1970 UNESCO Convention.

[10] A signatory to a convention refers to a country that has signed it in agreement, but the agreement is not legally binding. Conversely, a country that has ratified the convention has approved it and legislated it into their local laws.

[11] Italy's bilateral agreement with the U.S. defines Italian cultural property as objects dated from the 9th century BCE to the 4th century CE including sculpture made of stone, metal, or ceramic; vessels made of ceramic and metal; glass; inscribed or decorated sheet metal; architectural elements and sculpture, and wall paintings. See Memorandum of Understanding Between the Government of the Italian Republic and the Government of the United States of America Concerning the Imposition of Import Restrictions on Categories of Archaeological Material of Italy: https://2017-2021.state.gov/united-states-and-italy-sign-cultural-property-agreement/ (accessed 18 July 2026).

[12] Neither Cambodia nor Thailand have bilateral agreements concerning cultural property with Australia.

[13] The MoU was renewed on 19 September 2003, with amendments on 14 August 2008 and 26 August 2008. See: https://www.unesco.org/en/cultnatlaws/memorandum-understanding-between-government-united-states-america-and-government-kingdom-cambodia-0 (accessed 28 July 2026).

a date range of 2500 BCE to 1750 CE; ethnographic material was defined as architectural materials, manuscripts, and religious objects dated 1400–1891 CE.[14] This bilateral agreement has resulted in many recent high-level repatriations to Cambodia which are discussed in several articles in this Edition (Carter & Chhay; Campbell; Edelstein & Morasco).

Thailand does not have an import restrictions agreement with the U.S.[15] It also has not signed or ratified the 1970 UNESCO Convention. Instead, Thailand relies on its own legislation, including the 1961 Act on Ancient Monuments, Antiques, Objects of Art and National Museums.[16] It defines antiques as any archaic moveable property made by man or in nature that is part of an ancient monument and human/animal remains that have artistic, historic, or archeological value; furthermore, objects of art are defined as a "thing produced by craftsmanship which is appreciated as being valuable in the field of art".[17] While Thailand's reliance on its own legislation provides the country independence from legally binding bilateral treaties, such reliance can result in less stringent protections of its cultural property in foreign courts. This can be seen in the case of looted and stolen prehistoric artifacts, particularly Ban Chiang-related material, collected mainly by California museums and further discussed in the co-authored article by Joyce C. White et al. in this Special Edition. Because of this lacunae, the U.S. Convention on Cultural Property Implementation Act (CPIA), which ratified the 1970 UNESCO Convention into law, could not be used to protect or repatriate the objects. Even though the Act of 1961 considered the artifacts as stolen, the CPIA does not recognize foreign governments' export restrictions unless there exists a bilateral agreement (Vitale 2009). Thus, prosecutors had to rely on the U.S. Archeological Resources Protection Act of 1979 (ARPA) to facilitate in their repatriation; under this law objects over 100 years old and representative of the remains of past human life with archeological interest are protected (Vitale 2009).[18] Although Thailand may not have a formal bilateral agreement with the U.S., it has successfully repatriated a variety of cultural property which includes archeological objects and ceramics (White et al.), architectural

[14] See Extension and Amendment of Import Restrictions on Archeological and Ethnological Material of Cambodia, A Rule by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection and the Treasury Department on 19 August 2023: https://media.unesco.org/sites/default/files/webform/mhm001/usa_cambodia_mou03_enorof_0.pdf.

[15] Although Thailand does not have a bilateral agreement with the U.S., it does have an agreement with the Government of the Kingdom of Cambodia that was signed in 2015. See Agreement between the Government of the Kingdom of Cambodia and the Government of the Kingdom of Thailand to Combat Against Illicit Trafficking and Cross-border Smuggling of Movable Cultural Property and to Restitute It to the Country of Origin, Bangkok, Thailand, 11 July 2015, https://media.unesco.org/sites/default/files/webform/mhm001/cambodia_agreement_thailand_engtno.pdf (accessed on 28 July 2026). There was an earlier MoU signed in 2000 also tackling these issues. See: https://media.unesco.org/sites/default/files/webform/mhm001/cambodia_agreement_thailand_engtno.pdf.

[16] The Act of 1961 is not the first law intended to preserve and protect Thai cultural property and was written as an amendment to the Act of 1934 and the Act of 1943 (Rawadee 2012).

[17] See: https://media.unesco.org/sites/default/files/webform/mhm001/thailande_act_1961_engl_orof.pdf (accessed 28 July 2026).

[18] See: https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCODE-2013-title16/html/USCODE-2013-title16-chap1B.htm (accessed 7 August 2026).

fragments from Prasat Phnom Rung (Revire) as well as Angkor period statuary (Vincent et al.).

These 20th-century conventions and laws had in common a goal to preserve cultural heritage and to protect cultural property by limiting its destruction and thus its illicit trade. They no doubt had some impact on reducing the pillaging and trafficking of cultural property. However, these conventions and laws could not stop the market forces that fueled the art market. Collectors and museums desired prized objects; looters, middlemen, dealers and auction houses were willing to make profits to facilitate this desire.

The Marketplace and Changing Behaviors

One way to curtail the illicit market for cultural property is to create a licit or legal market. Legal scholar John Henry Merryman has long argued that an anti-market bias in UNESCO and an excessive source-nation retention of cultural property has helped to fuel the black market because this anti-market bias prevents a legal market from existing. In "A Licit Trade in Cultural Objects", Merryman (2005) argues that the organized sale of surplus cultural objects by source countries can prevent looting and displace the black market while providing the government and its citizens an additional source of income. Such a licit market did exist in Cambodia in a colonial context. In 1923, the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) authorized the sale of fragments and surplus objects to help fund their research and conservation efforts of Khmer cultural heritage (Abbe 2021). Ironically, through their efforts, buyers became more knowledgeable about Khmer art and began demanding more important pieces. This resulted in the sale of significant cultural property, thereby counteracting the very premise of selling redundant or less important objects. In 1945, the EFEO stopped facilitating the sale of Khmer art. This example demonstrates that buyers want what they want and a marketplace will evolve to meet such demands. Thus, perhaps the most effective way to preserve and protect cultural heritage is to change the behaviors of those involved. We have seen this with recent high-profile restitution and repatriation cases that have directly led to the debasement of dealers, collectors, and museum staff. Public outcries and damaging publicity have drastically reduced museums' interests in collecting non-contemporary Southeast Asian art. In turn, collectors are deterred from buying objects they know will not be accepted for future donations. Finally, without buyers, looters and dealers must find other viable markets.

Notably, this Special Edition includes several articles discussing Douglas A.J. Latchford, also known as Pakpong Kriangsak (ภัคพงษ์ เกรียงศักดิ์; 1931–2020), a controversial collector of Khmer antiquities. Within his lifetime, Latchford was considered both a champion and an enemy of Southeast Asian cultural heritage. He bought, collected, consigned, and sold some of the finest objects of art from the region and donated others to important institutions including the National Museum of Cambodia (NMC) in Phnom Penh and the Metropolitan

Museum of Art (Met) in New York City. One can argue that his connection to the 2011 Sotheby's auction of a 10th-century stone statue from Prasat Chen at Koh Ker and its eventual return to Cambodia marked a watershed in the repatriation of Southeast Asian cultural property, fundamentally changing both the antiquities market and perceptions of his own legacy.

In the spring of 2011, Sotheby's advertised this star offering on the cover of its catalog **[Figure 1]**, described as a "spectacular 10th-century Khmer Koh Ker period Athlete from a European private collection (est. US$2/3 million). Acquired from the original owner over 40 years ago, the figure is the mate to the Koh Ker athlete at the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena that is almost identical in posture and appearance". At the time, I was the curator of Asian art at the Norton Simon Museum and was bombarded with calls and emails from scholars, museum colleagues, and journalists. Some wanted to know who sold the statue to the Norton Simon Museum. As a staff member representing the Museum, I did not have the academic freedom that I do now as a university professor and was unable to respond or engage with these pressing inquiries. However, I was struck by the immediacy with which news outlets sought to uncover the provenance of the Sotheby's statue and by the calls from scholars, government officials, and the public to halt its sale. This auction came in the wake of the 2008 case involving prehistoric Southeast Asian and Ban Chiang artifacts that embroiled California museums (Rod-Ari 2019),[19] as well as the arrest of Indian art dealers Vaman Ghiya (2003) and Subhash Kapoor (2011) who facilitated the looting, creation of false provenances, and sale of South Asian art.

Sotheby's auction was supposed to take place in New York City on 24 March 2011; however, Éric Bordonneau, French historian and archeologist, and then director of a research program at Koh Ker under the EFEO, sent a report to the UNESCO office in Phnom Penh explaining that the statue, which he identified as Duryodhana, was illegally removed in 1972 and that its feet were still *in situ* at Koh Ker (Chea, Muong & Tythacott 2021: 72–73). One day before the auction was to take place, Sotheby's—at the request of UNESCO and the Cambodian government—removed Duryodhana from sale (Hauser-Schäublin 2016). Soon after, facilitated by longstanding bilateral agreements between the U.S. and Cambodia, "federal prosecutors sought the forfeiture of the statue from Sotheby's claiming that it had been stolen from Cambodia and illegally imported into the US" (Burns 2014). In the months that followed, the owner of the statue was revealed: a Belgian collector named Decia Ruspoli di Poggio Suasa whose husband had purchased the statue in 1975 from the British auction house Spink & Son, who in turn had come into its possession through Douglas Latchford (Mashberg & Blumenthal 2012). News outlets such as the *New York Times* turned their attention to the legal battle that ensued between Sotheby's and the governments of Cambodia and the U.S., and began to scrutinize museum collec-

[19] I was an intern at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) at the time of the 2008 case and met with both the dealer, Robert Olson, and the undercover agent, Todd Swain, who sought to donate artifacts to the museum.

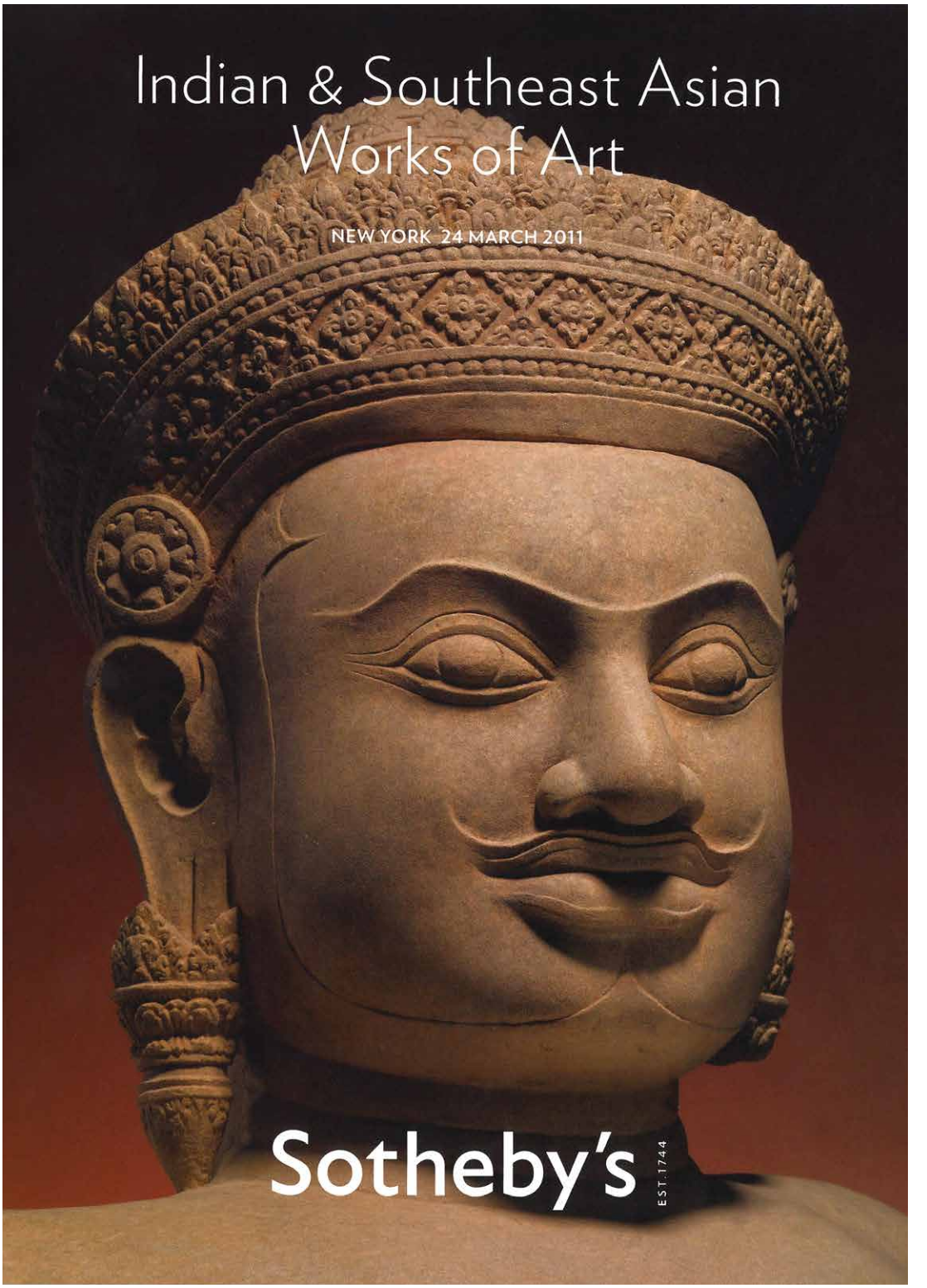


Figure 1: Catalog cover for the New York auction of 24 March 2011, depicting Duryodhana from Koh Ker, Cambodia © Sotheby's

tions that included works from Prasat Chen or others associated with Latchford (Mashberg 2012). In response to such negative publicity and mounting calls by the public to return cultural property to their places of origins, museums and curators, including myself, were under pressure to reexamine our collections for questionable provenance histories and any associations with Latchford. In 2013, the Met was the first museum to return objects from their permanent collection associated with Latchford and believed to be from Prasat Chen to Cambodia—two kneeling figures of the Pandava brothers Sahadeva and Nakula (Chea, Muong & Tythacott 2021: 73–74). In 2014, after much dispute, Sotheby's returned Duryodhana, avoiding a public hearing that would have set a legal precedent for the sale of objects with unclear provenance (Burns 2014). This return was followed by the Norton Simon Museum repatriating Duryodhana's pendant statue, Bhīma, from its collection, which was followed by the return of other statues from Christie's in 2014, the Cleveland Museum of Art in 2015, and the Denver Art Museum in 2016 (Rod-Ari 2019). This has led to ever stricter conduct by museums to collect objects with irrefutable and clear provenance so as to not be in a similar position in the future.

This case also changed the behavior of some collectors. As no surprise, one such example is Latchford's extensive collection of Southeast Asian art. In 2020, he died at the age of 88 in Bangkok. His personal collection, which included stone and bronze statues and gold jewelry from the Angkor and pre-Angkor period, had been documented in lavishly photographed books such as *Adoration and Glory: The Golden Age of Khmer Art* and *Khmer Gold: Gift for the Gods* (Bunker & Latchford 2004, 2008). These books were co-authored with Emma Bunker, a specialist of Asian art and member of the board of trustees at the Denver Art Museum. While many objects were attributed to a "private collection", it was known that that they belonged to Latchford. The collection is said to have been worth upwards of US$50 million; he bequeathed it to his daughter Julia Ellen Latchford Copleston (Thai name, Nawapan Kriangsak; นวพรรณ เกรียงศักดิ์). One imagines that in an earlier time, when her father's illegal dealings were unknown and when museums were not as reluctant to accept donations with questionable provenance, Ms Latchford Copleston may have been able to sell parts of the collection or donate them to museums around the world. However, by 2020 policies and behaviors had changed. In 2021, she donated her father's collection, along with his records and computer laptop, to the government of Cambodia (Mashberg 2021). The data in the files may be the real "treasure" because they have given Cambodian authorities greater knowledge of the provenience and provenance of looted works in foreign collections. Without such information, the histories of many objects from Latchford's collection or those sold and consigned by him that are scattered all over the world would likely remain unknown. Enabled with such valuable information, the Cambodian government has successfully identified and repatriated dozens of objects, including some described in this Special Edition.

Synopsis of Articles

This Special Edition represents the experiences, research, and writings of archeologists, law enforcement personnel, art historians, provenance specialists, conservation scientists, and museum curators and directors. Every article represents an important contribution to the authors' field of expertise. They are presented here in order of appearance.

"Quantifying Archeological Damage: The Operation Antiquity Seizures from Thailand", co-authored by Joyce C. White, David J. Welch, Judith R. McNeill & Todd Swain, provides an insider's view of a U.S. criminal investigation into the illegal movements of mainland Southeast Asian antiquities between 2002 and 2014, which resulted in the 2008 raids on four California museums.[20] Many of these objects came from Thailand's Ban Chiang cultural tradition, which were the most highly publicized. For the first time, this article provides a quantitative figure for the archeological damage of tens of thousands of looted artifacts related to Operation Antiquity. Importantly, the authors provide a monetary amount as a result of this damage by devising a data-based methodology to determine the archeological valuation for each item; they outline this method in detail in their appendices.[21] This contribution is important for many reasons; I highlight one here: As previously discussed, Thailand does not have a bilateral agreement with the U.S., nor has it signed or ratified the 1970 UNESCO Convention, making it impossible to argue that the objects were protected under CPIA. Similarly, the U.S. National Stolen Properties Act of 1934 (NSPA), typically employed in cases involving internationally trafficked cultural property, could not be used because many of the looted artifacts were not commercially valued at over US$5,000. By formulating a methodology to attach an archeological valuation to each object, the authors create a standard that can be used for other archeological material that may have little commercial but enormous historical and archeological value. This furthers the case for the protection and preservation of archeological sites and the importance of scientific excavation not only for Thailand, but also for all vulnerable source countries.

In "Small Things Forgotten? Repatriating Small, Utilitarian Cambodian Artifacts", Alison Kyra Carter & Chhay Visoth continue to examine the question of "value" by making a case for repatriating not only highly sought after stone and bronze religious statuary, but also utilitarian artifacts such as ceramics and prehistoric adzes. They chronicle an attempted donation to the University of Oregon's (UO) Museum of Natural and Cultural History where Carter is a faculty member. With little to no documentation related to the objects' proveniences and their pro-

[20] The California raids affected the LACMA, the Pacific Asia Museum (now under the supervision of the University of Southern California) in Pasadena, the Bowers Museum of Art in Santa Ana, and the Mingei International Museum in San Diego. Although the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive was also part of the Operation Antiquity probe, it was not part of the 2008 raids. In the Midwest, the MacLean Collection near Chicago was also raided in 2008.

[21] The extensive appendices that accompany the article could not be included in the print version of the Special Edition but are available separately in a digital format.

venances beyond the collector's purchase, all parties agreed that the donation could not move forward and that the objects should be repatriated. Understanding the items' educational and historical importance, Carter negotiated an agreement by which they would be transferred to the UO's Southeast Asian Archeology Lab so that her students could research and document the objects before they were returned to the NMC in Phnom Penh. This was facilitated by Chhay Visoth, NMC Director. This article is an important study for any university museum or museum studies program with works of art in their collections of questionable provenance. It outlines the challenges and pedagogical value of hands-on research for students as well as the very real and tedious administrative realities of trying to repatriate works to their place of origin, even when the receiving institution is involved.

Joint efforts and shared stewardship among institutions and colleagues is also at the center of Beth Edelstein & Alyssa Morasco's article, "Stewards Beyond Ownership: A Continuing Partnership between the Cleveland Museum of Art [CMA] and the National Museum of Cambodia". Their article highlights how important discoveries can be made when institutions cooperate and share intellectual and material resources. In 2015, the CMA returned a 10th-century stone statue of Hanuman originally from Prasat Chen in Koh Ker to Cambodia. Although this return could have been viewed as the end of a multi-year provenance research project, it led to the beginning of a wide range of collaborative possibilities formalized by an on-going, evolving series of Memoranda of Understanding and Cultural Cooperation Agreements between the CMA and Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts of the Kingdom of Cambodia. The article chronicles important international loans and special exhibitions that resulted from the MoU, such as *Beyond Angkor: Cambodian Sculpture from Banteay Chhmar* that opened in 2017. It also describes fascinating efforts to reunite misattributed limbs and fragments from two Phnom Da statues of Lord Kṛṣṇa: one housed at the CMA, the other at the NMC. The discoveries from this collaboration resulted in *Revealing Krishna: A Journey to Cambodia's Mountain* which exhibited both statues side-by-side with correct limbs and fragments in 2021. While publications for both *Beyond Angkor* and *Revealing Krishna* were produced, this article provides readers with the CMA's conservation team's perspective. Moreover, it outlines the important work they and NMC colleagues did and continue to do to further our collective knowledge of Khmer art history. This artistic and conservation *tour de force* was made possible because of the concerted efforts of curators, conservation scientists, and museum leadership to continue rather than sever a relationship after repatriation.

The routes by which an object is repatriated vary just as much as the journey to a gallery or auction house, a collector's home, or to a museum. Nicolas Revire's article, "The Tale of Two Stones: Reuniting Khmer Fragments from Prasat Phanom Rung", demonstrates how the efforts of the author, then at the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC), resulted in the reassessment and deaccession

of a Kṛṣṇa pilaster in June 2024. In this "tale", Revire's linguistic and art historical knowledge, along with his access to AIC's object files as a Daniel F. and Ada L. Rice Research Fellow in the Departments of Arts of Asia and Curatorial Documentation and Research at the time, allowed him to weave together a more nearly complete provenance for the Kṛṣṇa pilaster; this resulted in codifying knowledge of the pilaster's identity, provenience, and its eventual repatriation, still pending at the time of writing. The article juxtaposes the journey of the pilaster with that of the well-known Viṣṇu lintel that had been returned in 1988 from the same temple sanctuary, Prasat Phanom Rung. Unlike the Kṛṣṇa pilaster, the return of the Viṣṇu lintel resulted from public and diplomatic pressure. Here, we again see how museums have changed from a stance of protective defiance to proactive research and shared stewardship. The article also addresses two related issues. First, when objects and fragments are treated as isolated reliefs in a museum setting, their original function, religious meanings, and cultural origins are lost, leading researchers astray. In both cases, the Viṣṇu lintel and the Kṛṣṇa pilaster were initially identified as objects from Cambodia dated to the 10th–12th century. This leads to the second issue, the continuing habit in academia and museums to conflate monuments and objects with Khmer artistic influence with an Angkorian or Cambodian origin. Revire's article shows that the museum's identification of the Kṛṣṇa pilaster as a Cambodian object prevented it from examination on its own terms for over 50 years. It was only after a dedicated provenance position had been established that its provenience became known. This article therefore underscores the need for museums to establish more dedicated provenance research positions.[22]

Once an object's place of origin is determined, it is naïve to believe that the "hard" part of returning that object is complete. This is particularly true in mainland Southeast Asia where the Khmer Empire's artistic influence was widespread. Modern laws and cultural nationalism over the fate of ancient objects often take precedence. Two articles in this Special Edition discuss such objects. Their purpose is not to debate the appropriateness of the locations to which the objects were returned; however, both give the reader ample information to consider and formulate their own thoughts on modern geopolitics and its impact on cultural heritage.

"Reassessing an Angkorian Bronze Masterpiece: The Male Deity from Ban Yang Pong Sadao, Buriram", authored by Brice Vincent, Donna Strahan, Federico Carò, David Bourgarit & Yvan Coquinot, brings together interdisciplinary expertise to examine an 11th-century Khmer bronze statue of a male deity, widely known as "Golden Boy". The statue was part of the Met's collection in New York City from 1988 to 2023 before being repatriated to Thailand. The study is an

[22] Revire's article also identifies two additional architectural fragments at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco and another at the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena that once belonged to the same architectural ensemble of Prasat Phnom Rung. As of the publication of this Special Edition, these sculptures remain in California.

important revision to our knowledge of this artistically significant statue, given different attributions by experts, including identification as a *devarāja* or the Hindu deity Śiva. Not wanting to divulge the authors' impressive scientific and art historical findings here, their article provides not only a reattribution of the statue's identity, but also a more precise date of its production and place of manufacture. In addition, it provides possible clues to the statue's patronage and place of worship. Importantly, these claims are buttressed by the authors' technical studies, presenting their combined expertise in materials science across the multiple institutions where they are either employed or associated.[23] While technical studies may be difficult for general readers, this piece is written in an engaging fashion presenting findings as if the article were a movie played backwards. Part of this is owed to the authors' knowledge of the statue's provenience, which required them to work backwards from Ban Yang Pong Sadao where it was looted in order to trace its movements and reconstruct its history over space and time.

A similar story, although told in reverse, unfolds in Bronwyn Campbell's article, "From Canberra to Phnom Penh: Collaborative Research and the Repatriation of Three Cham Bronzes", which examines the National Gallery of Australia's (NGA) acquisition and subsequent transfer of three Cham statues to the Kingdom of Cambodia in 2023. Campbell provides a fascinating reconstruction of the statues' provenance history that involves some of the most well-known figures in the South and Southeast Asian artworld, including Douglas Latchford who sold the statues to the NGA in 2011. By this time, Latchford was still a respected figure in the Southeast Asian art world and his testimony concerning the statues' provenance along with their publication history by well-known scholars made them an attractive addition to the NGA's collection. However, in 2014, the NGA established the Asian Art Provenance Project in response to the Australian government's seizure and repatriation of a Chola-period Śiva-Naṭarāja to India. The high-profile case of this statue resulted in the NGA's reexamination of the entire Asian art collection, which consequently led to the unraveling of Latchford's falsified provenance claims. During the intervening nine years the NGA sought resolution on how and to whom to return these Cham statues. They remained at an impasse until 2021 when NGA representatives were introduced by Latchford's daughter to the Cambodian government's research and repatriation team, including Bradley Gordon of the Phnom Penh-based legal firm Edenbridge Asia. This meeting provided the missing "link" to the looters who sold the statues and who also, ironically, were the only ones that could establish the statues' provenience. The NGA continues to house the statues as the NMC galleries currently undergo renovation and expansion. As with the CMA example, the NGA did not see the repatriation of the statues as the loss of an asset, but instead an occasion to forge

[23] An extensive catalog of contemporaneous statues along with technical investigations could not be included in the print version of the Special Edition but is accessible in a digital format.

new relationships with Cambodian colleagues. Importantly, the NGA also used the repatriation as an opportunity to engage with the Cham and Cambodian diaspora in Canberra.

Often, diasporic communities are left out from conversations regarding cultural heritage even while having ancestral ties to the very same objects being repatriated. They are a demographic that museums, governments, and academics need to give greater attention to in our ever transnational and multihyphenate environments. Rebecca S. Hall's article "A Welcome Reunion: Cambodian Heritage, Diaspora, and the Ethics of Return in the Art of Phung Huynh" does this by interviewing the Los Angeles-based, Vietnamese–Cambodian American artist Phung Huynh. Born in Vietnam to a Vietnamese mother and a Cambodian father, her family fled Vietnam in 1978, making their way from a refugee camp in Thailand to various U.S. cities before resettling in Los Angeles. Her artistic oeuvre focuses on her identity as a refugee and a member of the Vietnamese–Cambodian diaspora. Her most recent work, *Return Home*, was inspired by a visit to the Angkor Archeological Park in 2012. During her visit she was struck by the many headless bodies that graced temples and were exhibited inside museums. As a professor of art at California State University, Los Angeles, she was familiar with the many bodiless heads that filled her local museums. Detailed pencil drawings on paper and screen-printed photography on translucent cloth banners represent the bodiless heads and headless bodies in U.S. museums and at monuments in Cambodia, respectively. Exhibited together in galleries and museums, they are a critical and much needed dialogue on the historical circumstances that led to the destruction and removal of cultural property as well as the role museums continue to play as stewards of these dismembered objects. Much of the article is told in the artist's own words, which is an important intervention in cultural heritage studies. By including Huynh's work, we acknowledge that culture and cultural heritage is not created in a vacuum and importantly, it is regenerative. Objects, even fragments of the past, can inspire new art.

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This Special Edition is envisioned as a collection of studies to be used in upper-level undergraduate and graduate-level coursework while at the same time peaking the interests of specialist and general readers. The authors and editors hope that each contribution solicits engaging discussions and questions that help move cultural heritage studies further with nuance and purpose. Moreover, as seen in the work of Phung Huynh, new ideas and art can evolve from the past—however imperfect or fragmented our knowledge of it.

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Quantifying Archeological Damage: The Operation Antiquity Seizures from Thailand

Joyce C. White,[1] **David J. Welch,**[2] **Judith R. McNeill**[3] **& Todd Swain**[4]

Abstract—"Operation Antiquity" (2002–2014), a United States criminal investigation, exposed the large-scale illicit trafficking of archeological materials from central and northeast Thailand, including Ban Chiang, and their acquisition by complicit dealers, collectors, and museums in the U.S. The investigation led to the seizure of tens of thousands of illegally imported artifacts. This article presents the methodology developed to assess the archeological damage caused by this trafficking as required for legal proceedings under the U.S. justice system. The assessment demonstrates the extensive destruction of Thailand's archeological record resulting from systematic looting and illustrates how damage assessment supports the protection of cultural resources and the prosecution of crimes against archeological heritage.

Keywords: Archeological Looting; Ban Chiang; Cultural Heritage Crime; Damage Assessment; Illicit Trafficking

Background

In the United States, the legal framework for assessing damage to archeological materials is codified in the Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979 ("ARPA")[5] and subsequent related regulations. ARPA was originally drafted to address looting, theft, and related damages to archeological resources on U.S. federal and Native American lands. In 1996, the U.S. Government began to apply ARPA to international trafficking cases (Marous & Marous 2006).[6] On the international level, general smuggling statutes, including some several centuries old, and laws such as the U.S. National Stolen Properties Act[7] also have been used in cases involving the illegal import of antiquities (Gerstenblith 2006; Levine 2006). Beginning in 2002, the United States Sentencing Guideline §2B1.5, was amended to apply to cases concerning damage to, destruction of, or illicit trafficking in cultural heritage resources,[8] and became the mechanism for applying ARPA methodology to all federal crimes involving cultural heritage resources

[1] University of Pennsylvania Museum, Philadelphia. Corresponding author. Email: banchang@upenn.edu.

[2] International Archaeological Research Institute (IARII, retired).

[3] International Archaeological Research Institute (IARII, retired).

[4] U.S. National Park Service Special Agent (retired).

[5] See: https://www.nps.gov/subjects/archeology/archaeological-resources-protection-act.htm (accessed 5 August 2026).

[6] See also United States vs Melnikas, 929 F. Supp. 276 (S.D. Ohio 1996): https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp/929/276/1812948/ (accessed 6 August 2026).

[7] See: https://uslawexplained.com/national_stolen_property_act (accessed 5 August 2026).

[8] See: https://www.ussc.gov/guidelines/amendment/638 (accessed 5 August 2026).

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(looting, theft from a museum, smuggling, trafficking), including international cases. Thus, ARPA, in concert with other federal laws, provided one framework for charging and sentencing in cases concerning illegal trafficking of archeological materials with international dimensions.

The U.S. Government has a small number of agents with expertise in investigating the illegal movement of cultural materials; they develop cases in coordination with the United States Attorney's Office (USAO) within the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ). In 2002, a special agent with the National Park Service (NPS) conducted an undercover investigation of the looting of American Southwest archeological objects illegally removed from federal lands. That case led to the discovery of smugglers and dealers of illicitly imported pre-Columbian artifacts and, subsequently, of dealers connected with museums, galleries, and collectors who also dealt in Southeast Asian antiquities. Over time, the agent uncovered a vast network of individuals, middlemen, scholars, professors, curators, galleries, and institutions involved in a scheme through which museums and private collectors acquired numerous illegally obtained artifacts. Many of these museum acquisitions also involved tax fraud. NPS, Homeland Security Investigations, and the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) conducted a large-scale, multi-year undercover investigation of this network. The U.S. Attorney's Office for the Central District of California (USAOCC) took the lead prosecutorial role over the case under the name "Operation Antiquity" (OA).

As the case developed, legal and logistical complexities and nuances multiplied with dimensions too massive to be reviewed here.[9] USAOCC discussed numerous legal frameworks, statutes, and approaches; since, however, the case was never fully litigated, legal strategies that would have been utilized by the prosecutors are unknown (but see below, Outcomes section). USAOCC did consult with the Royal Thai Consulate-General in Los Angeles and the Thai Fine Arts Department (FAD), including a visit by a federal attorney to Bangkok and a visit by FAD officials to Los Angeles to assist in identifications. These interactions provided important understandings of relevant Thai laws, particularly the 1961 (2504 BE), Act on Ancient Monuments, Antiques, Objects of Art and National Museums. This law outlawed the export of antiques discovered in Thailand and older than 100 years except when permitted by the FAD.[10] In 1972, the Thai National Executive Council passed a law making the purchase, sale, or export of specifically Ban Chiang artifacts illegal without FAD permission (Lyons & Rainey 1982: 8). Ultimately, the 1961 Thai Act provided the key legal foundation for the OA case, even though Thailand was not a State Party to the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property.[11]

[9] Some details including legal filings are available here: https://iseaarchaeology.org/ban-chiang-project/operation-antiquity/ (accessed 5 August 2026).

[10] See: https://media.unesco.org/sites/default/files/webform/mhm001/thailande_act_1961_engl_orof.pdf.

[11] Because Thailand is not a State Party to the 1970 UNESCO Convention, some dealers have argued or assumed that the international trade in Thai or pre-Thai antiquities falls outside the scope of international restrictions (Rachanie 2001). See: https://www.



Figure 1: Law enforcement officers during a museum search conducted as part of Operation Antiquity, 24 January 2008 © Joyce White

Constructing a case involving the looting and/or trafficking of archeological materials requires a team of law enforcement officials, one or more prosecutors, and expert witnesses, including archeologists. Regardless of legal, institutional, and situational complexities, such cases depend on professional assessments to establish the authenticity of trafficked objects. Archeologists may also be called upon to assign monetary damages according to specific protocols defined in ARPA and related legal statutes.

In 2005, the lead author of this article, Joyce White, then a member of the research staff at the University of Pennsylvania (Penn) Museum, was identified as the archeologist with the expertise in the prehistoric material culture of mainland Southeast Asia—particularly the Ban Chiang cultural tradition—needed to assess the authenticity of the majority of objects trafficked from prehistoric sites in Thailand, as well as to determine their likely regional origins and estimate their ages to a degree sufficient to satisfy legal requirements in U.S. courts.

By 2007, USAO offices in California and Illinois determined that sufficient evidence existed to conduct searches of several public museums and one private museum within their jurisdictions, as well as galleries, warehouses, storage facilities, and the residences of individuals investigated in the case. After obtaining search warrants, more than 500 federal agents carried out searches and interviewed employees and suspects in late January 2008 **[Figure 1]**. This article focuses only on the prehistoric materials from Thailand, which made

unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/convention-means-prohibiting-and-preventing-illicit-import-export-and-transfer-ownership-cultural.



Figure 2: Joyce White and a colleague conducting authentications during Operation Antiquity, revealing the extensive scale of archeological damage © Todd Swain

up the bulk of the items. Appropriate experts identified additional items from pre-Columbian, Burmese, and other East and Southeast Asian cultures.

Over the next few years, White evaluated thousands of prehistoric items originating from Thailand during in-person inspections of seized objects at appropriate institutions and storage facilities **[Figure 2]**. Materials generally came from prehistoric sites in northeast and central Thailand dating to the metal age and pre-metal periods (about 2300 BCE–500 CE). These visits resulted in extensive spreadsheets, containing thousands of rows documenting the seized artifacts, which were organized by the institutions and individuals involved.

This article does not examine the legal details of Operation Antiquity, but rather one stage in the preparation of the case. To understand its scale, the prosecutor requested that the expert, White, prepare a preliminary damage assessment based on ARPA guidelines, specifically evaluating the harm caused to Thai archeological sites represented by the seized prehistoric materials. The compiled data from these inventories provided the basis for the assessment report, which calculated damage according to the "archeological value" (AV) of the collections. The AV assessment in this article includes the OA seizures at five of the investigated museums, two of the "middlemen" (smugglers, gallery owners), and six of the implicated individuals. These investigated institutions or subjects are referred to as Museum 1, Museum 2, and so forth and not by the actual name of the institution or person (but see Rod-Ari 2021 for more information). Seizure data are presented in **Online Appendix 1**.[12]

Overview of the Legal Framework

Since ARPA's codification in 1979, a significant body of regulations, methods, and procedures has developed along with relevant publications and technical reports. McAllister et al. (2019) provides a recent brief overview of damage assessment in archeological cases with links to useful technical briefs. An edited book, *Presenting Archaeology in Court* by Hutt et al. (2006), provides concrete examples where the ARPA law has been instrumental in U.S. court cases dealing with site destruction or trafficking in antiquities and other domestic cultural properties, including international examples.[13]

[12] Available at: https://doi.org/10.69486/114.2.2026.3b.

[13] This link provides gateways to more information

In the U.S., cultural property cases may require an assessment of monetary damages before defendants are charged and tried. Such assessments allow prosecutors to evaluate the scale of the crime as they prepare their cases. Once a defendant is convicted of an archeological crime, they are sentenced, typically based upon the total amount of theft, damage, or vandalism stated in monetary terms. For sentencing, value calculations involve not only the documentation of stolen or damaged materials but also estimates for repairing the vandalism and curation of damaged materials. Of particular importance for archeological cases, according to ARPA guidelines, "damage is also assessed for the affected sites", not only the trafficked objects. Assigning monetary values follows the systematic process outlined below.

In addition to these basic legal system precepts, a plethora of other relevant legal standards and rulings must be followed. For example, in U.S. courts, "expert witnesses" must meet certain criteria: only a person found to be an expert may offer opinions or conclusions as part of their testimony. Non-expert witnesses may only testify to facts they personally know. For an archeologist to testify as an expert in U.S. court, she or he likely will need an advanced degree as well as significant work experience in the area and material culture involved in the case. It is also not enough for expert witnesses to guess the financial amount of theft, damage, or vandalism. Empirically based numbers must be assigned following specific procedures, including line-item budget estimates, and numbers must be defensible under the scrutiny of defense counsel and reasonable in the eyes of a judge.

Components of Damage Value Determinations

ARPA Uniform Regulations issued in 1984 define three values in cultural property cases that must be calculated by expert witnesses:

1. *Commercial Value* (CV)—The fair market value of an item between a willing seller and a willing buyer. In some cases archeologists make these assessments, but commercial appraisers who assess property for insurance or estate purposes may be engaged in this determination.[14]
2. *Cost of Restoration and Repair* (R&R)—The cost to quantify and document the damage, repair the damage, and stabilize and curate the affected items.
3. *Archeological Value* (AV)—What it would cost archeologists to do a legitimate excavation and documentation of the same proportion as represented by the damaged site during criminal activity. The underlying purpose of the AV is to quantify in monetary terms the loss of knowledge and information that occurred because of the looting. The AV recognizes that it is not simply the seized artifacts that have value, but that, in terms of

on ARPA and its applications in value determinations: https://www.nps.gov/subjects/archeology/archaeological-resources-protection-act.htm (accessed 20 July 2026).

[14] Note, since the 1970s, U. Penn Museum and many other public institutions nationwide have policies prohibiting staff on ethical grounds from appraising archeological objects for market, donation, or insurance values.

scientific and historical information, the archeological context (where the artifact is located in a site, what it is associated with, etc.) is of the *greatest* value. Context allows archeologists to determine an artifact's age and function within a society and to reach conclusions about the community that used it. Looters invariably destroy this contextual information.

A hypothetical example illustrates how the three aspects of this methodology might work for a site looted in the U.S.:

- Looters dig a one-meter square hole that is one meter deep in an archeological site in a national park. From this hole they recover an intact ceramic vessel they sell for US$100.
- CV: While the looters sold the vessel for US$100, the commercial value might be different if the expert finds similar pieces that have sold for more or less. For this hypothetical example, the looter's sale price will be considered the fair market value.
- R&R: Measuring, mapping, screening back dirt, and documenting the damage at the looters' pit are all considered legitimate costs in the R&R assessment. While the looters were only interested in retrieving an intact object, they likely tossed aside many other finds of scientific value, such as human and/or animal bones, tools, and pottery shards from cooking and other vessels. The R&R calculation includes wages of an archeologist and archeological technician to conduct field work to document the damaged site, sift the disturbed dirt, and record materials thrown out by the looter (a one-day cost for the two employees of US$500), and, in the office, to complete site forms, examine and estimate the date of the ceramic vessel, and write the R&R damage report (four more days for a total of US$1,280). Additionally, the curation and perhaps repatriation of the looted ceramic vessel must be calculated, which might cost US$500. Thus, the total R&R in this hypothetical example is US$2,280.
- AV: The looters' hole is comparable to a standard archeological unit (1 cubic meter), so the archeologist can reasonably price the costs for a legitimate scientific excavation of a comparable unit, study the finds, and produce the documentation in a report. This price includes legally required planning (consultation, permits, hiring excavation staff, acquiring equipment), curating and analyzing the excavated materials, dating the site, recording, photographing and illustrating the finds, and writing the final report. This cost could reasonably be around US$10,000.
- Overall, CV: US$100; R&R: US$2,280; AV: US$10,000; total components used for sentencing: US$12,380.

In this hypothetical example, the defense will likely aim to convince the jury and judge that the total cost of the damage and loss is merely the commercial value of the looted ceramic vessel (US$100). The archeological expert must provide firm and defensible numbers for R&R and AV, particularly damage that has been done to knowledge that could have been acquired with scientific excavation and the study of the site's

deposits if it had not been looted. These numbers provide the prosecution and court with the information they need to charge, try, and sentence the case.

Distinctive Aspects of Operation Antiquity Damage Assessment

The OA damage assessment had a number of distinctive features. As usual, professional appraisers made CV determinations, while the prices that middlemen, auction houses, and galleries charged for the smuggled items were also considered. Regarding R&R costs, because the locations where the pits had been dug to acquire the looted items could not be determined, calculating a large portion of the R&R costs became problematic. Therefore, the prosecutors asked the archeological experts to focus on the AV, as the statute specified:

> (a) *Archaeological value*. For purposes of this part, the archaeological value of any archaeological resource involved in a violation of the prohibitions in § 7.4 of this part or conditions of a permit issued pursuant to this part shall be the value of the information associated with the archaeological resource. This value shall be appraised in terms of *the costs of the retrieval of the scientific information which would have been obtainable prior to the violation*. These costs may include, but need not be limited to, the cost of preparing a research design, conducting field work, carrying out laboratory analysis, and preparing reports as would be necessary to realize the information potential (1984 ARPA Uniform Regulations, § 7.14; emphasis added).[15]

In cases of looting on U.S. federal lands, objects are sometimes traceable to specific sites and specific looters' pits at those sites. In those cases, archeologists can measure the disturbance, assess the kind of site, the kind and amount of finds based on both trafficked items and back dirt contents, and then calculate the cost of a proper scientific investigation to retrieve, study, and document the site as if it were undisturbed.

Because linking the thousands of objects identified by Operation Antiquity to specific looters' pits in Thailand was impossible, a different methodology to calculate AV became necessary. During the investigation period of 2002 to 2008, the NPS undercover agent learned that participating persons and institutions knew that prehistoric artifacts came from on-going looting in Thailand. Several suspects visited these looting operations and middlemen showed the agent photos of ongoing looting and described in detail how the looting and smuggling worked. Moreover, some of the seized materials had not yet been cleaned, for example, copper-base[16]

[15] The full text concerning archeological value is stated at: https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-43/subtitle-A/part-7/subpart-A (accessed 20 July 2026).

[16] Metal artifacts, when greenish-blue, likely have copper in their composition. If no elemental analyses determined the exact composition of the artifact,



Figure 3: Uncleaned copper-base prehistoric bangles encircling arm bones © Glen Anderson

bangles encrusted in dirt encircling the arm bones of the deceased **[Figure 3]**. This indicated these materials had been rapidly removed (robbed from graves), boxed, and shipped to middlemen in the U.S. The investigation showed that the smuggling, trafficking, and museum donation scheme began at least as early as the 1990s.

The OA searches aimed to document all prehistoric objects from Thailand at the search locations, based on the 1961 Thai Act specifying the requirement for FAD approval for export of antiques older than 100 years.[17] That law preceded the time when extensive looting began at prehistoric Thai sites in the late 1960s onwards (Rachanie 2001: 8). If and when FAD granted approval for export, they would issue certificates and tags. Among the tens of thousands of objects examined, less than a handful of prehistoric artifacts from Thailand with such certificates and tags were found **[Figure 4]**.

Damage assessment focusing on archeological value at such a large scale was a significant feature of the OA case. Unlike many high-profile antiquity trafficking cases where the focus is on individual commercially valuable objects, the OA seizures involved large numbers of cultural items including utilitarian objects used in daily life (see Carter & Chhay, this Special Edition). The CV (commercial value) of individual pieces might be relatively small, but the aggregate AV (archeological value) becomes immense. Focusing on archeological value, defined not in terms of damages to artifacts treated as art objects, but rather to source sites and therefore to scientific knowledge from archeological contexts, meant that the evaluation of damages done by the looting would be calculated in terms of aggregate values.[18]

Calculating Archeological Damage

The lead author of this article, the archeological expert witness for the seizures of prehistoric materials from Thailand, was tasked under ARPA with assessing the AV of all seized materials based on "an assessment of the level that a scientific program would have needed to legitimately and professionally excavate, study, and document relevant evidence". A scale of depredation

to differentiate pure copper from an alloy such as bronze, the term "copper-base" is used.

[17] Preliminary archeological value assessment of Operation Antiquity seizures was not limited to acquisitions beginning in 2002 but included all prehistoric objects from Thailand seized from the targeted collections.

[18] See for example Federal Rules of Evidence (2024), no. 702, 703, 1006: https://www.uscourts.gov/sites/default/files/2025-02/federal-rules-of-evidence-dec-1-2024_0.pdf.



Figure 4: One of the very few pots with a FAD export approval certificate encountered during Operation Antiquity © Todd Swain

was calculated based on comparisons with scientific excavations at comparable Thai sites which yielded collections equivalent in quality to the seized materials. The lead author requested assistance from co-authors David Welch and Judith McNeill who had conducted several professional archeological investigations in Thailand and elsewhere to extract and organize the needed data from the massive spreadsheets of the seized materials.

Methodological Overview

The methodology for determining the archeological value of the seizures (the costs of the retrieval of scientific information which would have been obtainable if the source sites had not been damaged) involved five steps:

1. Compile and quantify the volumes from scientifically excavated archeological deposits that produced intact and reconstructible artifacts comparable to objects in the seized collections.
2. Calculate the average archeological deposit removed to retrieve one instance of an intact/reconstructible artifact for each class of artifact (pots, copper-base adzes, etc.).
3. Develop a budget for an archeological program (preparation, excavation, study, and report preparation) for a single year at a site in Thailand comparable to the ones from which the seized artifacts likely came, along with a resultant budgetary cost per cubic meter to undertake a scientific study at such a site.
4. Calculate metrics for damages represented by each individual seized artifact (i.e., average number of excavated cubic meters for professional archeologists to retrieve one artifact [from step 2] times cost per meter for study of said artifact [from step 3]). Resultant metrics provide AV for individually seized artifacts.
5. Results of step 4 are used to estimate damages in terms of AV.

These damage values are applied to each collection held by an investigated person or institution, to each class of objects, as well as to assess the entire aggregate of objects to provide the damage assessment for the seizures as a whole.

Examination of data from scientifically excavated sites provides metrics for the average volume of deposit removed to recover an intact pot, an intact copper-base adze, etc. Since neither archeologists nor looters have X-ray vision to see below the earth's surface, looters are almost certain, in the course of retrieving intact objects, to dig through a volume of soil at a scale comparable to an archeological team, disturbing context, discarding unwanted cultural and biological materials, and damaging deposits surrounding the object and other artifacts near the found intact object.

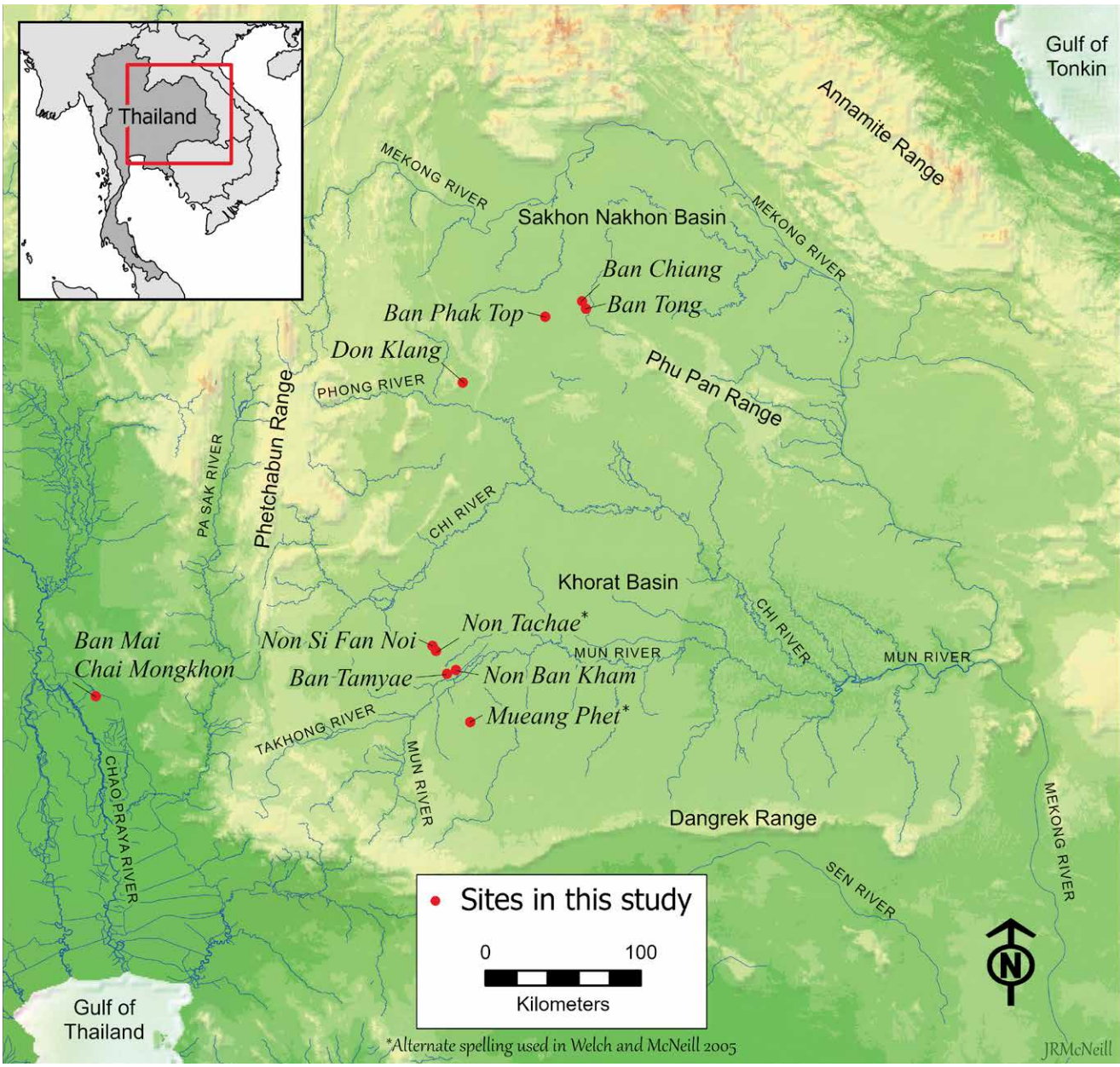
Operationalizing Methodology

Step 1. Compile Baseline Archeological Data

Baseline data on excavation volumes and recovery rates for intact or reconstructible objects were compiled from scientific excavations of Thai prehistoric sites that yielded materials broadly comparable to those represented in the seized collections. These data were drawn from several well-documented excavations. White contributed the records from the two Penn Museum–Thai FAD projects at Ban Chiang (บ้านเชียง; 1974–1975), together with the contemporaneous excavations at Ban Tong (บ้านโทง) and Ban Phak Top (บ้านผักตบ) in Udon Thani province and Don Klang (ดอนกลาง) in Khon Kaen province.[19] She also incorporated comparable data from the 1994–1995 Silpakorn University excavations at Ban Mai Chai Mongkhon (บ้านใหม่ชัยมงคล) in Nakhon Sawan province, analyzed by Chureekamol Onsuwan Eyre (2000). David Welch and Judith McNeill contributed data from their excavations at Ban Tamyae (บ้านตำแย), Non Ban Kham (โนนบ้านคำ), Mueang Phet (เมืองเพชร), Non Si Fan Noi (โนนสีฟันน้อย), and Non Tachae (โนน ตาแจ้) in the upper Mun River valley of Nakhon Ratchasima province (Welch 1985; McNeill 1997; Welch & McNeill 1988–89, 2005). These 11 excavations at 10 sites include diverse site types located in different environments covering different regions of Thailand **[Map 1]**. Cultural materials from these sites cover the temporal range when the artifacts in the seized collections were manufactured.

Archeologists excavating these sites recorded the total amount of deposit excavated, the number of burials, and the number of intact or reconstructed artifacts of various types as well as all fragments—Ban Chiang had more than 1 million sherds—and other items such as bone and charcoal. The rates of recovery in scientific excavations of the kinds of intact objects that collectors and museums are interested in acquiring can be calculated from these data. At these excavations, the volume of deposits removed ranged from 8 to 226 cubic meters, while the total volume of excavated deposits from all 10 sites is 712 cubic meters. Forty-one classes of artifacts are noted from all sites. Since

[19] For an overview of these sites, see White 2018.



MAP 1: Prehistoric sites providing reference data from scientific excavations
© Judith R. McNeill

sites vary in the density and types of intact artifacts recovered, combining the volume and recovery data from all 10 sites provides the most realistic "rates of recovery" of intact/reconstructible objects per volume of deposit, forming the basis of quantifying archeological values for the seized collections. **Online Appendix 2** provides the overall table of the excavated volume and the quantities of intact/reconstructible objects recovered at each site.[20]

[20] Available at: https://doi.org/10.69486/114.2.2026.3b.

Table 1: AV Calculation for Selected Excavated Artifact Classes

Number of artifacts recovered from 11 excavations in Thailand
Total volume excavated = 712 cubic meters
(See Online Appendix 2 for full list)

	COMPLETE	TOTAL	DENSITY	RECOVERY	AV in US$
Copper-base adzes	1	1	0.001	712.00	7,298,000
Copper-base bangles	29	100	0.041	24.55	251,655
Beads: translucent glass	59	94	0.083	12.07	123,695
opaque glass	224	231	0.315	3.18	32,580
stone	3	3	0.004	237.33	2,432,667
Copper-base bells	5	7	0.007	142.40	1,459,600
Pottery vessels	109	668	0.153	6.53	66,954
Clay rollers	41	232	0.058	17.37	178,000

COMPLETE = intact or reconstructed artifacts; good provenience only (no unprovenienced surface collections)
TOTAL = number of artifacts both complete and fragmentary
DENSITY = number of complete artifacts per one cubic meter
RECOVERY = estimated recovery rate, cubic meters per one complete artifact
AV = US$ per complete artifact (see Online Appendix 2 for cubic meter rate determination)

Step 2. Calculate Rates of Recovery of Intact Objects from Archeological Deposits

These data can then be used to provide quantitative evidence for an average number of cubic meters that would be excavated to retrieve one intact/reconstructible artifact of each of the various classes. For example, an average of about 25 cubic meters of excavated deposit could produce one intact copper-base bangle. **Table 1** shows average cubic meters likely needed to excavate intact artifacts from several example classes: pots, copper-base adzes, copper-base bangles, clay pellets, and beads. **Online Appendix 2** presents an overview of all data.

Step 3. Develop Archeological Budget for Commensurate Site

In 2009, USAOCC requested that the damage assessment team prepare a preliminary monetary assessment of archeological value for a subset of seizures. As required by ARPA, the team developed a budget for a hypothetical archeological project to undertake a suitable scientific excavation and study of a site in Thailand of the kind that produced the majority of the seized objects. Understanding the budget first requires appreciation of the kind of sites characteristic of the relevant time period in northeast and central Thailand and the archeological methods needed to obtain scientific understanding of such sites. Archeological budgets are not "one size fits all". Different kinds of sites require

different scales of excavation, ranges of expertise, types of post-excavation studies, laboratory expenses, etc.

Distinctive Aspects of Thai Prehistoric Archeology

Type of Site and Site Formation

Because burials tend to provide archeologists with intact artifacts in good condition, most prehistoric objects from Thailand seized in Operation Antiquity would have been grave goods. However, sites with burials in Thailand usually were also locations where people lived and may continue to live. Thus burials were apparently placed under, between, or adjacent to houses, a practice known as "residential burial" (White & Eyre 2011). Moreover, these sites were often inhabited for centuries; prehistoric Ban Chiang had people living there for more than 2,000 years. Archeologists conducting scientific excavations at these mixed mortuary/occupation sites usually find dense, deep, complicated deposits that not only include human burials, but also debris and features from daily life **[Figure 5]**.

Scientific excavations in Thailand rarely recover intact objects from mixed mortuary/occupation sites. **Online Appendix 2** lays out the evidence from 11 excavations at 10 sites, including the two at Ban Chiang where field seasons

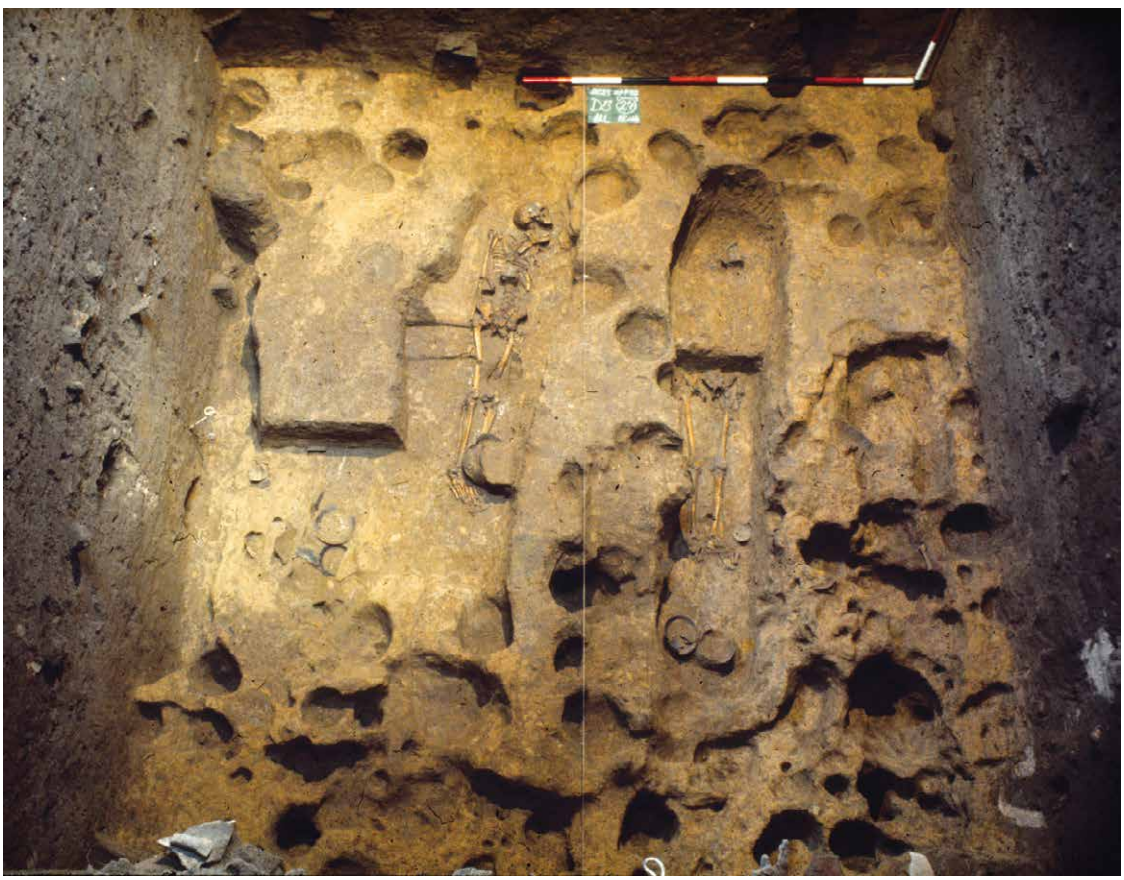


Figure 5: Ban Chiang excavation, 1975, showing the depth and complexity of the mixed burial and occupation deposits © Ban Chiang Project

lasted 6–9 months each. Non-marketable remains from burials and habitation contexts tossed aside by looters represent the vast majority of finds at these kinds of sites. Scientific excavation and analysis of these sites provide important evidence of past human occupation of contemporary Thailand's landscape and answers to questions about regional origins of agriculture and metallurgy, economic development from production activities and regional trade, the development of hierarchical societies and other societal structures, as well as human migrations and interactions.

Excavation Challenges of Mixed Mortuary/Occupation Sites

Scientifically excavating mixed mortuary/occupation sites in Thailand, inhabited sometimes for millennia and often reaching 4–6 meters in depth, is difficult, time consuming, and expensive. While all archeological excavations require careful observation and meticulous attention to detail, 21st-century excavations in Thailand (and Southeast Asia in general) involve complexities of a high order, including relatively expensive budgets, numerous experts, and lengthy timetables.

Long-term occupation at these sites means that layers are often cut into by later graves and deposits, resulting in complicated stratigraphy. The tropical climate can blur stratigraphic layers and the outlines of burial pits and encourage insect and small animal activity that further mix deposits. In addition, these sites are often still inhabited. Excavating large areas to reach depths of several meters brings challenges of logistics and recording.

Specialists normally need to be on site to document and collect special samples for analysis. Physical anthropologists document human remains *in situ* through drawings and photographs, recording often fragile and fragmentary remains. They identify and separate the bones of individuals when multiple burials occur together and document possible ritual treatments of corpses or cremated remains. Geoarcheologists sample sediments to determine how deposits formed or became disturbed and chemical processes that may have affected preservation of the site's contents. Archeobotanists retrieve and study often microscopic plant remains to identify past vegetation around a site, as well as cultivated crops and wild plants used by past communities.

All these factors must be considered in estimating the time required, the know-how needed, and the budget necessary to conduct an excavation designed to retrieve the maximum amount of scientific information from a mixed mortuary/occupation site.

Post-Excavation Challenges

Scientific excavations are usually just the beginning of several years of study of retrieved collections and their contexts, plus additional years writing up the material leading to publication of the results (e.g., Gorman & Pisit 1976; White 1982, 1986; Pietrusewsky & Douglas 2002; White & Hamilton 2018–2022). Post-excavation study involves not only archeologists but also specialists such as archeometallurgists, ceramic specialists, archeobotanists, faunal analysts, and physical anthropologists. Archeologists compare the evidence from numerous

scientifically excavated sites to reconstruct regional dietary patterns and intercommunity relationships expressed in trade or conflict, providing insight into how past societies have adapted to and impacted on Thailand's landscape. Only by the sequence of (1) excavation, (2) post-excavation analysis, and (3) publication can knowledge of prehistoric past enter the public domain, first in primary scientific reports (peer-reviewed articles and monographs) and later in secondary syntheses for more general audiences.

Budgeting a Project Year for Excavation and Study at a Mortuary/Occupation Site

ARPA standards require the preparation of line-item budgets to estimate costs to retrieve the scientific information that would have been obtained before the damage to sites by looters. Budgets cover all expenses for a research program from initial planning to report writing with the goal of providing the basis for justifying archeological valuation for criminal cases. The budget for damage assessments was prepared by the authors, based on decades of experience in developing similar budgets for culture resource management activities in Japan, Micronesia, and Hawai'i and conducting research in Southeast Asia. The line-item budget estimated costs for one year of research, including a 2-month excavation season followed by 10 months of analysis and report preparation. This budget for one "project year" included the kinds of expertise and analyses that can be anticipated in this kind of archeological program in Thailand. For this article, the original preliminary budget prepared in 2009 has been updated in **Online Appendix 3**[21] to account for inflation to the year 2025 CE (2568 BE for the Thai calendar).

The expert team estimated that in a properly funded and staffed two-month field season, with a team of six archeologists, eight laborers, and three specialists, 48 cubic meters (4 x 4 x 3m, for example) would be excavated and, in the following 10 months, studied using proper procedures. Note that this 1-year program would excavate only a small portion of sites from this time period, some of which could be many hectares in size. Such an excavation would be considered "small". Costs include funding archeologists and experts (as detailed in the preceding section) for both excavation and post-excavation work at a mixed mortuary/occupation site similar to Ban Chiang. The experts and studies would address basic questions such as the sequencing and age of the site's deposits, description of mortuary evidence including burial rituals and the population that inhabited the site, dietary and environmental evidence, technological expertise, and so forth. The budget assumes a team of both Thai and non-Thai staff, with many specialists coming from other countries. The cost of a two-month excavation and the 10-month post-excavation analysis and report preparation came to approximately US$492,000 in 2025 dollars. This projected archeological program identifies what a one-year project might accomplish in ideal conditions and the scale of the budget needed to fully fund that project year.

The "cost per excavated cubic meter" can then be calculated (US$492,000

[21] Available at: https://doi.org/10.69486/114.2.2026.3b.

divided by 48 cubic meters) for a scientific study of a mixed mortuary/occupation site, resulting in a minimum estimated cost of US$10,250 per cubic meter. This amount does not include full publication, which would add substantially to the budget and the time needed for project completion.

To the layperson these numbers may seem high. However, the amounts are realistic and represent employment of a team of professionals and experts to participate in the wide range of tasks necessary in modern archeological research.

Step 4. Archeological Valuations of Objects

This step combines the data from Step 2 (average cubic meters of deposit per object) with data from Step 3 (cost of excavation and study of the relevant cubic meters). Based on data from these two steps, each artifact in the excavated collections can be assigned an archeological value (AV), which can then be applied to the seized collections. These values by artifact class are specified in **Online Appendix 2.**

The seized collections show that the prehistoric artifacts from Thailand of interest to collectors and museums include 176 artifact classes such as intact/reconstructed ceramic vessels, copper-base adzes/axes, copper-base bangles (rings, anklets, bracelets, and neck torques), copper-base bells, and clay rollers. **Table 1** illustrates AV values of a few of the more common classes.

For example, pottery vessels, many of which are "refurbished" **[Figure 6]**, are common objects in the seized collections. Scientific excavations at relevant Thai sites show that on average 6.5 cubic meters of archeological deposit are likely involved in the retrieval of one intact/reconstructible pottery vessel. At a rate of US$10,250 per cubic meter for scientific excavation and study, the recovery of one intact vessel represents an archaeological value (AV) of US$66,954. Copper-base adzes are considerably rarer, with only one recovered from 712 cubic meters of excavation at comparable sites. Accordingly, the AV of a single copper-base adze is estimated at US$7.3 million.

Beads

The most common class of artifacts in the seized collections is beads, numbering more than 20,000, made of different materials including glass, stone, and shell. Beads, which are particular targets for looters (Vallard et al. 2015), deserve special comment. Rachanie Thosarat (2001: 8) reported that, in the Bangkok Plain, "whole sites are sluiced for beads".

In seized material, beads are typically found strung together **[Figure 7]**. This raises the issue of how to count these beads? As "strings" or as individual beads? Normally, in an archeological context, beads are not found strung together. Thus, from both an archeological and an ARPA perspective, each bead is considered an individual artifact with its own composition, manufacturing history, uses (such as a trade good, grave good, or personal adornment), and archeological context, whether from a burial, a particular site, or a workshop. Contrastingly, the "strings" are assembled by looters and middlemen to make the beads marketable commodities. Interviews with Thai collectors have



Figure 6: Villagers at Ban Pulu, near Ban Chiang, refurbishing looted pottery vessels, 1979. Many seized vessels are pieced together and repainted for the market © Joyce White



Figure 7: Stringed beads from a seized collection; beads from multiple contexts, each counted as an individual artifact in the damage assessment © Todd Swain

shown that strings are made of beads collected from numerous different contexts and sites (Vallard et al. 2015).

Removal of beads from their archeological provenience and their subsequent agglomeration into marketable strings destroys their potential to contribute to interesting and important lines of archeological investigation. Scientific studies of beads from prehistoric Thai sites, such as Carter et al.'s (2022) study of glass beads from Phromthin Tai (พรหมทินใต้), Lopburi province, provide data of how the inhabitants at particular timeframes participated in exchange networks that included other parts of mainland Southeast Asia, South China Sea coasts, and beyond. The beads found in Burial 20 at this site had two different chemical signatures, meaning they probably originated from two different production/exchange networks. They likely dated from a period when bead exchange networks shifted from a South China Sea focus to an expanded Mekong River Interaction Sphere.[22] Such nuanced data showing how past communities in Thailand related to larger regional exchange networks is destroyed when beads are removed from their *in-situ* context and marketed as commodities.

Step 5. Application of Archeological Damage Valuations

AV numbers can be applied to seized materials to calculate the costs to recover and study these materials with scientific excavations and analyses. The collections documented from the investigated subjects range from 4 to 12,851 objects per entity and in aggregate more than 34,000 objects are listed in the OA spreadsheets **[Online Appendix 1]**. These are minimum numbers for OA seizures because Thai collections at several subject museums were incompletely documented and collections of some investigated subjects were never tallied.

Aggregate values can be calculated from the numbers available from seized collections in various ways to assess damages in terms of "archeological value"; they thus form one component of an archeological damage assessment for the OA case. However, because of the unpredictability of excavation at any particular location, a simple summation of the values for every artifact is not an accurate approach. Two cubic meters excavated by an archeologist to expose and remove one burial might contain multiple intact and marketable artifacts or it might produce no such objects.

The expert team (the authors of this article), in close consultation with federal attorneys, felt that it would be more accurate to present ranges of AV from possible maximum to probable minimum values. The objective was to develop an archeologically viable approach that would be reasonable and defensible in court. Those estimated ranges can be calculated for each subject investigated as well as by artifact classes across all seizures for aggregate numbers **[Online Appendix 1]**. These numbers also provide a sense of the scale of damage in terms of the cubic meters of deposit destroyed and the number of "project years" that would have been needed to conduct proper research of the evidence if undisturbed.

[22] See also Xu Siwen et al., this volume—*Editor's note.*

Table 2: Damage (AV) Calculations in US$ for a Sample of Seizures

Seizure Collection	Copper-base Adzes		Copper-base Bangles		Glass Beads		Stone Beads		Copper-base Bells		Pottery Vessels		Clay Rollers	
Museum 1	111	810,078,000	371	93,364,069	3,942	128,431,768	209	2,432,876	31	45,247,600	461	30,865,853	24	4,272,000
Museum 2	18	131,364,000	49	12,331,103	1,821	59,328,830			10	14,596,000	41	2,745,119	20	3,560,000
Middleman 1	256	1,868,288,000	2,884	725,773,517	42	1,368,375	4,482	10,903,212,000	1,058	1,544,256,800	1,158	77,532,881	130	23,140,000
Middleman 2	25	182,450,000	23	5,788,069	582	18,961,768	4,410	10,728,060,000	8	11,676,800	51	3,414,661	10	1,780,000
Individual 1	15	109,470,000	105	26,423,793					10	14,596,000	14	937,358	6	1,068,000
Individual 2	7	51,086,000	24	6,039,724					28	40,868,800	35	2,343,394	3	534,000
TOTAL	432		3,456		6,387		9,101		1,145		1,760		193	

	Copper-base Adzes	Copper-base Bangles	Glass Beads	Stone Beads	Copper-base Bells	Pottery Vessels	Clay Rollers
GRAND TOTAL	**444**	**3,879**	**6,390**	**9,128**	**1,158**	**1,953**	**571**
AV in US$	**7,298,000**	**251,655**	**32,580**	**2,432,667**	**1,459,600**	**66,954**	**178,000**
AV Damage in US$	**3,240,312,000**	**976,170,414**	**208,188,482**	**22,205,381,333**	**1,690,216,800**	**130,761,413**	**101,638,000**

TOTAL = the sum of the six (6) example seizures
GRAND TOTAL = the sum from all seizures reported in this article
AV = US$ per complete artifact (see Online Appendix 2)
AV Damage for OA seizure

Take pottery vessels as one example. Each pot has an AV of US$66,954; the total number of pots in OA documented seizures is 1,953. Therefore, the damage to archeological sites from pots alone comes to approximately US$131 million. That represents 12,757 cubic meters of damage or almost 266 project years of archeological research. Seized collections from individual investigated subjects can also be assigned AV damages. **Table 2** and **Figure 8** provide a snapshot of selected seizure valuations in aggregate and also by the main investigated subjects and their holdings of some classes of objects. Middleman 1, for whom 12,851 objects were documented—the largest collection seized—held 1,158 pots. His pottery collection thus represents an AV of approximately US$77.5 million (7,564 cubic meters of destroyed deposit and 158 project years of research). Museum 1 had 461 ceramic pots resulting in an AV damages of approximately US$30.9 million.

Copper-base adzes are extremely rare in archeological excavations, with only one recovered in 712 cubic meters from the excavated comparative sites. The total number of copper-base adzes documented in OA seizures was 444 which represents, based on their AV of approximately US$7.3 million each, a total AV of more than US$3.24 billion **[Figure 9]**. That represents 316,128 cubic meters of archeological damage needing 6,586 project years for research. Middleman 1 had 256 copper-base adzes representing a total AV of about US$1.87 billion. Similarly, Museum 1 had 111 copper-base adzes representing an AV of its adze collection of approximately US$810 million.

The very high recovery of beads, especially stone beads, from the OA seizures is reflected in **Fig. 8** and **Table 2**, as well as in the extraordinarily high AV assigned to stone beads, exceeding US$22 billion. Based on extrapolations from the documented seized collections, the overall damage to the Thai archeological record represented by OA falls within the range of hundreds of millions to billions of U.S. dollars. This publica-

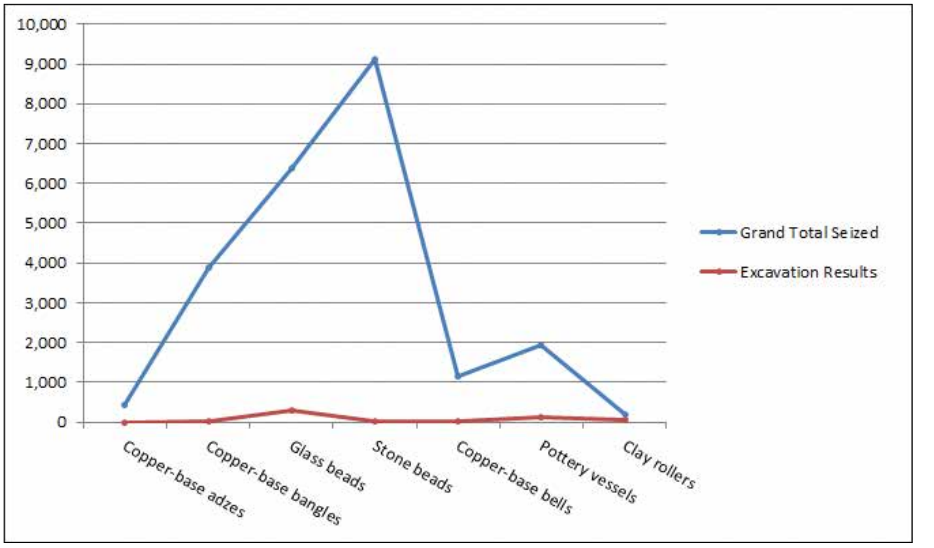


Figure 8: Whole artifacts from seized collections compared with those recovered from scientific excavation © Joyce White et al.

tion is the initial presentation of these valuation estimates.

The large monetary values generated by this methodology should not be mistaken for the commercial value of artifacts or the cost of excavating every threatened site. Rather, they serve as legally defined proxies for demonstrating the scale of archeological damage identified in the OA case, losses that are ultimately irreplaceable and beyond monetary valuation. No amount of funding can reconstruct the original contexts once they have been destroyed.

Outcomes

As with most court cases in the United States, Operation Antiquity was never fully litigated to a trial verdict. The U.S. Government brings only a portion of its investigations to litigated results and even fewer to trial; most cases end with plea deals and non-prosecution agreements, and some cases expire from statutes of limitations or because the subjects die. Sometimes the DOJ objective is more about changing behavior by shining a light on a problem than in bringing every individual or institutional wrongdoer "to justice".

OA did result in four felony convictions and, in an extremely rare example for antiquities cases in the U.S., actual jail time for one of the middlemen implicated in the trafficking.[23] Some artifacts have been returned to Thailand as a result of non-prosecution agreements[24] with two implicated museums and some antiquities originating from other countries were returned as well.[25]



Figure 9: 444 copper-base adzes from OA seizures (combined AV: ~US$3.24 billion). Only one comparable adze was recovered at Ban Chiang during the 1974–75 scientific excavations
© Joyce White

Perhaps one of the quickest and most important outcomes was the realization by U.S. museums that their accessioning of illicitly trafficked antiquities is punishable by stiff penalties. Museums

[23] See: https://www.justice.gov/usao-cdca/pr/los-angeles-art-dealer-sentenced-federal-prison-smuggling-stolen-antiquities-and (accessed 20 July 2026).

[24] Non-Prosecution Agreements are common resolutions in the U.S. legal system when objects of civil or criminal investigations agree to fulfill specific sanctions and the government agrees not to file charges.

[25] See: https://chasingaphrodite.com/2014/06/10/scoop-bowers-museum-will-return-500-thai-antiquities-seized-during-2008-raids/ (accessed 20 July 2026).

cannot afford images of hundreds of law enforcement officers encamped around their grounds and probing their collections and records. U.S. museums for years had been debating the ethics of acquiring unprovenienced and looted archeological objects, especially following the U.S. criminal trial of New York dealer Fred Schultz and Italy's criminal trial of J. Paul Getty Museum's curator in Los Angeles, Marion True (Murali 2012). However, the January 2008 well-publicized federal raids at several U.S. museums showed that criminal prosecutions would not be limited to middlemen or foreign courts. Those raids created a tipping point for U.S. museum recognition of their potential criminal liability from accessioning unprovenienced and looted archeological objects.

Thus shortly after the raids, on 3 June 2008, the Association of Art Museum Directors issued revised guidelines for Acquisition of Archeological Materials and Ancient Art, emphasizing detailed provenances that show the date the artifact was removed before 1970 from its original country or detailing clearly its legal exportation after this date.[26] The revised guidelines indirectly acknowledge the role that certain museums played in fueling looting and smuggling of artifacts; the Association set down stricter voluntary guidelines to attempt to curb this practice. Nonetheless, some scholars subsequently sought to fabricate provenance histories of objects to fit the new guidelines (Smith 2025).

Another important indirect outcome has been the energizing of source countries in Southeast Asia, including Thailand, to pro-actively seek repatriation of their illegally exported objects (Crosbie-Jones 2025). The articles in this Special Edition are a testament to changed attitudes in both international institutions and source countries, including new efforts by Southeast Asia nations to request restitution and repatriation of their heritage items from museums around the globe. Remaining unresolved are issues of the long-term custody and disposition of seized objects that have not yet been repatriated or addressed by other legal resolutions. These issues, while beyond the scope of this article, remain important aspects of the broader legacy of the case.

Some Final Thoughts

The pillaging of Ban Chiang and Thailand's archeological resources is not a new topic (Gorman 1982; Lyons & Rainey 1982). Publications decried the destruction for decades, but the losses were generally described in qualitative terms. Damage had not previously been assessed through a systematic methodology that quantified either monetary losses or the volume of archeological resources destroyed. Operation Antiquity provides, utilizing a comprehensive case study, a new quantitative perspective on both the financial consequences and the likely scale of archeological resource destruction.

Using the landmark OA case, this article has examined how monetary damages can be assigned to unprovenienced antiquities based on their archeological value. The assessment follows ARPA requirements by calculating damages according to the costs of recovering the scientific information

[26] See: https://culturalpropertynews.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/AAMD-REPORT-ON-ACQUISITION-OF-ARCHAEOLOGICAL-MATERIALS-AND-ANCIENT-ART-2008.pdf (accessed 20 July 2026).

that would have been obtainable prior to the looting of archeological sites. If the materials seized by Operation Antiquity had been recovered in scientific excavations and undergone scientific study and publication what would such a research program cost? The method employed by the authors was to use data from scientific excavations of Thai sites to provide figures for the amount of excavation that would likely be needed to retrieve intact artifacts comparable to the seized materials.

The OA case has additional significance because it involves a large volume of objects of archeological origin. Although many of these objects have relatively modest individual commercial value, their aggregate loss represents a massive amount of archeological damage. Whereas many prominent antiquities trafficking cases have focused on individual high-value art objects, such as the Getty's Aphrodite,[27] the AV assessment of the OA seizures—based on tens of thousands of looted objects—reveals a scale of archeological loss that far surpasses previous cases involving individual works of art, plausibly reaching into the billions of U.S. dollars.

The methodology presented here is specific to the ARPA framework and does not evaluate how the same evidence might be assessed under Thai law. Moreover, the OA seizures represent only a portion of the broader global dispersal of unprovenienced prehistoric objects from Thailand. The total archeological loss is probably considerably greater than the values calculated in this study, which do not include other museums and private collections holding significant Thai prehistoric materials.

Not included in these monetary calculations are broader economic and social losses, including potential impacts on national tourism and local communities that might have developed archeological resources through scientific research and heritage initiatives, as Ban Chiang village has done **[Figure 10]**. The assessment also does not account for lost educational opportunities related to national heritage, nor for potential employment opportunities for archeologists and heritage professionals at local, provincial, and national levels. Regardless of who assesses the damage or which methodology is applied, the tens of thousands of objects documented by Operation Antiquity demonstrate the devastating impact of looting on Thailand's archeological resources. Twenty-five years ago, Rachanie Thosarat (2001: 12) aptly described the destruction of Thailand's prehistoric sites as "a cultural catastrophe".

Ultimately, the central question is, what does Thailand seek from its past and how can its archeological resources serve contemporary society? What knowledge, educational opportunities, and social or economic benefits can emerge from the scientific study of these resources? What questions about the origins and development of Thai society can only be answered through systematic archeological research?

Moving beyond the presentation of ancient objects as merely "pots on shelves" in museums and galleries requires a broad approach that reveals past communities, social relationships, interactions, and historic developments.

[27] Also illegally excavated. See: https://traffickingculture.org/encyclopedia/case-studies/1059/ (accessed 6 August 2026).



Figure 10: School children at the Ban Chiang National Museum view a model of Burial 23 from the 1974 Penn/FAD excavation © Ban Chiang National Museum

This requires not only excavation but also the scientific and social scientific analysis of excavated materials and their contexts. When properly unearthed and thoroughly studied, Thailand's prehistoric sites constitute vast repositories of information about early agricultural and metal-age societies, not only in Thailand but across mainland Southeast Asia. Scientifically investigated archeological sites provide essential portals to Thailand's deep history.

The authors hope that this study will contribute to greater appreciation of Thailand's remaining archeological resources and encourage increased investment in their protection, as well as in their systematic scientific excavation and analysis. The importance of Thai archeological resources extends far beyond Thailand itself. The distinctive qualities of the region's prehistoric evidence provide important new perspectives of international significance for understanding human history (e.g., Dardeniz 2022). However, this potential value will only be realized if archeologists are able to identify, protect, and investigate intact, non-looted sites and study evidence in its original context. Once archeological context is destroyed, even extensive and costly scientific study cannot reconstruct the lost information. The value of intact sites therefore lies not only in the objects they contain, but even more in the relationships, associations, and historical knowledge preserved within their contexts.

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In Small Things Forgotten? Repatriating Small, Utilitarian Cambodian Artifacts

Alison Kyra Carter[1] **& Chhay Visoth**[2]

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

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

Introduction

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

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

[1] University of Oregon, Eugene.
Corresponding author. Email: acarter4@uoregon.edu.
[2] National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Penh.

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

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

Background

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Table 1: Objects in TC's collection

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

How Did These Objects End Up in the Marketplace?

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

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



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

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

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

Importing Artifacts into the U.S.

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

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

Working with Collectors and Looted Collections

In recent years, multiple institutions and Western organizations developed

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Researching the Collection: An Opportunity for Student Involvement

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

Returning Home: The Logistics of Repatriating Artifacts

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

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

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

What Happens When These Artifacts Return to Cambodia?

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

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

Benefits and Challenges to Accepting Looted Collections

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

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

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

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

Concluding Remarks

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

Beth Edelstein[1] **& Alyssa Morasco**[2]

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

[1] Cleveland Museum of Art. Corresponding author. Email: bedelstein@clevelandart.org.

[2] Cleveland Museum of Art.

[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.

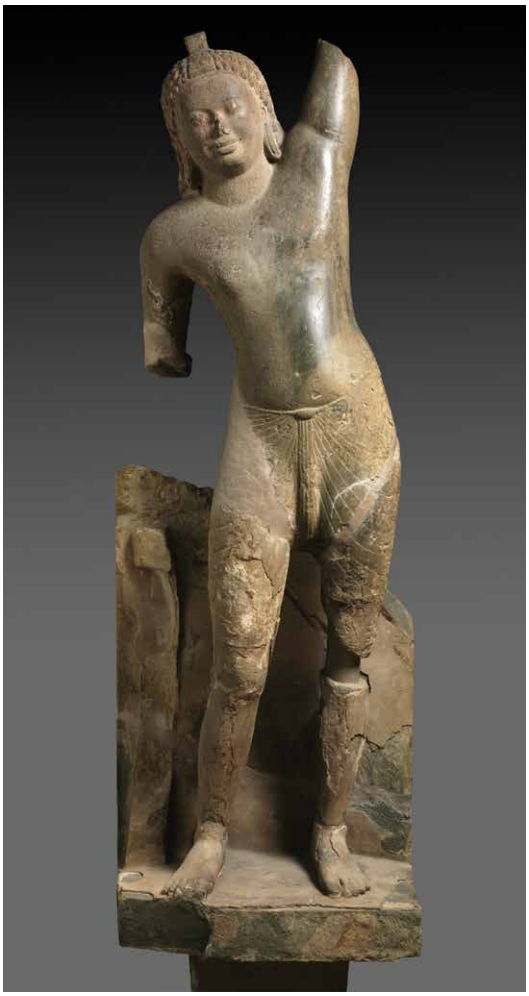


Figure 5: The CMA Kṛṣṇa Govardhana, shown prior to the 2018–2021 restoration, including the three lower leg fragments and base that were later reunited with the NMC Kṛṣṇa © CMA



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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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).

https://doi.org/10.69486/114.2.2026.6 © The Siam Society Under Royal Patronage

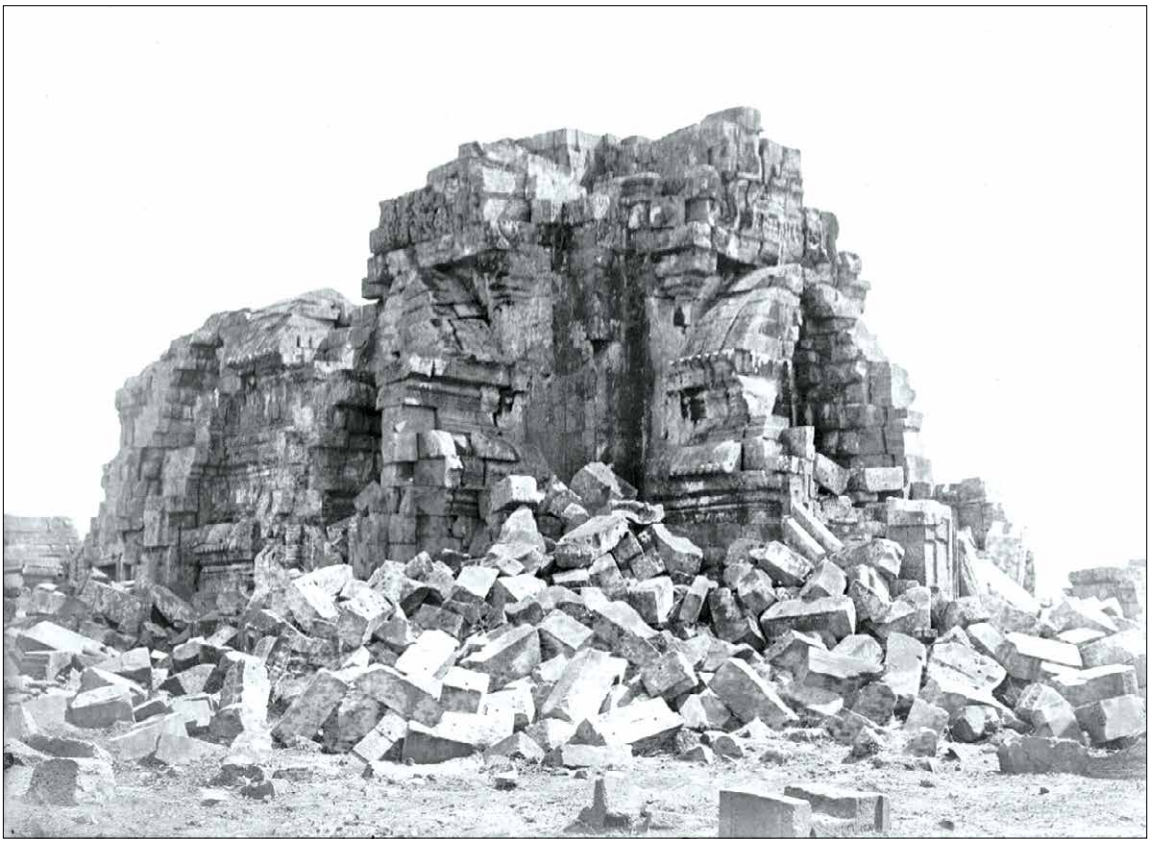


Figure 1: Heaps of stone at Prasat Phanom Rung, main sanctuary, photo by Emil Groote, Jan. 1930 © National Archives of Thailand

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]



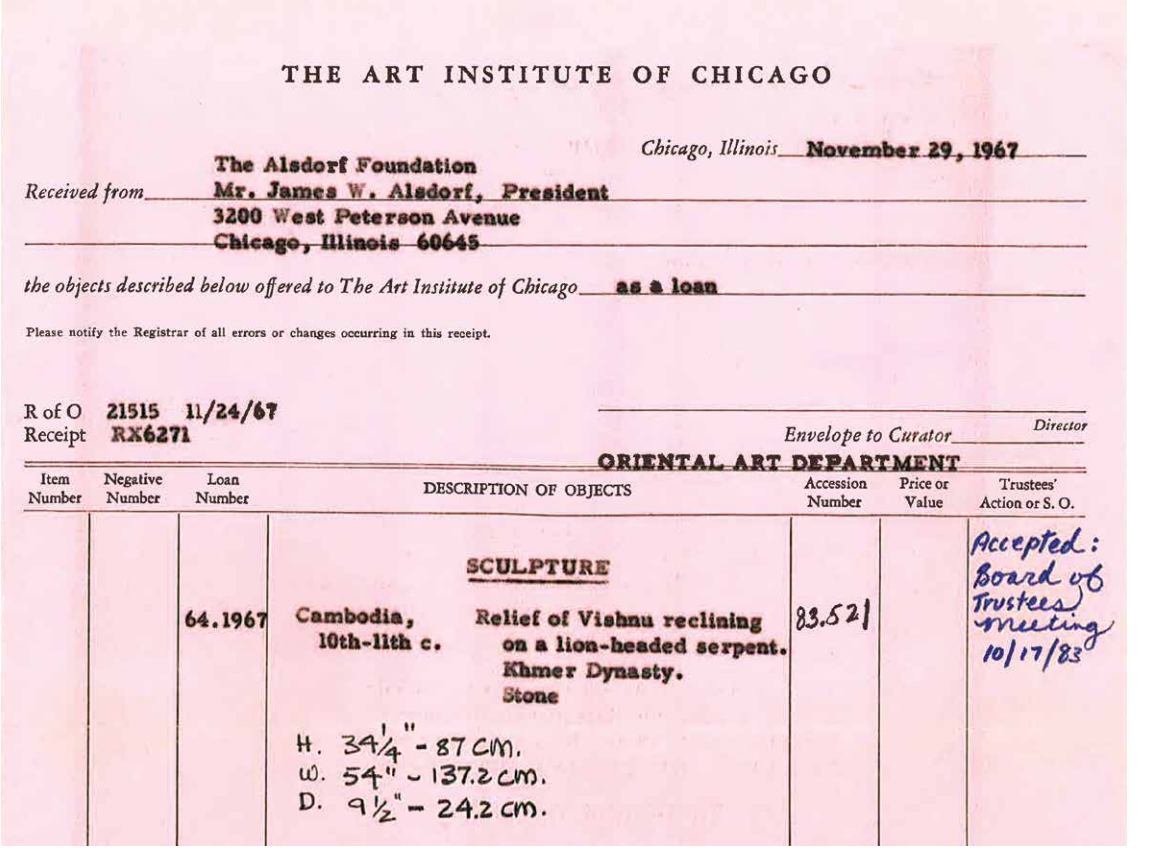
Figure 5: Right fragment of the Viṣṇu lintel lying on the ground *in situ* at Prasat Phanom Rung, photo by Emil Groote, Jan. 1930 © National Archives of Thailand

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.

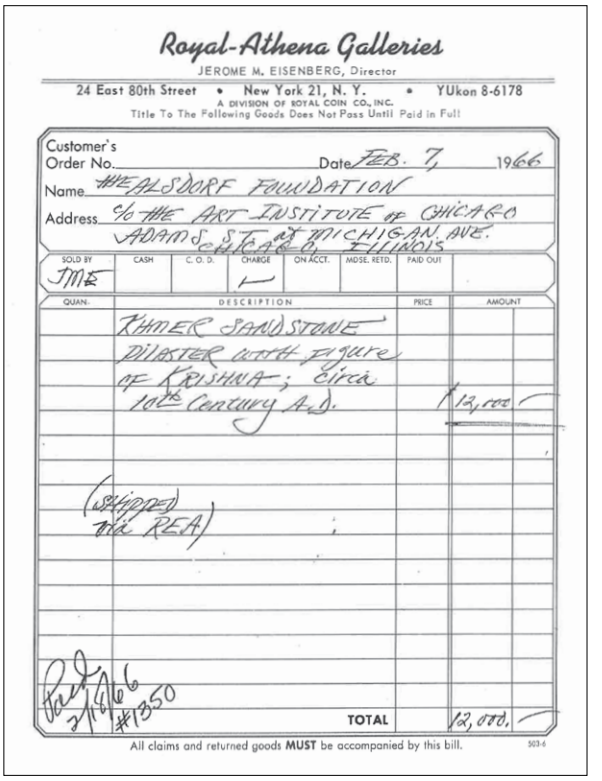
The Pilaster

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.

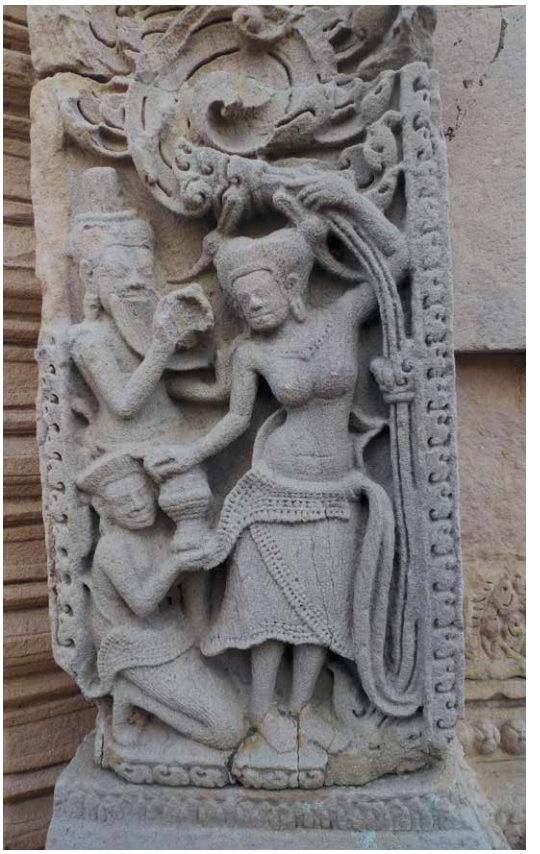


Figure 14: North pilaster base possibly depicting the transfer of the embryo of Balarāma or Kṛṣṇa at Prasat Phanom Rung, eastern entrance of the main sanctuary, Dec. 2023 © Nicolas Revire

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).

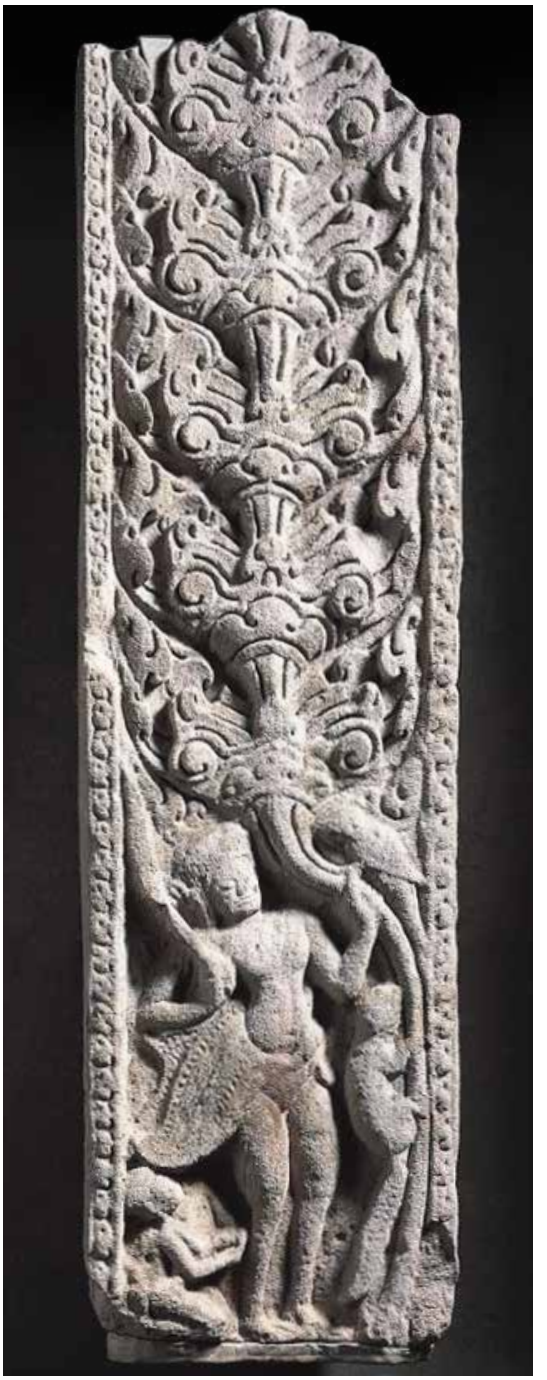


Figure 15: East pilaster base possibly depicting Kṛṣṇa uprooting the Pārijāta tree at Prasat Phanom Rung, northern entrance of the main sanctuary; Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena, H.: 97.8 cm, W.: 27.6 cm, acc. no. F.1975.11.5.S © NSM

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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Reassessing an Angkorian Bronze Masterpiece: The Male Deity from Ban Yang Pong Sadao, Buriram

Brice Vincent,[1] **Donna Strahan,**[2] **Federico Carò,**[3] **Adriana Rizzo,**[4] **David Bourgarit**[5] **& Yvan Coquinot**[6]

Abstract—An exceptionally rare and remarkably well-preserved Khmer bronze statue of a male deity, formerly in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, was recently returned to Thailand. Moving beyond competing ownership claims and nationalist narratives, this article presents the results of an interdisciplinary scientific investigation into the long-life cycle of a unique cult image and its production. The findings place the statue within the political, religious, and technological milieu of the 11th-century Angkorian kingdom while underscoring the transregional character of Khmer bronze statuary. These results also offer a more nuanced understanding of the object's historical and cultural significance in both Thailand and Cambodia.

Keywords: Angkor; Art History; Deity-Image; Khmer Bronzes; Life Cycle; Provenance and Provenience; Technological Investigations

Introduction

An exceptionally rare and well-preserved 11th-century Khmer bronze statue of a male deity, once part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met) in New York City **[Figure 1]**, was recently returned to the Kingdom of Thailand.[7] The sculpture's repatriation was officially announced by the Met in December 2023 and was made effective in May 2024; it is now on view at the National Museum Bangkok (inv. no. 01/01/2567; former Met acc. no. 1988.355). It was returned along with another bronze sculpture of a kneeling female figure (inv. no. 01/02/2567; former Met acc. no. 1972.147; cat. no. 7 in **Online Appendix 1**).[8] Both sculptures are linked to the notorious Thai–British art smuggler and collector of South and Southeast Asian antiquities, Douglas

[1] École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), Paris. Corresponding author. Email: brice.vincent@efeo.net.

[2] Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art, Washington, D.C.

[3] The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met), New York City.

[4] The Met, New York City.

[5] Centre de recherche et de restauration des musées de France (C2RMF), Paris.

[6] C2RMF, Paris.

[7] Publications that mention the statue are listed here in chronological order: Felten & Lerner 1989: 224–227; Watt et al. 1989: cover, 92; Burn 1993: 168–169; Kossak & Lerner 1994: 80, 82, fig. 85; Woodward 1997: 92, n. 24; Strahan 1998: 101; Thompson 1999: 278, n. 28; Bunker & Latchford 2004: 213–214; Woodward 2005: 127; Felten 2006: 48–49; Baptiste & Zéphir 2008: 205; Bunker 2008: 299; Bunker & Latchford 2008: 45; Gerschheimer & Vincent 2010: 118–119; Woodward 2010: 50, n. 27; Bunker & Latchford 2011: 234, 240, fig. 7.15a–b; Bunker 2011–2012: 21, 23; Campbell 2012: 123; Vincent 2012: ill. 2.15a–b; Vincent 2014a: 106–127; Vincent 2014b: 23–26; CAST:ING 2018; Feneley 2023: 261, 264, 266, 268, figs 182–185; Vincent & Bourgarit 2025; Chiu 2026.

[8] The online appendices are available at: https://doi.org/10.69486/114.2.2026.7b.

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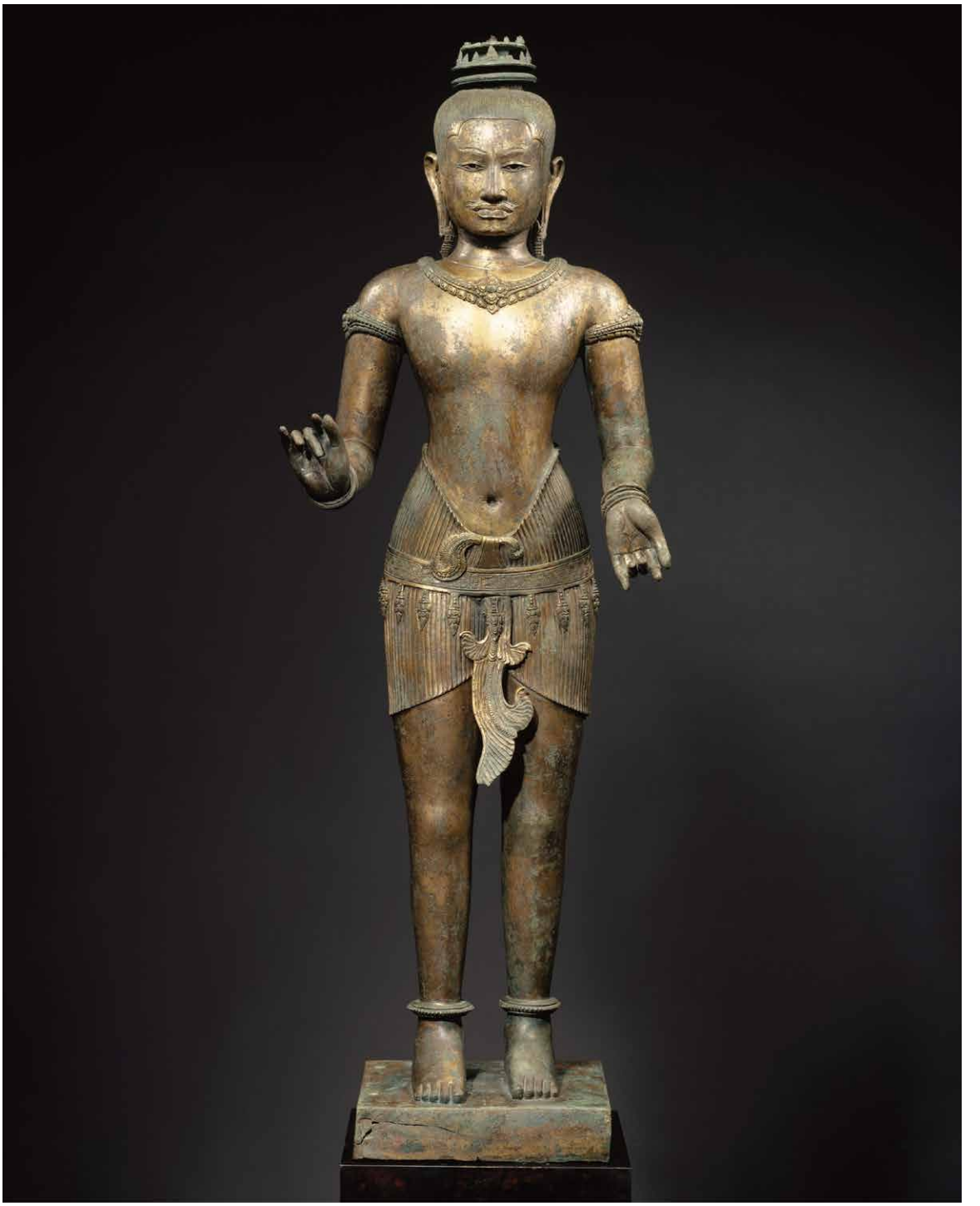


Figure 1: Male deity from Ban Yang Pong Sadao, Ta Chong subdistrict, Lahan Sai district, Buriram province, Thailand; Baphuon style, 1060–1080s; National Museum Bangkok, inv. no. 01/01/2567; formerly at the Met, acc. no. 1988.355; mercury gilded bronze with silver, lead, cinnabar, and red ochre; H.: 131 cm (with tang), W.: 35.5 cm, D.: 34.5 cm, Weight: 66.2 kg © Met

A.J. Latchford, also known as Pakpong Kriangsak (ภัคพงษ์ เกรียงศักดิ์; 1931–2020).[9]

Setting aside the competing ownership claims and nationalist reinterpretations surrounding the statue in both Thailand and Cambodia,[10] this article presents the results of recent interdisciplinary research, combining provenance studies, art history, and technological investigations, to better contextualize this unique religious object and its production within the political, cultural, and technological frameworks of its time. Nevertheless, several questions remain unresolved. After years of discussions and collaborative work, the recent repatriation of the statue, together with this Special Edition of the *Journal of the Siam Society*, provides an excellent opportunity to share our collective research with a wider audience.[11]

From Provenience to Provenance: Discovery and Circulation

The sculpture depicts a two-armed male deity, standing with the right foot slightly forward on a square pedestal. Its height is around 130 cm, including a trapezoidal 25 cm tang under the pedestal that originally helped to stabilize the image on a stone base.

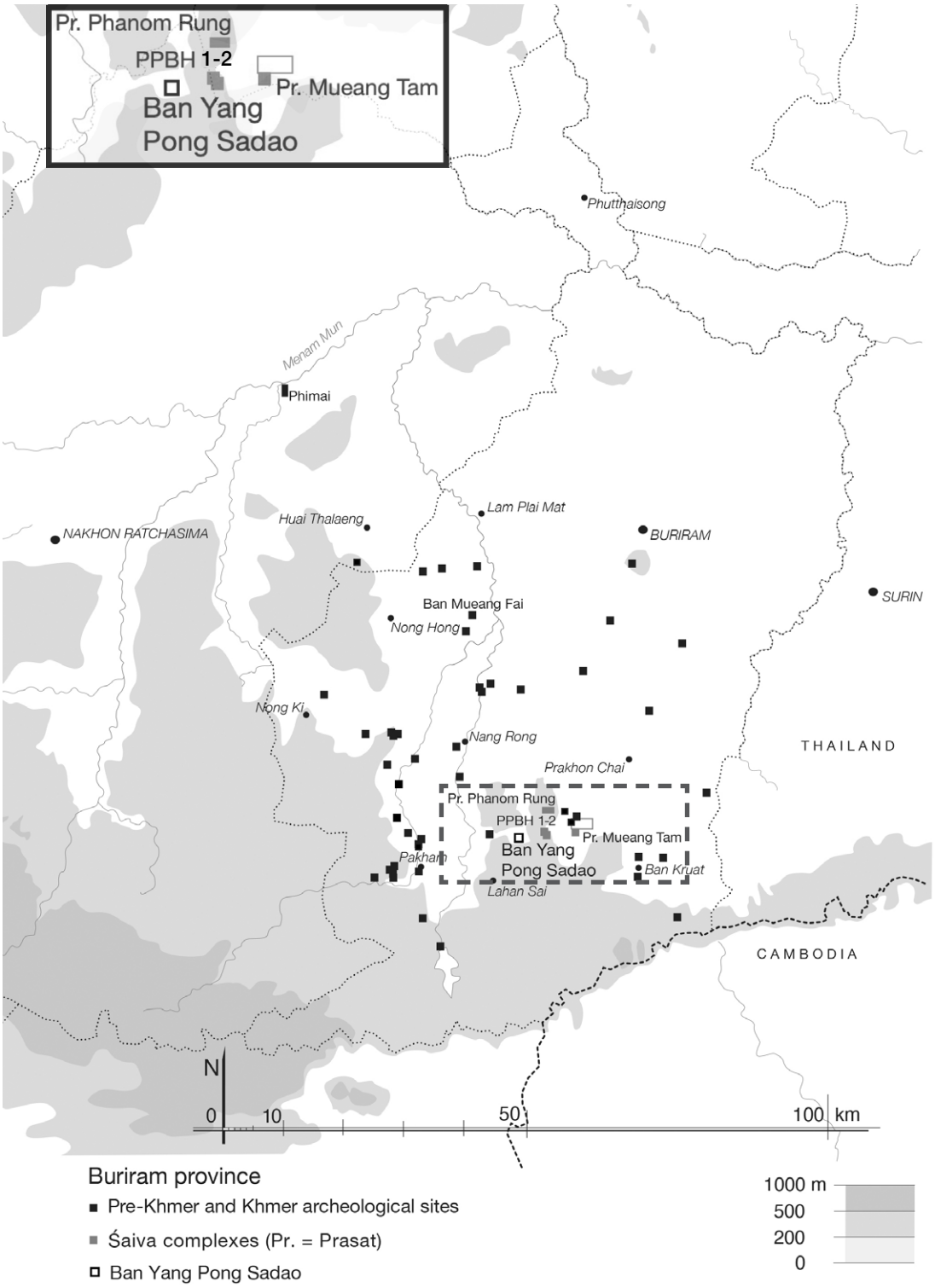
The statue is reported to have been accidently discovered by two brothers in the early 1970s in the northeast Thai village of Ban Yang Pong Sadao (บ้านยางโป่งสะเดา), Ta Chong subdistrict (ต. ตาจง), Lahan Sai district (อ. ละหานทราย), Buriram province (จ. บุรีรัมย์) **[Map 1]**.[12]

[9] The unfortunate nickname "Golden Boy", coined by Latchford himself—presumably to appeal to potential buyers during the "golden age" of the American finance sector in the 1980s—is still widely used to refer to the statue but will be deliberately avoided throughout this article.

[10] See, for example, Crosbie-Jones 2024.

[11] To date, the authors have presented this research only at two scholarly events: first, at the 15th EurASEAA International Conference (Nanterre, France, 6–10 July 2015), where Brice Vincent, Donna Strahan & Federico Carò delivered the unpublished paper "Technical Investigations of a Khmer Bronze Male Deity from the Metropolitan Museum: Angkorian Foundry Practices and 11th-Century Innovations"; and more recently on 9 October 2026, in an online CKS/EFEO webinar, titled *Khmer Objects in Motion: Provenance, Dispersal, and Repatriation?*, where Brice Vincent traced the statue's provenience and subsequent circulation from Buriram to New York City.

[12] This provenience was confirmed during a field survey conducted by Brice Vincent in Buriram province in July 2015, with the invaluable assistance of Surakarn Thoesomboon (Sai) of EFEO Bangkok. The investigation, which included interviews in Thai and Khmer with villagers, was prompted by a brief indication provided by Latchford himself in the already controversial *Khmer Gold: Gifts for the Gods*: "The figure was actually found at the village of Ban Yang, Lahan [Sai] district, where its stone base is still visible, and not in Cambodia" (Bunker & Latchford 2008: 45, n. 25). An earlier source also associated the statue with Buriram province, although less precisely: namely, a comment sheet from the Asia Society's archives (bronze Maitreya, acc. no. 1979.63), dated 13 November 1985, records a verbal communication from Latchford to the curator of Asian art Robert Mowry stating that the statue "was found not too far from Prakhon Chai", a locality likewise situated in Buriram province near Lahan Sai district (on the confusion between Prakhon Chai and Lahan Sai districts, see Revire 2025: 226–227). For additional information on the place of discovery, see Felten & Lerner 1989: 226, Bunker 2008: 299, and Bunker & Latchford 2011: 234; also the Channel News Asia documentary series *Looted* (Season 1, Episode 2, "Hunting Priceless Relics", 16 October 2022: https://www.channelnewsasia.com/watch/looted/hunting-priceless-relics-3009711), which documents the field investigations carried out by Tanongsak & Lalita Hanwong in Ban Yang Pong Sadao in 2022, as well as Chiu 2026.



Map 1: Buriram province sites with Ban Yang Pong Sadao and the three Śaiva complexes of Plai Bat Hill (Prasat Plai Bat Hill 1 and 2 [PPBH 1-2]), Prasat Phanom Rung, and Prasat Mueang Tam © Brice Vincent, adapted from Pierre Pichard



Figure 2: Satellite view of Ban Yang Pong Sadao sanctuary area, Jan. 2014, showing sanctuary (red dot), ancient moat and surviving remains of laterite structures © Google Earth

During a private interview conducted on site in July 2015, the younger of the two brothers—his elder brother having passed away—stated that the statue had been found within the ancient temple of Pa Kruha (ป่าครูหา), a site associated with the local tutelary spirit, Ta Kruha (ตาครูหา). At the time, the area was still forested and contained the ruins of an east-facing laterite sanctuary tower, surrounded by a laterite platform (ca. 35 m²) and enclosed by a rectangular moat measuring approximately 75 × 45 m. By 2015, however, the entire site had been levelled and the temple had been replaced by a building and a concrete playground. Today, the sanctuary tower lies beneath the eastern end of the expanded playground. Only part of the western section of the moat survives, while numerous laterite blocks remain scattered across the site **[Figure 2]**.[13]

According to our interview, the two brothers were digging for tuber crops (Th. *man*; มัน) near the central platform of Pa Kruha when they discovered the statue lying face up at approximately knee depth—about 50 cm below the ground surface, as measured from the level of a person standing inside the excavation pit. During its extraction, the statue was damaged: specifically, the hanging, fishtail-shaped front fold of the *sampot* became detached from the body. An additional upper element of the chignon-cover was also preserved at the time of discovery but has since disappeared. The younger brother did not recall the presence of the butterfly-shaped back bow.

The discovery took place after another high-profile find in northeast Thailand: in 1971 three 7th–9th-century

[13] Contemporary aerial coverage (2023) does not show the structures seen in this earlier coverage. See **Online Appendix 3, Fig. 1**.



Figure 3: Modern wooden shrine dedicated to Ta Kruha with two sandstone pedestals installed in front: Pedestal 1 (viewer's left) and Pedestal 2 (viewer's right), July 2015 © Brice Vincent

bronze statues were unearthed in Ban Mueang Fai (บ้านเมืองฝ้าย), Thai Samakkhi subdistrict (ต. ไทยสามัคคี), Lam Plai Mat district (อ. ลำปลายมาศ; now Nong Hong district, อ. หนองหงส์), located approximately 45 km north of Ban Yang Pong Sadao. Two years later, in 1973, the individuals who discovered those three statues received a payment of 100,000 Thai baht from the Thai Fine Arts Department (Tanongsak et al. 2024). Having witnessed this successful precedent, the elder brother subsequently sought assistance from villagers in Ban Mueang Fai to facilitate the sale of the newly discovered bronze statue from Ban Yang Pong Sadao. Two meetings were arranged with a Thai buyer named Bunloet (บุญเลิศ), a resident of "Khorat" (Nakhon Ratchasima).[14] The first meeting took place in Lam Plai Mat, where photographs of the statue at its findspot were examined—these were later destroyed—while the second was held in Nakhon Ratchasima, where the sale was finalized presumably with Bunloet. The brothers initially asked 3 million Thai baht for the statue, but it eventually sold for 1.8 million Thai baht, equivalent to more than US$ 86,000 at the exchange rate of the time. This was, and remains, a substantial sum, particularly for the village of Ban Yang Pong Sadao, where some inhabitants had opposed the sale. A portion of the proceeds was therefore used to organize a communal celebration featuring traditional performances such as *like* (ลิเก), as well as to purchase agricultural equipment. The villagers later learned that the statue had been resold for 7 million Thai baht (more than US$ 336,500).

After the sale, extensive clandestine excavations were carried out at the discovery site at the request of Bunloet and another foreign individual—most likely Latchford, whose presence in the village is documented at this time (Chiu 2026). The villagers excavated across the entire area, including the sanctuary tower, platform, and moat, removing soil and laterite blocks. During their search, they also employed traditional divination tools (*siang khong*; เสี่ยงของ), made of wood or metal, to identify the presence of spirits, burials, or buried metal objects. Inside the sanctuary tower, at a depth of two to three meters,

[14] Bunloet (also spelled Boonlert), as we now know, acted as a local intermediary, buyer and occasional driver for Latchford during his acquisition of pre-Khmer and Khmer antiquities in northeast Thailand during the mid-1960s onwards. Operating from villages in the region, he acquired ancient bronze objects from local villagers and facilitated their transfer to Latchford, who subsequently exported and marketed them internationally (Tanongsak et al. 2024: 197–198).

they discovered three sandstone pedestals.[15] Two remain *in situ* and were installed in front of a small wooden shrine dedicated to Ta Kruha **[Figure 3]**. The third, larger pedestal was reportedly sent to the Buddhist monastery of Wat Khok Wan (วัดโคกหว่าน) in the neighboring village of Ban Khok Wan (บ้านโคกหว่าน), Khok Wan subdistrict (ต. โคกหว่าน), Lahan Sai district (อ. ละหานทราย); however, it was not found there during our survey in 2015.

The dimensions of the two remaining pedestals correspond to those of the statue's pedestal and tang.[16] However, only one can be considered a possible match. Pedestal 1 must be excluded because of the presence of small deposit cavities around the edges of its upper platform. Pedestal 2, by contrast, remains a likely candidate; the missing Pedestal 3 cannot be assessed.

After its discovery and sale in Thailand, the statue was sent to London, where it entered Latchford's private collection (Felten & Lerner 1989: 226, "private collection, London"). It was most likely restored there under the supervision of Anna Plowden (1938–1997; Anna Plowden Ltd from 1968, and Plowden & Smith Ltd from 1985), as were other looted Khmer bronzes from Latchford's network.[17] The statue was subsequently consigned to the London-based firm Spink & Son Ltd, which frequently handled objects for Latchford. In 1988, Spink & Son sold it to the American media tycoon Walter H. Annenberg (1908–2002), who, together with his wife Leonore (1918–2009), later donated it to the Met as a "partial gift", a fractional donation arrangement under which the museum did not initially receive full ownership. At the time of the donation, Martin Lerner was curator of South and Southeast Asian Art.

Iconography, Style, and Dating

Like other contemporary bronze sculptures, the statue's identity is not readily identifiable due to the absence of specific iconographic features. For this reason, Lerner initially proposed identifying the male deity as a "deified king" and possibly "the only known surviving *Devaraja* image", potentially associated with the Khmer King Jayavarman VI

[15] The butterfly-shaped back bow may have been recovered during these clandestine excavations, although no direct evidence confirms this find.

[16] Pedestal 1 (**Fig. 3**, viewer's left; fragmentary, square, concave profile, with rim): H. 48 cm; upper platform W. 76 cm; central square opening W. 18–19.5 cm. Pedestal 2 (**Fig. 3**, viewer's right; fragmentary, square, concave profile, without rim, and larger): H. 59 cm; upper platform W. 79.5 cm; central square opening W. 26–26.5 cm. Statue pedestal (square base with trapezoidal tang): base W. 23.3–23.8 cm; tang H. 25.2 cm; tang W. 12.3–13.2 cm.

[17] Among the modern repairs identified—besides surface cleaning—was one affecting the right plinth of the pedestal, where a putty-like material was applied and subsequently repainted to match the color of the metal. XRF analysis of this repair detected potassium, calcium, titanium, manganese, iron, copper, strontium, and a notable presence of bromine. This intervention was likely undertaken after a substantial portion of the pedestal had broken off (the front and right plinths, as well as the inner plate), probably during burial and due to the weight of the tang. Ultraviolet examination also revealed that the broken right ear had been glued and that both hands had been repainted. At the Met, in 1989, the larger wings of the butterfly-shaped back bow were reattached using long stainless-steel pins, while earlier losses were filled and breaks repatinated (Steven M. Kossak, "Damage & Loss Report", 7 December 1989). More recently, an epoxy-like material was applied to the rear left corner beneath the pedestal to stabilize the sculpture for display.

(r. 1080/1081–1107/1108 CE).[18] Lerner's interpretation was based primarily on the statue's "size, quality, and medium", as well as its attribution to the end of the so-called Baphuon style (ca. 1010–1080 CE).[19] This hypothesis was later revised and the statue was instead proposed to represent the Hindu deity Śiva in anthropomorphic form, functioning both as a cult image for worship in a royal sanctuary and as an ancestor image of a deceased ruler (Campbell 2012: 123). However, this identification remains insufficiently substantiated.

These various hypotheses now require reassessment in light of current research. Regarding the more recent identification as Śiva, no extant iconographic features securely link the statue to this deity, such as a third eye, rosary, trident, crescent moon, or the syllable OṂ depicted on the chignon. However, the hand gestures performed by the male deity may suggest a relationship with Śiva. The right hand, positioned slightly off-center with the middle and ring fingers bent at different levels, appears to be in a holding gesture, generally depicted in art with the figure grasping a removable attribute. If the statue originally held such an attribute, it is now missing. The left hand, also slightly off-center, displays an open palm with the fingers pointing downward, the middle and ring fingers bent at the same level, performing the gesture of giving or receiving gifts. The combination of these two gestures is not unique and is attested in Khmer art from at least the first half of the 10th century. Notably, several extant images displaying this combination—although not all—represent Śiva[20] or are associated with a Śaiva context.[21] In addition, these images often feature braided hair, either arranged in a high cylindrical chignon or surmounted by a conical chignon-cover. This matted coiffure traditionally reflects the ascetic nature of Śiva and his consort Umā. Similarly, the present image displays individually braided strands of hair. Despite the deity's lavish jewelry, its ascetic character should therefore be taken into consideration, along with its possible Śaiva affiliation.

Thus, Lerner's original identification of the statue as a deified king no longer appears convincing, as much of his argument rested on the figure's adornment. Although the statue's jewelry is elaborate—including earrings, a necklace, armlets, bracelets, a belt, and anklets—such ornamentation does not necessarily indicate royal status (Thompson 1999: 278, n. 78). Contemporary bronze images of deities were similarly adorned and the statue's supposedly unique "crown" is likewise not unprecedented: similar tiered chignon-covers, composed of decreasing rows of lotus petals and originally complemented by a diadem, are found on stone sculptures from the capital region of Yaśodharapura (Angkor).[22] Moreover, no hard evidence

[18] Notice written in Watt et al. 1989: 92; see also Felten & Lerner 1989: 226; Kossak & Lerner 1994: 82.

[19] Period styles such as the Baphuon were defined by a stylistic development model elaborated and refined by early French scholarship (see, for example, Boisselier 1955).

[20] See, for example, the Śiva from Prasat Bavel, in Battambang province, Cambodia (IK 869), from the second half of the 10th century, formerly at the Wat Po Veal museum, Battambang (inv. no. 7; H. 134 cm; Giteau 1965: 70, fig. 32).

[21] Cat. nos 1 and 15 **[Online Appendix 1]**.

[22] See, for example, the head of Viṣṇu from Prasat

has been provided to support the statue's association with King Jayavarman VI, founder of the so-called Mahīdharapura dynasty. Lerner's hypothesis can be better understood by examining the preliminary inventory he proposed of the then-known large 11th-century bronze sculptures (Felten & Lerner 1989: 225–226). In this inventory, he arranged the sculptures chronologically on stylistic grounds and associated them with specific rulers, from Jayavarman VI's predecessors, Udayādityavarman II (r. 1050–1066 CE) and Harṣavarman III (r. 1066–1080/1081 CE), to his successor, Dharaṇīndravarman I (r. 1080/1081–1107/1108 CE), while extending the end of the Baphuon style beyond 1080/1081. This chronological framework is now considered incomplete and requires revision.

Similarly, Lerner's hypothesis identifying the statue as a representation of the *devarāja* should be dismissed in light of recent scholarship that has significantly nuanced our understanding of this royal cult and tutelary deity (e.g., Bourdonneau 2020; Bourdonneau & Mikaelian 2020). Éric Bourdonneau has proposed identifying the foundational representation of the *devarāja* (Old Khmer, *vraḥ kamrateṅ añ jagat ta rājya*) with a monumental stone image of a dancing Śiva installed in the Prasat Thom temple at Koh Ker, the ancient royal capital and holy place of Chok Gargyar, where the *devarāja* cult was established during the reign of Jayavarman IV (r. 921–941 CE). He further argued that this image continued to embody the palladium of Khmer royalty until the end of the Angkorian period, being replicated in one or more bronze statues and reproduced in various iconographic contexts.

Even so, some aspects of Lerner's earlier interpretations remain worth considering. First, the possibility of a connection between the statue and Khmer kingship, including royal patronage and installation in a royal foundation, should not be dismissed, given its dimensions and the materials employed (see below). Second, the statue may have served a dual function as both a deity-image and an ancestor image invested with a funerary or commemorative role, whether installed posthumously or dedicated to a living royal beneficiary (Lavy & Polkinghorne 2023).

Lerner initially dated the statue to the second half of the 11th century (Watt et al. 1989: 92; Burn 1993: 169; Kossak & Lerner 1994: fig. 85), tentatively associating its production with the reign of Jayavarman VI (Felten & Lerner 1989: 226). The Met later revised this dating to encompass the entire 11th century (Campbell 2012: 123). Other scholars have likewise proposed alternative chronologies, often on stylistic grounds.[23]

When the statue is examined alongside other large 11th-century bronze sculptures, of which around 30 are known (e.g., Bunker & Latchford 2004; Bunker & Latchford 2011; CAST:ING 2018), several distinguishing features emerge

Phnom Bok, Angkor, Siem Reap province, Cambodia, 11th century, now in the collection of the NMC (inv. no. Ka.1668; H. 42 cm; Boisselier 1955: pl. 24, fig. 3 [vol. 1]; pl. 60 [vol. 2]).

[23] Published stylistic datings include the late 11th century (Woodward 1997: 92, n. 24), the middle of the 11th century (Felten 2006: 49), the reign of Harṣavarman III (Bunker & Latchford 2011: 234), and the late 11th or early 12th century (Feneley 2023: 268).



Figure 4: Facial features with inlays for eyes, eyebrows, mustache, chin beard, and beauty marks on neck of male deity from Ban Yang Pong Sadao
© Brice Vincent/Met

that may help refine its stylistic attribution and dating.[24]

• *Face*. Inlays are used for the eyes, eyebrows, mustache, chin beard, and beauty marks on neck **[Figure 4]**. During the Angkorian period, bronze images of the Baphuon style are distinctive in their almost systematic use of inlays for the eyes, eyebrows, mustache, and beard, the latter two typically rendered in a bracket-shaped form (Boisselier 1955: 219). However, such facial inlays are generally absent from later Baphuon bronzes.

• *Garment*. The statue preserves a rare, complete example of a costume comprising a low-cut, pleated *sampot* without a border, complemented by a hanging fishtail-shaped front fold secured by a decorated knot and an elaborate butterfly-shaped back bow **[Online Appendix 3: Fig. 2a]**. This combination of costume elements is attested in Khmer bronze statuary from around the middle to the end of the 11th century, and possibly into the early 12th century.[25]

• *Jewelry*. Among its most distinctive ornaments is a belt composed of a central square plaque and a double row of flattened ovals and quatrefoils, bordered with beading and complemented by pendants and peduncles. The necklace likewise features large central diamond-shaped medallions—echoed on the armlets—as well as similar pendants and peduncles at the back **[Online Appendix 3: Figs 2b–c]**. These decorative elements, particularly the belt ornamentation and the pendants and peduncles shared by the belt and necklace, are attested in Khmer bronze statuary from the 1040s and again during the second half of the 11th century.[26]

• *Coiffure*. In addition to the elaborate tiered chignon-cover mentioned above

[24] A large hole was drilled into the back of the left shoulder, presumably to obtain a sample for metal analysis and/or thermoluminescence (TL) dating prior to the statue's sale. No known documentation records this intervention.

[25] See cat. nos 8 and 15 **[Online Appendix 1]**.

[26] See cat. nos 6, 10, and 11 **[Online Appendix 1]**.

[Fig. 4], the coiffure consists of braided hair rather than alternating vertical bands of quatrefoils and beads and features a continuous hairline complemented at the back of the head by a row of petals **[Online Appendix 3: Fig. 2d]**. This coiffure arrangement is also attested from the 1040s onward.[27]

• *Body*. The treatment of the legs and, particularly, the feet—with the right foot still slightly advanced—is less naturalistic and recalls the stylistic developments of later Baphuon bronzes **[Online Appendix 3: Fig. 2e]**. Moreover, among the two types of navel representations identified in 11th-century bronze production—either round or incised with two horizontal lines on each side—the statue belongs to the latter type **[Online Appendix 3: Fig. 2a]**. This characteristic, however, cannot be linked to a specific period or workshop.

Based on the above-listed features, dating the statue to the second half of the 11th century seems appropriate. More precisely, its crafting likely occurred between the production of bronze sculptures mentioned above: on the one hand, the *dvārapāla*—or Śiva—from Prasat Sa Kamphaeng Yai (cat. no. 10 in **Online Appendix 1**; 1040s) and the West Mebon Viṣṇu (cat. no. 11 in **Online Appendix 1**; 1050–1060s); on the other, the Prasat Yeay Moa and Wat Phu male deities (cat. nos 13 and 14 in **Online Appendix 1**; 1080s?). An additional argument for this late dating is evidenced by the facial representation. The statue's face, rather than oval or round (Boisselier 1955: 219), is more elongated, with less opened eyes, thicker eyelids, a sharp nose with incised nostrils, and larger ears. The stylistic model for this representation is therefore distinct, which in this case would preclude gradual stylistic evolution but would also suggest the embodiment of individualistic traits in a kind of idealized portrait image.

Fabrication

While in the collection of the Met, the statue was examined visually and instrumentally at the Sherman Fairchild Center for Objects Conservation and the Department of Scientific Research, in collaboration with the Centre de recherche et de restauration des musées de France (C2RMF), to investigate its manufacturing techniques. An integrated methodological approach specifically adapted to the examination of lost-wax cast bronze sculptures was employed (Bourgarit et al. 2025; for detailed operating conditions, see **Online Appendix 2**).

From Wax to Bronze

The copper-based sculpture was hollow-cast in almost a single piece, including the pedestal and tang. In addition, ten sections were cast separately: first, elements belonging to the body, the right hand and the left forearm with hand; second, a series of decorative elements, including the chignon-cover (three elements, one of which is now missing), earrings (two elements for each ear), the front fold (one element) and back bow (one element) of the *sampot*, and the diadem (one element, now also missing). Determining how the wax model of the main part of a

[27] See cat. no. 6 **[Online Appendix 1]**.

sculpture was prepared prior to casting is rarely straightforward (Bourgarit et al. 2025). In this case, several features point toward a direct lost-wax process, including the non-conformal inner volume (for example, the overthickness of the *sampot*) and the relative complexity of the armature system (see below).

Wax Model

Following the hypothesis of a direct lost-wax process, an iron armature was first constructed as a "skeleton" **[Figure 5]**. It consisted of two vertical iron rods (Diam. 8–10 mm) representing the legs, extending down to the feet. These were bent and joined in the hip region, then continued upward as a thick double rod (Diam. 9–13 mm) reaching the top of the head, where it extended through an open hole and appeared square in cross-section **[Online Appendix 3: Fig. 3]**. A horizontal rod was added at the shoulder level, crossing the vertical rod and bent to provide support for the shoulders and arms. It extended to the right wrist and left elbow (Diam. 4 mm). The junction between the horizontal and vertical rods remains unclear, although they may have been secured together with wire.[28] Once this iron "skeleton" was completed, clay was

[28] A metal wire joining the vertical and horizontal armatures was possibly identified in cat. no. 5 (**Online Appendix 1**; Vincent 2014a: 64, fig. 3.2.6b). In cat. no. 7 **[Online Appendix 1]**, the horizontal iron rod running through the chest, branching into the arms, and extending to the hands has an oval opening at the center to allow the central vertical armature to pass through (Vincent 2014a: 93, fig. 3.4.6).

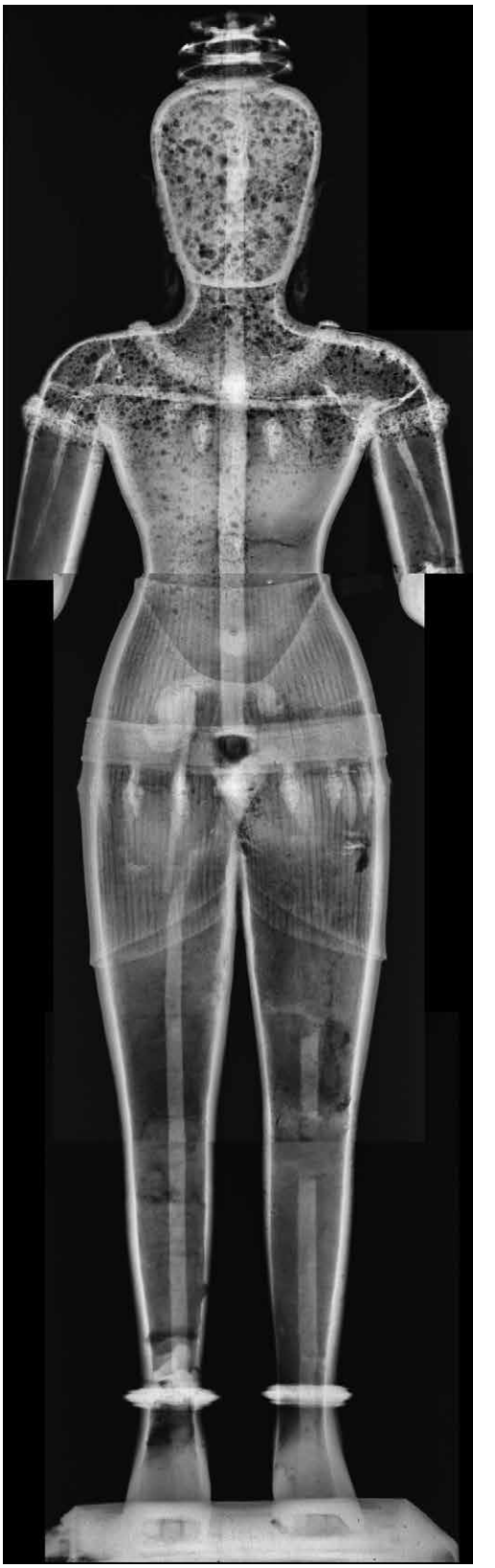
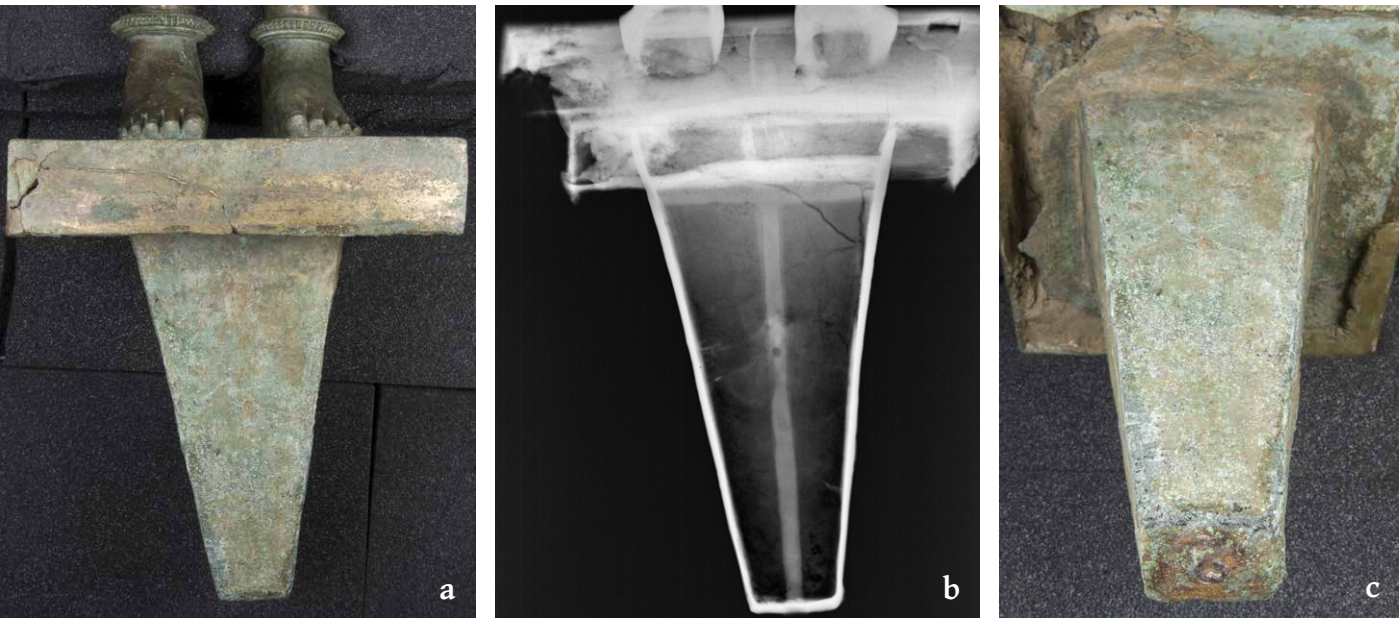


Figure 5: X-radiography of male deity from Ban Yang Pong Sadao, front view © Brice Vincent/Met



Figures 6a–c: Square base and trapezoidal tang of male deity from Ban Yang Pong Sadao; a. Front, b. X-radiography: front view, c. Iron armature on the bottom (round in cross-section) © Brice Vincent/Met

applied to form the three-dimensional standing figure.

The refractory clay-based core was entirely preserved. Vertical fine gaps, known as "core flashes" (Bourgarit et al. 2025), attest to the construction process of the core, which was built upward through the progressive addition of clay layers. The core was reinforced with additional thin iron rods, visible in the X-radiographs as separate floating rods. These include one rod in the left hip and another in the neck area, parallel to the central vertical rod (Diam. 2–3 mm; Length 10 cm). The shape of the final core was nearly identical to that of the finished metal sculpture.

Once completed, the core was covered with wax to create the wax model. The intended thickness of the wax layer can be estimated at around 4–6 mm, as observed on the head, ribs, hips, and right thigh **[Fig. 5]**. The regularity and relatively substantial thickness of the wax layer, reflected in the consistent thickness of the metal walls, suggest the use of wax sheets. The rare variations in thickness (from 7 to less than 2 mm, for example on the right shoulder, arms, and left leg) indicate a displacement of the core during casting. Further evidence for the use of wax sheets is visible on the exterior of the sculpture: a vertical seam line on the left side of the chest and a corresponding step on the upper edge of the *sampot* mark the junction between two wax sheets. Once the body was completed, decorative details were carved into the wax. These include the eyes, hair, *sampot* pleats, palm *cakra*, toenails, and nostrils. Separate wax appliqués were applied to form the ears, nipples, small front knot of the *sampot*, necklace with pendants, armlets, bracelets, belt with pendants, and anklets.

The wax model of the hollow-cast pedestal consisted of two parts: a base and a tang **[Figures 6a–b]**. The following construction sequence may be proposed, combining both direct and indirect processes. Once the wax figure was completed, 3–6 mm-thick wax sheets were joined to the feet to form an open square base composed of a top plate and four plinths, with two corresponding openings cut into the top plate. The base was then filled with a clay-based core. To form the tang, an additional trapezoidal clay-based core, built around a single vertical iron rod (Diam. 10 mm), was joined to the base core. The armature, running through the center of the tang from top to bottom, remains visible at the lower end and is round in cross-section **[Figure 6c]**. The clay tang was coated with 3–5.5 mm-thick wax sheets, while additional 3.5–4 mm-thick wax sheets were applied around the tang to close the open square base. The heels were positioned at the center of the pedestal, with the toes of the right foot extending toward the front edge. This arrangement helped distribute the weight of the statue centrally on the pedestal and ensured its balance and stability after casting.

Manufacture Marks

To guide the joining of the wax models of the body and pedestal, as well as to ensure the correct placement and spacing of wax appliqués on the model, shallow lines were incised into the wax. These marks were not removed before casting and remain visible in the metal of the statue. A continuous line was engraved on the top of the pedestal, precisely centered between the feet **[Online Appendix 3: Fig. 4a]**. A corresponding line is visible on the chest, below the central medallion of the necklace and aligned with that on the pedestal **[Online Appendix 3: Fig. 4b]**. Individual marks incised in the wax are also preserved on the back of the necklace, above the central medallion and between the pendants **[Online Appendix 3: Fig. 2c]**.

Armature Extensions, Core Pins, and Core Extensions

The wax model, including the body, pedestal, and tang, was invested with refractory clay, allowing the armatures to extend beyond the head, arms, and bottom of the tang. These extensions served to secure the clay-based core within the refractory investment during casting after the wax had melted out. They were cut off only after casting.

Iron core pins were inserted at strategic points in the wax sculpture to reinforce the armature system. Of those that could be identified, two are located on the shoulders (right: square, 3–3.5 mm; left: round, Diam. 5 mm); two on the hips, on either side of the *sampot* (square, 3 mm; **Online Appendix 3: Figs 5a–b**); one on the back of the *sampot* (both sides?); one at the center of the chest (square, 3 mm); and one at the center of the back. Additional iron core pins were inserted into the side plinths of the pedestal: one was observed on the left plinth (elongated, 6 × 2 mm; **Online Appendix 3: Fig. 5c**). The tang also contains three pins: two on the front (square, 5 mm) and one on the back.

In addition, on the top of the pedestal, each corner bears a square depression that originally accommodated a clay-based core extension, preventing displacement of the core during casting. These extensions were removed and the resulting cavities filled with metal after casting (see below; **Online Appendix 3: Fig. 6b**).

Casting, Repairs, and Finishing

The extensive porosity extending from the shoulders into the head provides evidence that, after the wax was melted out, the image was cast upright, allowing gas bubbles to migrate upward through the metal during cooling **[Fig. 5]**. The main pouring gate was likely located at the top of the head, which was left undecorated.

After the casting had cooled, the investment was broken off and the main gate and any additional runners were cut off. The statue shifted slightly during casting, resulting in cracks in the right ankle and a gap in the left foot. To fill these gaps and stabilize the right ankle, repair patches were added, as indicated by their differential corrosion compared with the tin-bronze substrate (see below).[29] Two small holes along a crack just above the right anklet were repaired with rectangular patches that are now missing **[Online Appendix 3: Fig. 6a]**, while two larger rectangular patches were applied to the right calf and right foot. The core inside the ankle was removed, and molten metal was poured into the cavity. Two round holes (Diam. 10 mm) visible on the pedestal, on the right side of the right foot, may be related to this repair.

Additional repair patches are located on the surface of the statue and pedestal: one on the lower back, corresponding to a break in the clay-based core (square); two on the right side and back of the right leg (rectangular and square); four on the top of the pedestal, one at each corner, corresponding to the former core extensions (square; **Online Appendix 3: Fig. 6b**); and one, missing, on the front plinth (rectangular; **Online Appendix 3: Fig. 6c**). Overall, the casting process appears to have been successful, requiring relatively few repairs.

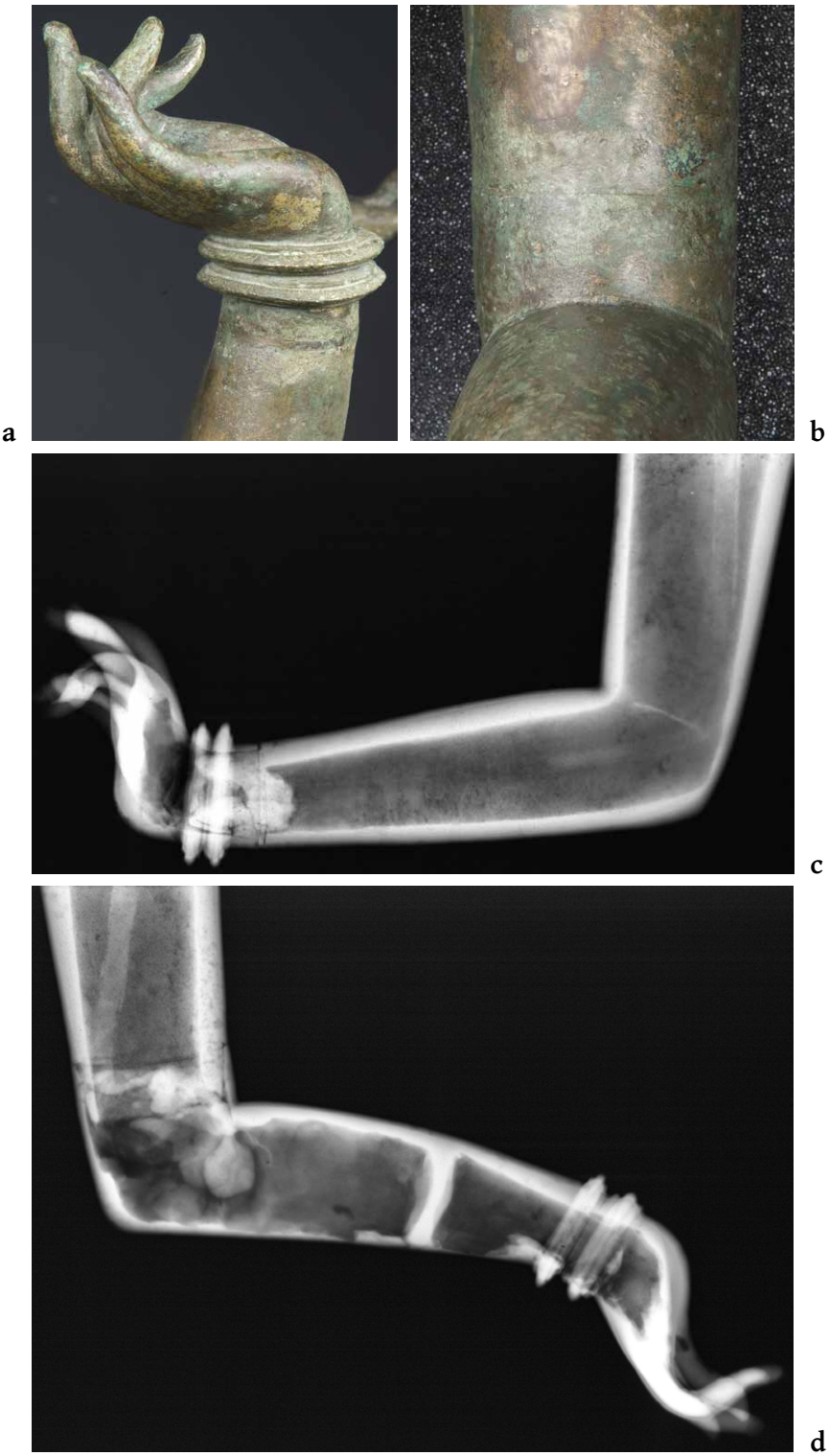
Once repaired, the surface was finished, particularly to eliminate porosity in the upper part of the statue, most likely through chasing and polishing with tools of different granulometries and made of various materials (sandstone, ceramic, and organic materials). Because of the gilding layer (see below), chasing and polishing marks were difficult to examine, except on the back of the butterfly-shaped bow. It should also be noted that the surfaces between the legs and between the arms and chest were left as-cast, as was the tang of the pedestal; these areas still preserve metal bumps and fins.

Assemblies

After casting, the separately cast sections were assembled onto the main figure using mechanical methods (back bow and chignon-cover), soldering (front fold, diadem and earrings), or brazing (right hand and left forearm with hand).[30]

[29] The metal of the repair patches has not been analyzed.

[30] For further details, see Bourgarit et al. 2025.



Figures 7a–d: Brazing of the right hand and left forearm with hand of male deity from Ban Yang Pong Sadao; a–b. Joints on the right wrist and left arm; c–d. X-radiography (side view), right and left arms © Brice Vincent/Met

In the case of the right hand and left forearm with hand, the body section formed the tenon, while the hand and forearm sections functioned as mortises. The clay-based core was partially removed after casting, allowing the two parts to fit together. They were then joined by pouring molten metal into a thin, circular channel between the two sections (1.5–2 mm in width; **Figures 7a–b**). The joints remain preserved and are visible through differences in the surface patina. For both the right hand and left forearm, the color and similar radiographic density of the joint metal compared with the surrounding tin-bronze substrate rule out soldering with tin- or lead-based alloys. Instead, brazing with a leaded tin-bronze alloy was employed, as suggested by XRF analysis.

During this process, the right hand shifted slightly downward. Areas of higher-density metal observed in X-radiography indicate that some of the assembly metal flowed into the statue. On the right side, the metal accumulated inside the forearm, suggesting that the statue was lying face up during the assembly process **[Figure 7c]**. On the left side, the metal accumulated inside the elbow, and the presence of fallen metal droplets indicates that the statue was standing **[Figure 7d]**.

The solid front fold of the *sampot* was soldered to the body using a tin-based alloy, as evidenced by XRF analysis **[Online Appendix 3: Figs 7a–c]**. Traces of the dark grey solder remain visible between the legs and in the X-radiographs. Additionally, the solid back bow was mechanically fixed to the *sampot*: its rectangular tang was inserted laterally into an oval opening at the back of the belt and then rotated 90 degrees to lock it in place, with the larger wings facing downward **[Online Appendix 3: Figs 8a–c]**.

The missing diadem was originally secured behind the ears and only grey solder traces remain visible; these areas were inaccessible to XRF analysis. A small rectangular iron pin on the back of the head may also have served to secure the diadem's bow **[Online Appendix 3: Fig. 9]**. The diadem may likewise have been made of gilded cast bronze or possibly of hammered gold, as proposed for other contemporary productions.

Each earring was originally composed of two separate solid parts: an inner element, longer because of its conical tip, and an outer element, now missing. They were attached through the pierced earlobes using a similar tin-based solder, as evidenced by XRF analysis, traces of which remain visible on both sides **[Online Appendix 3: Figs 10a–b]**.

The armature extension protruding from the top of the head was used to thread the three separate parts of the chignon-cover (from bottom to top): a plain disk; two other disks cast in one piece, decreasing in size and decorated with rows of lotus petals and engraved indentations; and probably a smaller disk decorated with lotus petals and surmounted by a conical tip, now missing but apparently found with the statue at the time of its discovery.[31]

Remains of a dark grey material were found between the head and the lower disk, between the lower and

[31] For a contemporary example, see the stone statue from Prasat Phnom Bok mentioned above in note 21.



Figure 8: Chignon-cover of male deity from Ban Yang Pong Sadao (incomplete): lower and upper disks threaded on iron armature extension (with modern restoration material) © Brice Vincent/Met

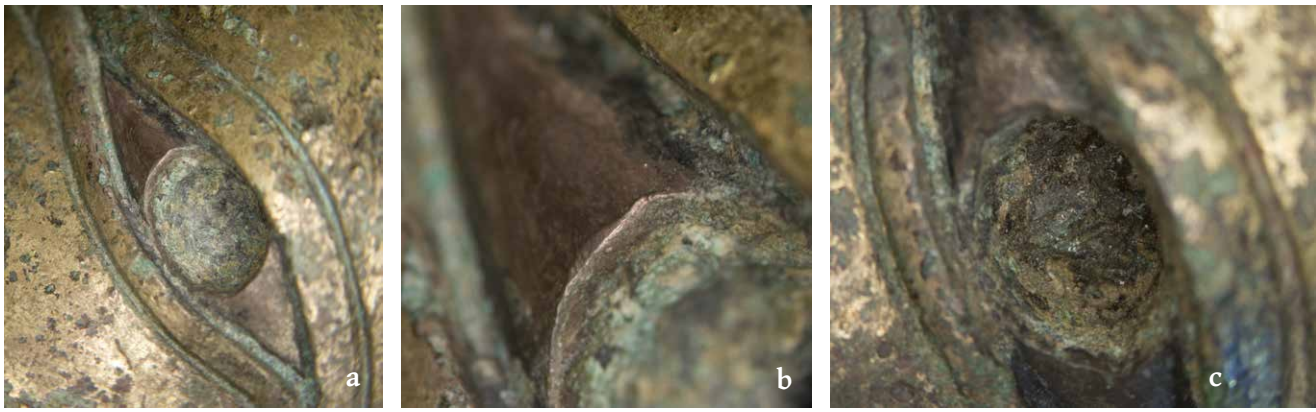
upper disks, and on top of the chignon-cover, around the square-shaped armature **[Figure 8]**. Although no density variation was visible in X-radiography, SEM-EDS analysis indicates that this filling consists of a compact assemblage of very fine, well-sorted particles of talc set in a calcium-rich matrix (Carò & Rizzo 2014). Additionally, Py-GC/MS identified the presence of a synthetic resin composed of styrene and phthalic anhydride, possibly a styrenated alkyd resin, which is clearly of modern manufacture. This synthetic restoration material may have masked the original material. A second microsample collected from the same area (between the lower and upper disks) contains very fine, well-sorted grains of silicates, mainly quartz, together with abundant undetermined clay minerals (possibly kaolinite and illite). Both types of particles contain, or are surrounded by, tin-rich bronze corrosion products.

Polychromy

The statue was entirely gilded, except for the hair, chignon-cover, tang, and the back surfaces of the front fold and back bow of the *sampot*. XRF analyses performed on several locations (face, neck, chest, arms, right hand palm, front fold, back bow and pedestal) confirmed that the surface is mercury gilded (see also Strahan 1998: 101; Bunker 2008: 299).

Deep cavities were carved into the wax prior to casting to receive inlays for the irises and pupils **[Fig. 4; Figures 9a, c]**. Remains of black material are present inside both pupils. Py-GC/MS and SEM-EDS analyses of a sample from the right pupil identified it as carbonized plant matter, possibly part of an adhesive used to hold black glass or a black stone or, alternatively, the remains of the original pupil itself (Carò & Rizzo 2014).[32]

[32] Only a few Angkorian bronzes retain their original



Figures 9a–c: Inlaid eyes of male deity from Ban Yang Pong Sadao: a–b. Right eye: iris and pupil (now missing black glass or stone), eye whites (silver), BM: 6X and 20X; c. Left iris and pupil (now missing black glass or stone), BM: 10X © Brice Vincent/Met

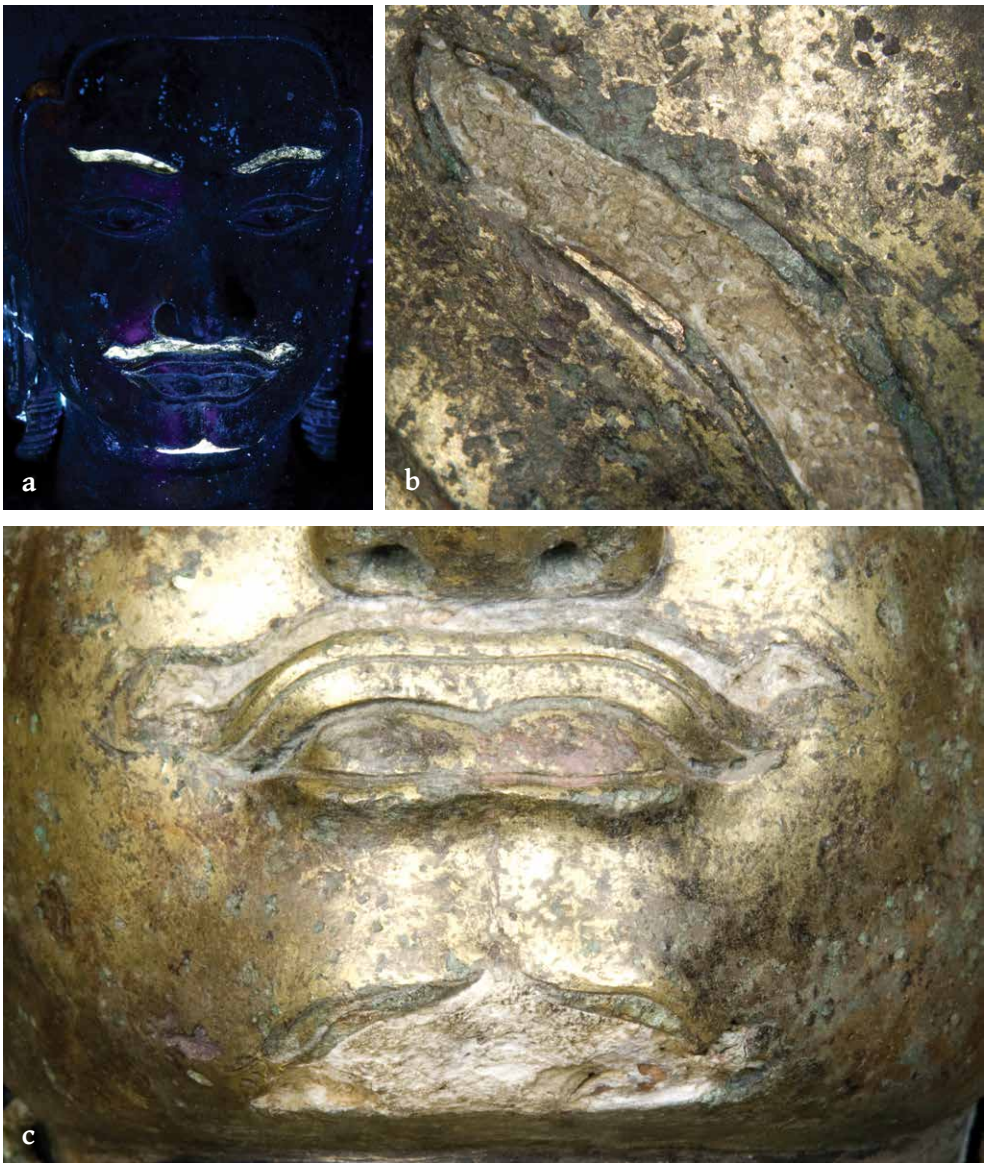
Cavities for the eyes whites and the beauty marks on neck were likewise prepared in the wax. These were inlaid by cold working with hammered silver sheet, as evidenced by XRF analysis: two pieces for each eye white and four for the beauty marks **[Fig. 4; Figures 9a–b; Figure 10]**.

White material is present in the inlay channels of the eyebrows, mustache, and chin beard **[Fig. 4; Figures 11a–c]**. Those in the left eyebrow and chin beard are smooth and completely fill the cavities, with additional inlays on both sides of the beard's upper edge, indicating that no other material was added. A sample from the right side of the chin beard was identified as lead-based by XRF analysis before further characterization by FTIR (Carò & Rizzo 2014). The white material was identified as cerussite, a lead carbonate that can occur either as a pigment or as a corrosion product of metallic lead. Its presence therefore allows two possible interpretations. First, cerussite may have been intentionally used and mixed with a binder to create a white inlay material. Second, the mineral may indicate the former presence of a grey or black patinated metallic lead inlay, which was



Figure 10: Inlaid beauty marks on neck (silver) of male deity from Ban Yang Pong Sadao © Brice Vincent/Met

eyes and even fewer have had them examined and characterized: for example, blue potassium glass, possibly colored with copper, in cat. no. 2 (**Online Appendix 1**; based on an examination by Yvan Coquinot), and opaque yellowish-brown lead glass in cat. no. 3 (**Online Appendix 1**; based on an examination by Anna Bennet).



Figures 11a–c: Inlaid eyebrows, mustache, and chin beard (lead) of male deity from Ban Yang Pong Sadao; a. Face under ultraviolet light; b. Left eyebrow inlay channel, BM: 8X; c. Mustache and chin beard inlay channels © Brice Vincent/Met

entirely converted into lead carbonate during burial. This corrosion process, accompanied by volume expansion, would have filled inlay cavity. Since no binder has been identified by FTIR,[33] the second interpretation appears more plausible.

Finally, traces of red pigment are visible on several parts of the statue, primarily on hair—especially at the back—but also on face (lips, eyelids, eyebrows, mustache, and hairline), chignon-cover (upper disks), *sampot* (front knot and upper edge), and jewelry (armlets, necklace, and belt)

[33] Py-GC/MS analysis was not conducted.



Figures 12a–d: Colored pigments of male deity from Ban Yang Pong Sadao; a–b. Red ochre remains on hair, BM: 8X; c–d. Cinnabar (and minium?) remains on lower lip and left eyelid, BM: 6X and 10X © Brice Vincent/Met

[Figures 12a–d]. Painting is clearly ancient and applied over the gilding before burial, as corrosion products have since developed over much of the surviving pigment. Extensive areas of the hair were painted red. A sample taken from hair at the top of the head (right side) and analyzed by SEM-EDS was identified as red ochre (Carò & Rizzo 2014). The presence of red ochre is also indicated by XRF analysis of pigmented areas on the *sampot*. In contrast, XRF analysis of the red pigment on the lips revealed abundant lead in addition to mercury, suggesting either the use of minium, also known as red lead and characterized by an orange-red color, or a combination of minium and cinnabar, possibly applied at different times.[34]

[34] Red ochre and cinnabar were already known as pigments used for interior wall paintings in Angkorian brick temples of the 9th and 10th centuries (Runkel et al. 2012) and, in the case of

Table 1: Metal Composition and Analytical Results for Six Parts of the Statue (ICP-AES)

	Sn	Pb	Zn	Ag	As	Ni	As/Ni	Co*	Bi*	Fe	S	Sb	Pb/Sb	Au*	Hg*
Body	12	1.6	0.011	0.11	0.30	0.25	1.2	614	166	0.29	0.0034°	0.064	25	380	56
Pedestal	11	1.3	0.022	0.12	0.28	0.25	1.1	666	152	0.45	< 0.0019	0.060	22	182	4.1
Tang	12	1.3	0.019	0.12	0.28	0.26	1.1	679	144	0.45	< 0.0024	0.060	22	195	7.2
Front fold	11	0.5	0.040	0.22	0.22	0.31	0.7	328	57	0.14	< 0.0024	0.030	17	161	5.7
Back bow	11	4.3	0.032	0.15	1.1	0.20	5.5	350	219	0.19	0.011	0.1	43	111°	5.9
Upper disks	11	3.5	0.085	0.13	0.36	0.15	2.4	229	303	0.073	0.029	0.088	40	92°	4.5

* Results in part per million
° Value below the quantification limit

Metal Composition

All six analyzed parts (body, pedestal, tang, front fold, back bow, and upper disks) are made of the same copper-based alloy, namely an 11–12 wt% (weight percent) tin bronze with relatively low lead contents (0.5–4 wt%) **[Table 1]**. The similar main impurities characterize the copper used, namely silver (0.1–0.2 wt%), nickel and arsenic (0.2–0.3 wt%), iron (0.1–0.5 wt%), antimony (0.03–0.10 wt%), and cobalt (0.03–0.06 wt%). This composition corresponds to the chemical pattern recently designated as "Angkorian copper" (Vincent & Bourgarit 2025).

Two distinct metal batches appear to have been used. On the one hand, the body, pedestal, tang, and front fold of the *sampot* are characterized by very similar metal compositions, most probably reflecting production in the same workshop within a narrow chronological range. Specifically, the body, pedestal, and tang clearly derive from the same melt, as indicated by their very similar contents of lead, arsenic, nickel, cobalt, and antimony, whereas the front fold was cast separately. On the other hand, the back bow and upper disks were cast from a distinctly different metal batch. Their much higher lead content may even indicate a different alloy, namely a leaded bronze, also characterized by a relatively higher sulfur content and arsenic/nickel ratio. Furthermore, if the chignon-cover elements were cast independently from the statue, these three sections were probably produced at the same time from the same metal batch.

Clay-Based Core Composition

Remains of the original clay-based core are preserved in the pedestal of the sculpture, specifically at the junction between the base and the tang along the break **[Online Appendix 3: Fig. 11a]**. Macroscopically, the core appears as a homogeneous, moderately porous aggregate composed of fine framework grains embedded in a very fine, dark carbonized matrix **[Online Appendix 3: Fig. 11b]**. Elongated plant fibers are also visible to the naked eye.

Petrographic analysis reveals that the framework consists of silt and sand (49% of the total surface area), embedded within a subordinate clay-rich matrix **[Figure 13; Online Appendix 3: Figs 12a–c]**. The framework is composed primarily of quartz (38.5–40% total surface area), with some feldspars (2.4–3.6% total surface area). Identified accessory

cinnabar, for Koh Ker stone statuary (Bourdonneau 2020: 39). Minium is only documented in Khmer epigraphy; it appears once under the Sanskrit name *sindūra* in the digraphic stele K. 281, dated to the reign of Yaśovarman I (r. 889/890–ca. 910 CE; Face D, st. 8; Bergaigne 1893: 458, 471).

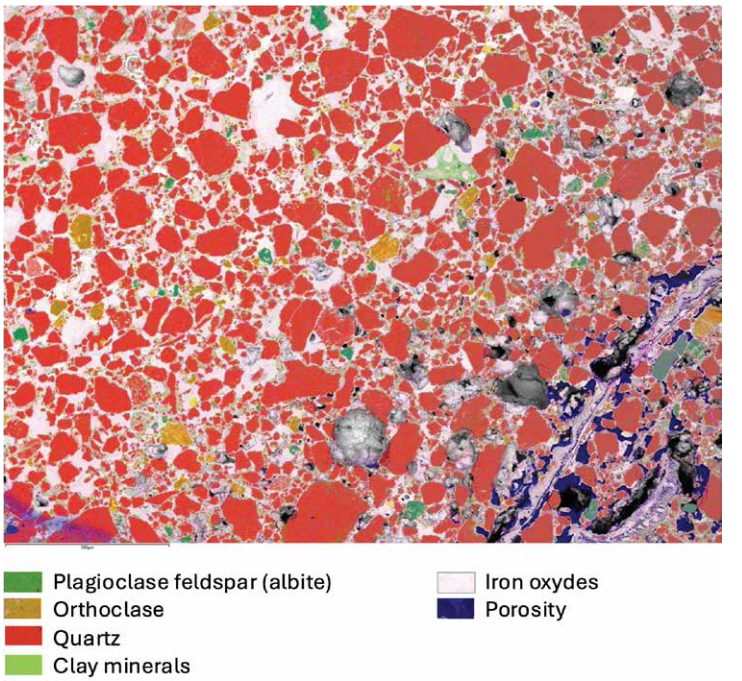


Figure 13: Clay-based core composition of male deity from Ban Yang Pong Sadao; SEM-EDS: chemical mapping (mineral and rock fragments, organic additives) © Yvan Coquinot/ C2RMF

minerals include rutile, ilmenite, apatite, zircon, xenotime, and small mica needles (<0.1% total surface area).

Leaching by percolating water has removed most of the clay from the core, which now occupies only 2–3% of the total volume. The clay matrix has been replaced by iron oxides (goethite) resulting from the corrosion of the nearby iron armature (58.6% total volume). Consequently, the microstructure of the core, including its porosity and grain-size distribution of the clay and silt fractions, has been altered. Nevertheless, the quartz and feldspar grains retain their original characteristics in terms of size and shape: they are angular to subrounded, very fine, and moderately sorted (mean grain size = 77 µm). A few coarse grains, up to 1 mm, are also present. Quartz occurs mainly as non-undulose and undulose monocrystalline grains with subordinate polycrystalline grains. Feldspar grains are often altered and consist predominantly of potassium feldspars (orthoclase), whereas plagioclases (albite) are less abundant and smaller. The core also contains organic additives (0.2%), including rounded carbon fragments and, more abundantly, carbonized to uncarbonized rice husk.

The very fine clay matrix (<2 µm) consists of a mixture of clay minerals that could not be identified because an insufficient quantity remains. However, SEM-EDS analyses conducted on small areas where clay is still preserved reveal the following mean composition: 59% silicon dioxide (SiO_2), 17% alumina (Al_2O_3), 17% iron oxide (Fe_2O_3), 1.8% calcium oxide (CaO), 1.6% titanium dioxide (TiO_2), 1.4% potassium oxide (K_2O), 0.7% magnesium oxide (MgO), and 0.2% sodium (Na).

Technical Choices and New Dating Arguments

Following the methodology applied in the stylistic study, the statue was examined and compared with the same group of large 11th-century bronze

sculptures in order to identify additional distinguishing features that may further support the proposed dating.

• *Armatures and model*. The complex internal armature system, two complementary iron rods extending from the feet to the hands and emerging through an open hole in the head, is characteristic of 11th-century bronze statuary (Vincent 2014a). The pedestal, with its long tang, is also nearly identical to that visible beneath the Prasat Sa Kamphaeng Yai statue mentioned above (cat. no. 10 in **Online Appendix 1**; Warangkana 2535: figs 5 and 15).

• *Casting direction*. The choice to cast the statue upright—rather than upside down, as observed in several Angkorian bronzes (Woodward 1997: 88–94, 97–111, based on examinations by D. Strahan; Vincent 2012: 277–278)—appears unusual and may reflect a specific workshop practice.

• *Metal*. The alloys used for the body, pedestal, tang, and front fold of the *sampot* correspond closely with those documented for 11th-century bronze statuary, including the West Mebon Viṣṇu mentioned above (cat. no. 11 in **Online Appendix 1**; Vincent & Bourgarit 2025). Only the upper disks and back bow exhibit relatively higher sulfur contents and arsenic-to-nickel ratios, which do not entirely exclude the possibility that these two elements were produced later, during the 12th century.

• *Assemblies*. Assembly of separately cast sections has not been observed among the earliest Baphuon bronzes. Moreover, the combination of the three identified assembly techniques—mechanical fixing, soldering, and brazing—is only attested in bronzes produced from the middle to the second half of the 11th century.[35]

• *Polychromy*. The statue represents the best-preserved example of polychrome effects currently known, combining gilding, inlays, and painted decoration. Such complex and elaborate treatment is documented only from the second half of the 11th century onward. To date, only two other analytically characterized examples displaying a comparable combination of techniques and materials (mercury gilding, silver or silver-gold alloy and lead or lead-tin alloy inlays, and cinnabar pigment) are attested.[36]

Thus, the study of the statue's manufacturing techniques does not contradict the stylistic analysis. Instead, it supports a production date in the second half of the 11th century, possibly during the reign of Harṣavarman III in the 1060–1080s.

Reconstructing the Statue's History

Based on the results discussed above, it is now possible to reconstruct the statue's original religious, political, cultural, and technological contexts.

Place of Manufacture

The statue was discovered in Ban Yang Pong Sadao, Buriram province, in present-day northeast Thailand. The Buriram region came under substantial Khmer control as early as the late 9th to early 10th century, before becoming integrated into the Angkorian kingdom, Kambujadeśa (Woodward 2005;

[35] See cat. nos 9 and 11 **[Online Appendix 1]**.

[36] See cat. nos 11 and 12 **[Online Appendix 1]**.

see also Pira 2016). Angkorian political and cultural expansion in the region is particularly evident in major religious foundations, notably the three Śaiva complexes of Plai Bat Hill (PPBH 1 and 2), Prasat Phanom Rung, and Prasat Mueang Tam **[Map 1]**, as well as in other epigraphic, architectural, and sculptural remains. During the same period, the territory was traversed by a royal road linking the capital of Yaśodharapura (Angkor) to the holy place of Vimāy (Phimai), further reinforcing Khmer authority over the region.

Stylistically, the statue can be compared with both bronze and stone productions from the Angkor region and northeast Thailand. Technologically, it likewise shares features with bronze sculptures from both areas. Given its place of discovery, manufacture in the Buriram region might initially seem the most plausible hypothesis. This possibility is supported by evidence for a local bronze-casting tradition extending back to the 7th–9th centuries which produced large and small Buddhist bronze statuary, notably those allegedly found at the later 10th-century temple of Prasat Plai Bat Hill 2 (PPBH 2), located 8 km east of Ban Yang Pong Sadao, as well as farther north at Ban Mueang Fai (Bunker 2002; Tanongsak et al. 2024; Revire 2025).

Recent metal analyses of a series of 11th-century bronze statues reportedly discovered in present-day Buriram and Sisaket provinces—although these reported proveniences must be treated with considerable caution—also support the hypothesis of a so-called Buriram bronze-casting tradition active from the early 11th century through the late 11th or early 12th century.[37] These statues are characterized by particularly high cobalt contents (0.1–0.9 wt%), a feature also observed in several bronzes reportedly found at PPBH 2 (Vincent & Bourgarit 2025).

In the case of the present statue, however, the relatively low cobalt content measured in all six analyzed parts does not support an attribution to this proposed Buriram production group **[Table 1]**. Instead, the close similarity of the metal with that of the West Mebon Viṣṇu (cat. no. 11 in **Online Appendix 1**) suggests a manufacture in the Angkor region. Specifically, the produced metal alloy may be linked to the foundry associated with the royal capital and installed near the Royal Palace in present-day Angkor Thom. This appears to have been one of the principal—if not the principal—centers of bronze production for the Angkorian kingdom during the 11th century (Polkinghorne et al. 2014; Vincent & Bourgarit 2025; Baptiste et al. 2025).

While metallic copper is a mobile raw material, clay generally originates from the immediate surroundings of a bronze workshop, making it a more discriminating indicator for locating the place of manufacture (Bourgarit et al. 2025). Reexamination of the statue's clay-based core, in comparison with other samples as part of ongoing research on Angkorian clays, reveals that its clay fraction clearly differs from that of the West Mebon Viṣṇu's core, as well as from a series of clay samples collected at the royal foundry site in Angkor Thom. These differences include

[37] See cat. nos 4, 7, 12, and 16 **[Online Appendix 1]**.

a distinct chemical composition and the absence of volcanic rocks, laterite fragments, and volcanic quartz.

Moreover, the unusually high proportion of potassium and plagioclase feldspars in the statue's clay-based core (3–6% of the total volume of grains) does not correspond to the "Grès Supérieurs" sandstones, which constitute the source rocks of the alluvial deposits around Angkor within a radius of approximately 20 km. Instead, this suggests that the silty-sandy material used for the core originated from an area where feldspathic sandstones contributed significantly to the source rocks of the alluvial deposits.

Available geological data from the historical territory of the Angkorian kingdom allow two possible interpretations. First, the statue may have been manufactured within the royal capital of Angkor using silty-sandy material transported from areas located more than 20 km east or northeast of the urban center. Second, it may have been produced in the Buriram region, or possibly in neighboring Surin, more likely in the upstream areas of river drainage basins —as appears to be the case for Ban Yang Pong Sadao—where the absence of basalt inclusions in the clay-based core can be explained. Given the characteristics of the clay material, the second hypothesis currently appears more plausible.

Commission

Further questions concern the statue's patron and the artisans who crafted it. Given its large size, technical sophistication, and quality, as well as the use of precious materials (gold and silver) and imported substances (mercury and cinnabar), the statue's commission must be attributed to a high-status, wealthy patron, most likely connected with the Angkorian royal court. Examples of royal commissions for 11th-century bronze statuary are known both within and beyond the royal capital of Yaśodharapura.[38] As previously noted, the statue may have been produced during the reign of Harṣavarman III, suggesting the possible patronage of the king himself or members of his entourage as a royal offering to a provincial sanctuary and as an instrument of political consolidation (Lavy & Polkinghorne 2023).

The processes of commissioning and production, however, remain only partially understood. If the statue was indeed produced locally in the Buriram region, two possibilities may be considered regarding the founders involved. The first is that local craftspersons, inheritors of a long-established bronze-casting tradition—particularly in the Ban Kruat district (อ. บ้านกรวด) of southern Buriram, known for its craft production (ceramics and iron; Pira 2016)—were responsible for its manufacture. The second is that mobile artisans, possibly dispatched from royal workshops in Angkor for a specific commission, produced the statue. These craftspersons may have held the status of royal artisans (Skt, *rājaśilpin*; Old Khmer, *śilpi rājakārya*). Although poorly documented in epigraphic sources, such

[38] Royal commissions are attested during the reign of Sūryavarman I (the Śiva image commissioned by Queen Vīralakṣmī, according to inscription K. 1064) and during that of his successor, Udayādityavarman II (the West Mebon Viṣṇu commissioned by the king himself); cat. nos 6 and 11, respectively **[Online Appendix 1]**.

artisans appear to have been regularly employed by royal authority following the administrative reorganization of the 10th–11th centuries (Vincent et al. 2025). The similarity between the statue's manufacturing techniques—particularly the creation of complex polychrome effects—and those documented for the West Mebon Viṣṇu lends support to the second hypothesis.

Place of Worship

Another issue concerns the statue's original place of worship. Based on interviews and field observations conducted in July 2015, the surviving remains of the Ban Yang Pong Sadao sanctuary tower appear to consist of a small laterite shrine surrounded by a platform and a moat. These modest architectural remains provide little support for identifying the sanctuary as the destination of an elaborate royal offering. Moreover, as discussed above, no definitive conclusion can be reached regarding the association between the statue and the sandstone pedestals discovered within the sanctuary tower.

At the very least, one possible pedestal (**Fig. 3,** Pedestal 2) can be compared stylistically with pedestals from the brick shrines of nearby Prasat Mueang Tam, located more than 10 km east of Ban Yang Pong Sadao and generally dated to the 11th century (Woodward 2005: 123–124; construction of the brick shrines is associated with the early 11th century). However, the third pedestal—perhaps the one originally associated with the statue—remains unidentified. It should also be noted that three statues were probably originally installed in the Ban Yang Pong Sadao sanctuary tower. The possibility that the statue was transferred from another sanctuary before being buried (see below) should therefore not be excluded.[39]

When searching for the statue's original place of worship, the nearby complex of Prasat Phanom Rung (Old Khmer, Vnaṃ Ruṅ; Skt, Pṛthuśaila, among other Sanskrit names), located 9.5 km northeast of Ban Yang Pong Sadao, emerges as another possible location. Characterized by continuous occupation and religious use, the Phanom Rung hill constituted a major holy site of the Angkorian kingdom between the 10th and 13th centuries. Its importance is attested both by epigraphic sources and the successive religious foundations and architectural additions established on and around the hill. The principal deity venerated there was Śiva, known from the 10th century as Kamrateṅ Jagat (K.J. or "Lord of the World") Vnam Ruṅ. As a major holy site, the sanctuary functioned as a place of pilgrimage and attracted substantial patronage, particularly from Khmer kings and members of the royal entourage. During the third quarter of the 11th century, two inscriptions document such high-status donations made in honor of K.J. Vnam Ruṅ. First, the so-called "Lovek" stela (K. 136) records offerings of statue ornaments and ritual objects in precious metals by *vraḥ kamrateṅ añ* (V.K.A.) Śaṅkarapaṇḍita, who successively served as chaplain (Skt, *hotar*) to kings Sūryavarman I, Udayādityavarman II, and Harṣavarman III. These offerings formed part of a long list of donations to renowned deities of transregional prominence (l. 40; Cœdès

[39] A similar and nearby example is represented by the group of 7th-9th-century Buddhist bronzes reportedly found within the enclosure of the 10th-century PPBH 2 sanctuary (Tanongsak et al. 2024; Revire 2025).

1954: 284–286). Second, the Preah Nok stela (K. 289) reports that Saṅgrāma, a military commander (Skt, *senāpati*) under King Udayādityavarman II, visited the Pṛthuśaila hill before a battle to seek Śiva's favor and, following his victory, returned to make comparable offerings of precious materials in recognition of his success (Face C, st. 32, 51–54; Barth 1885: 166–168). Considering the prominence of K.J. Vnam Ruṅ during this period and the well-attested practice among the Angkorian politico–religious elite of dedicating elaborate metal objects to major sanctuaries, the statue may plausibly have originally formed part of such offerings to the holy-site deity, Śiva. It may have been presented either to the main sanctuary or to one of its associated shrines, such as the Ban Yang Pong Sadao sanctuary tower.

To ensure completeness, attention should also be drawn to the four-faced Sanskrit stela K. 384, discovered in the Phanom Rung sanctuary and recently reassessed through a revised translation (Goodall 2026). The text consists of a eulogy in five chapters dedicated to Narendrāditya, now identified as the son of King Sūryavarman II (r. 1113/1114–1149/1150 CE). As a follower of the Paśupata sect, Narendrāditya devoted part of his life to ascetic practices and religious devotion to Śiva; he is also frequently credited with founding the principal shrine of Prasat Phanom Rung. Three additional lines were engraved at a later date, corresponding to 1150/1151 CE (1072 *śaka*), although the events they record occurred earlier, during the reign of Sūryavarman II. Notably, the stela was likely produced to commemorate the installation of a golden statue of Śiva, which simultaneously functioned as an image of Narendrāditya and was named Hiraṇyajanaka. This statue was dedicated by his son and disciple, the dignitary Hiraṇya, who also composed the inscription, "after crossing the age of twenty" (Face D, st. 27), during Narendrāditya's lifetime.

This Śaiva context, combined with its emphasis on asceticism, is reminiscent of the iconographic characteristics of the statue under discussion. Nevertheless, although it is tempting to identify the statue with the golden image mentioned in the stela—as an idealized portrait of the Śaiva ascetic Narendrāditya—such an interpretation remains conjectural. In light of the stylistic and technical features discussed above, assigning the statue's manufacture to as late as the reign of Sūryavarman II remains problematic. One possibility worth considering is a case of "archaism", a creative process documented in Khmer art (Lavy & Polkinghorne 2023), whereby the statue may have been produced deliberately in an earlier Baphuon style. This hypothesis, however, remains highly speculative, as it would require an artificial reconciliation between the statue and the historical information provided by the stela.

Life Cycle

Continuing to chart the statue's life cycle, possible evidence for later repairs exists. As noted above, the relatively higher sulfur contents and arsenic-to-nickel ratios detected in the metal of the upper disks and back bow **[Table 1]** may support a 12th-century production date, suggesting that these two elaborate and structurally vulnerable elements were not original but later replacements.

Evidence for deconsecration is also suggested by the possible intentional removal of the eyes **[Figs 9a, c]**. As part of the installation rituals (Skt, *pratiṣṭhā*), the "opening of the eyes" (Skt, *unmīlita*) constituted the essential act of consecrating a deity-image. An image could become an object of worship once it was considered alive and animated by the actual presence of the deity. In material terms, this ceremony involved engraving or inserting the pupils into the eyes. From the 9th century onwards, in bronze statuary, this ritual act was often expressed through the use of metal and glass—or stone—inlays for the eye whites and pupils.

The statue's ritual destruction would have taken place before its burial, in the immediate vicinity of the Ban Yang Pong Sadao sanctuary tower, approximately 50 cm below ground level. Supporting this interpretation, comparable ritual destruction has been documented for the Prasat Sa Kamphaeng Yai bronze statue mentioned above (cat. no. 10 in **Online Appendix 1**), which was found lying on its left side just below ground level, with the pupils missing from its face (Warangkana 2535: figs 1–3).

Within the life cycle of Angkorian statues, deconsecration could occur for various religious and non-religious reasons. These included the replacement of an older deity-image by a new one and its subsequent abandonment, or shifts in religious affiliation, particularly from Hindu to Theravada cult practices. Political motivations may also have played a role, including the concealment of images in "caches" to prevent their loss, destruction, or transfer. This possibility is particularly relevant in the regional historical context of the late Angkorian period. According to the bilingual stela K. 1361 (Thai inv. no. NM 78) found in Nakhon Ratchasima province, Ayutthayan King Borommaracha II (r. 1424–1448 CE) victoriously subjugated several cities in 1431 CE, including Phanom Rung and Phimai, during a campaign that began at Angkor (Santi 2558).

Concluding Remarks

From the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Gallery of Southeast Asian Art in New York City to the Ban Yang Pong Sadao village and the nearby Phanom Rung religious complex in Buriram province, this artwork, initially praised only by scholars, curators, and collectors, has become the material support of local memories as well as a newly contextualized and dated deity-image with both Śaiva and royal connections. In addition to its inestimable historical, religious, cultural, and art-historical value, the innovative interdisciplinary research conducted by the authors of this article confirms that the Ban Yang Pong Sadao male deity represents a technical *tour de force*. This masterpiece, in every sense of the word, demonstrates the extraordinary skill of Angkorian bronze founders in the 11th century. It also offers new insights into contemporary preferences for polychrome effects and the original appearance of large bronze statues within temple settings. Together with unresolved questions surrounding the long-life cycle of the statue, these findings contribute to its ongoing historical and cultural reappropriation on both sides of the ancient royal road linking Angkor to Phimai.

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Abbreviations

BM: binocular microscope
FTIR: Fourier Transform Infrared Microscopy
ICP-AES: Inductively Coupled Plasma Atomic Emission Spectrometry
PIXE: Particle-Induced X-ray Emission
Py-GC/MS: Pyrolysis Gas Chromatography Mass Spectrometry
SEM-EDS: Scanning Electron Microscopy with Energy Dispersive Spectrometry
XRF: X-ray Fluorescence

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From Canberra to Phnom Penh: Collaborative Research and the Repatriation of Three Cham Bronzes

Bronwyn Campbell[1]

Abstract—In July 2023, the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra ceremonially repatriated three bronze bodhisattvas to the Kingdom of Cambodia. Produced in Campā between the 9th and 11th centuries and likely buried centuries later in southeastern Cambodia, the sculptures were returned following years of research into their findspot and provenance. The handover celebrated a decades-long relationship between the National Gallery and the National Museum of Cambodia in Phnom Penh and reflected broader shifts in museum practice, ethical decision-making, and collection management.

Keywords: Douglas Latchford; Looting of Antiquities; National Gallery of Australia; Provenance and Provenience; Repatriation

Introduction

On Friday 28 July 2023, at a small ceremony on the unceded lands of the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people in Australia's capital city Kamberri/Canberra, the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) ceremonially repatriated three sculptures to the Kingdom of Cambodia. The handover was the culmination of years of research into the provenance (ownership history) and provenience (findspot) and a celebration of a decades-long relationship between the National Gallery and the National Museum of Cambodia (NMC) in Phnom Penh. It is also emblematic of the ever-evolving frameworks for ethical decision-making and collection management that the NGA has been nurturing since the 2014 Australian government seizure and repatriation to India of a Chola-dynasty Śiva as Lord of the Dance (*naṭarāja*) **[Figure 1]** acquired from the now-infamous Manhattan Asian art dealer Subhash Kapoor, whose 2011 arrest in Germany and subsequent extradition to and conviction in India was the first case to bring global attention to the illicit trade in Asian cultural objects. Having voluntarily repatriated over 270 works of art since 2014, the NGA must simultaneously consider how it continues to reflect Australia's diversity while respecting the rights of creator communities. Rethinking the role of collecting institutions presents challenges while bringing exciting opportunities for genuine and rewarding connection through cultural material.

The Sculptures

This article focuses on the evolution of the NGA's approach to managing its collections through the lens of one

[1] National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
Email: bronwyn.campbell@nga.gov.au.

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Figure 1: Śiva as Lord of the Dance [*naṭarāja*], Chola dynasty, 11th–12th c., Tamil Nadu, India; H.: 128.5 cm; National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, former acc. no. 2008.1; deaccessioned and repatriated, 2014 © NGA

research project, rather than an art-historical discussion of the works of art that were the subject of that project or their original creation and purpose. These do, however, play a role in how and why the sculptures were acquired, how they were used by the National Gallery, how they influenced the approach to and progress of research into their provenance and provenience, and, finally, they are central to the ongoing significance of their repatriation.

The three sculptures are made of bronze and represent bodhisattvas,



Figure 2: Three bronze bodhisattvas, 9th–11th c.; National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, former acc. nos 2011.946.1–3; deaccessioned 2021, repatriated 2023; on loan from the Kingdom of Cambodia, 2023–2029 © NGA

revered figures in Mahayana Buddhism. Two represent Avalokiteśvara Padmapāṇi, the bodhisattva of compassion in the form of the "lotus-bearer". The third is Vajrapāṇi, a guardian and protector figure in the Buddhist tradition **[Figure 2]**. Their story begins in the Campā region, where a succession of Cham polities flourished in present-day central and southern Vietnam from the early centuries of the first millennium CE until the early 19th century, with connections extending, at times, into present-day Laos and Cambodia. The sculptures date to between the late 9th and the 11th centuries, when Mahayana Buddhism enjoyed strong royal patronage. Their precise place of manufacture remains unknown.

The largest **[Figure 3]** measures 54 cm in height and 19.8 cm at its widest. It depicts a four-armed, heavily bejeweled Avalokiteśvara Padmapāṇi standing on a lotus pedestal, with a gently reassuring smile on his lips. Rising from the base are the twisted stalks of the lotus leaves and flowers that give the bodhisattva his epithet as the "lotus bearer" (*padmapāṇi*). One stem is held lightly between the thumb and forefinger of his lower right hand, the blossom nodding over his shoulder, while in his upper right hand he holds aloft a sutra. His lower left hand grasps the neck of a spouted holy water flask and in his upper left is a loop of prayer beads. His braided hair is elaborately looped into a characteristically tall arrangement,



Figure 3: Bronze Avalokiteśvara Padmapāṇi; H.: 54 cm; former acc. no. 2011.946.1 © NGA



Figure 4: Bronze Avalokiteśvara Padmapāṇi; H.: 33 cm; former acc. no. 2011.946.3 © NGA

with the Buddha Amitābha seated on the band that secures the base of the coiffure. Apart from these identifying attributes, a flaming aureole frames Avalokiteśvara Padmapāṇi's lithe silhouette. This separate and removable piece may have stayed with the bodhisattva for at least ten centuries.[2] Much of the original gilding also survives.

A second, smaller, version of Avalokiteśvara Padmapāṇi **[Figure 4]** is so like the larger that it may have originated in the same workshop. Only 33 cm high, it is stylistically and iconographically nearly identical to the larger one. However, it has less remaining gilding. While it was presumably once furnished with a similarly fiery nimbus, the only surviving evidence of this is the loop on the back of the bodhisattva's head from which the nimbus might have hung.

Of a similar size, the Vajrapāṇi **[Figure 5]** also retains little trace of its original gilding. Its facial features are slightly more pronounced, its jewelry differs in treatment, and it is accompanied by a simple nimbus framing only the head and tiered hairstyle. Its overall posture is graceful and naturalistic, with the garment falling in soft, flowing folds. The right hand firmly grasps a slender, pointed *vajra*, while the empty left hand

[2] Based on the discussion of the aureole by John Guy, which implies that the author believes that the backplate is original: "complete with flaming cusped aureole [...] the most elaborate ensemble recovered to date. The figure bears close comparison in both style and scale with the fine example from Quảng Bình (Fig. 15), but the latter lacks the wondrous openwork back-plate. The newly discovered icon displays for the first time the true splendour of such complete compositions" (2011: 316).



Figure 5: Bronze Vajrapāṇi; H.: 33.4 cm; former acc. no. 2011.946.2 © NGA

is held upturned at waist level. The serene expression differs from the fierce aspects associated with other manifestations of Vajrapāṇi in Buddhist art.

Stylistic differences and metal composition both distinguish the Vajrapāṇi from the other two sculptures, supporting the possibility that it was produced in a different workshop or at a different date. John Guy (2011: 318) reported that the Vajrapāṇi was found with a thin sheet of gold bearing an inscription contained within the base. Unfortunately, this sheet was not present when the sculpture was acquired by the National Gallery and no references to it occur in correspondence with the private collector it was purchased from, either before or after acquisition.

When the sculptures were offered to the NGA, the collector said these three figures were found together, and they were displayed and published as a group by the National Gallery. They originally did not belong together as a single set, however, but the combination of the smaller Avalokiteśvara and Vajrapāṇi may suggest a triad with a central buddha image now missing.

Acquisition History

The three Cham bodhisattva bronzes first came to the attention of the NGA in September 2010 when Thai–British collector Douglas A.J. Latchford, also known as Pakpong Kriangsak (ภัคพงษ์ เกรียงศักดิ์, 1931–2020), offered them for sale and sent photographs of the works for the Gallery's consideration. Inquiries made of Latchford regarding provenance gradually yielded the information that they were found together in 1969 at an unknown site in Vietnam, where they were acquired in the same year by an unnamed expatriate private collector working there for the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HBSC). This collector then exported them with his other belongings when he moved to Hong Kong in about 1970. A few years later, due to financial difficulty, he sold them through a mutual friend to Latchford, who was a family acquaintance. According to Latchford, the works were kept in his personal collection from the 1970s until 2010, when he eventually offered them for sale to the NGA for US$1.5 million.

None of the initial information obtained from Latchford could be corroborated by other sources. A European Community (EU) export license for the transport of the works from the United Kingdom to the National Gallery

for inspection on 23 November 2010 states that they had been imported from Hong Kong in 1995. While this appeared to confirm that they had been out of Vietnam since at least that time, the information was presumably provided to the shipping agent either by Latchford or his associate or employee and was therefore unreliable. It is also inconsistent with Latchford's assertion that the sculptures had been in his collection since buying them from the Hong Kong-based private collector in the 1970s.[3]

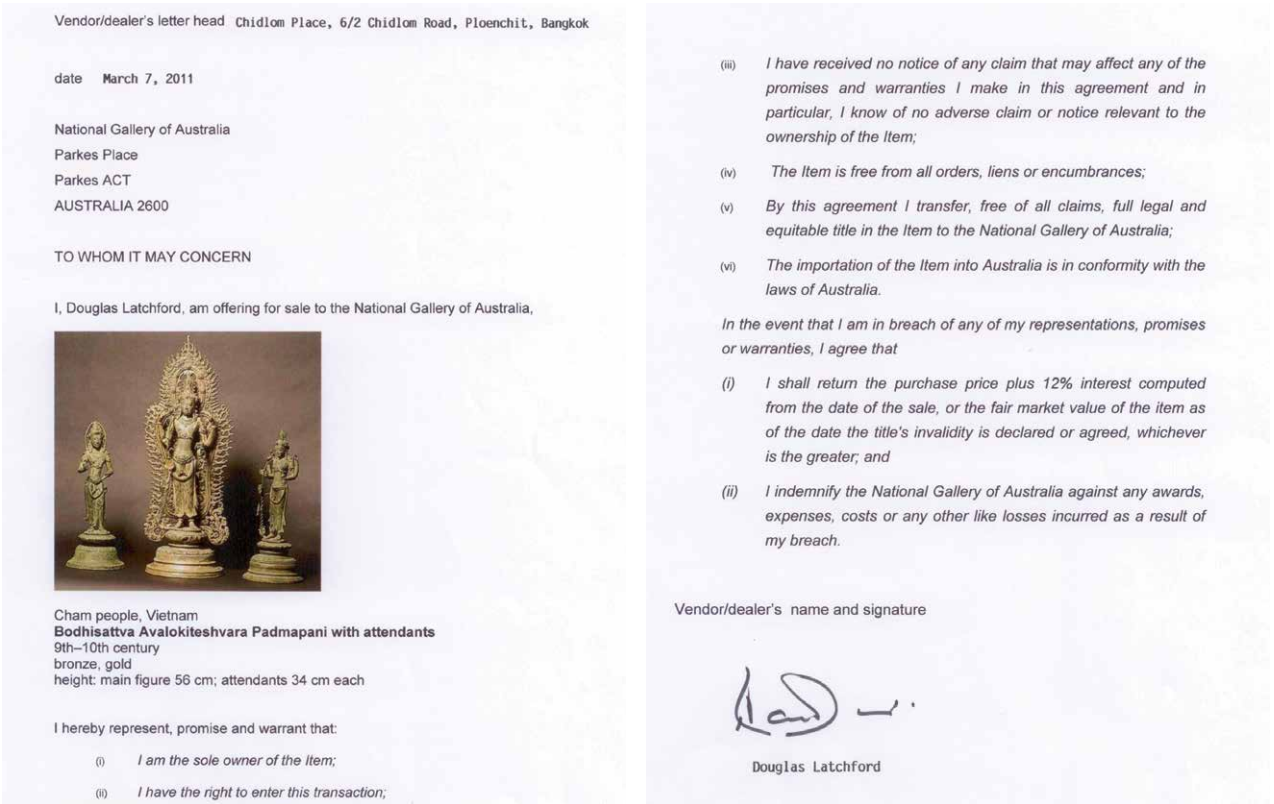
In response to continued efforts to obtain more details about the modern history of the works, Latchford signed a warranty of title to the works in March 2011. During this time, he divulged that the acquaintance he acquired the works from was named Ian Donaldson (Andrew Ian Donaldson, 1933–2001, born United Kingdom, died Hong Kong, living and working in East and Southeast Asia from 1955). This information was covered by a Deed of Confidentiality that prevented the NGA from disclosing anything relating to the provenance that was supplied by Latchford, including his own and Donaldson's name. It did, however, finally offer the National Gallery an opportunity to corroborate the information that Latchford had supplied. The name and biographical details of Ian Donaldson corresponded to those of the previous owner of a Mathura sandstone seated buddha from the Kushan period (2nd century CE), acquired by the NGA from another dealer, Nancy Wiener, in 2007 (see *infra*). This supported Latchford's representation of Donaldson as a collector of Asian art. The earlier purchase had been accompanied by a letter, dated 1985, signed "I Donaldson", averring that the buddha was in his collection, was authentic, and had good title. NGA staff verified the name and address of the by-then-deceased Donaldson in 2007, which strengthened the Gallery's level of comfort with the supplied provenance information for the three Cham sculptures.

After meeting the due diligence requirements of the NGA at the time, including:

- undertaking a literature review, which confirmed that the larger sculpture was published in three art-historical texts (Guy 2008, 2009; Bunker & Latchford 2008: 42);[4]
- contacting experts in Cham art and mainland Southeast Asian bronzes;
- consulting records of known Cham sculptures via the École française d'Extrême-Orient, Paris;
- obtaining an Art Loss Register certificate to establish that there was no reported theft; and
- obtaining a letter of warranty signed by Latchford **[Figure 6]**;

[3] While Latchford did not specify where the sculptures had been kept while in his possession, they were in London at the time they were offered to the NGA and were first published in 2008 as being from a private collection in London (Guy 2008). The statement on the EU export license in 2010 that they had been imported into the United Kingdom in or around 1995 is unsubstantiated, but accords with information that became available to the National Gallery in more recent years. Files from the time of acquisition do not contain comment on the possibility that the 1995 import via Hong Kong was inconsistent with Latchford's supposed 1970s acquisition.

[4] A further 2011 publication by Guy did not arrive at the National Gallery until after the purchase was finalized.



Vendor/dealer's letter head Chidlom Place, 6/2 Chidlom Road, Ploenchit, Bangkok

date March 7, 2011

National Gallery of Australia
Parkes Place
Parkes ACT
AUSTRALIA 2600

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

I, Douglas Latchford, am offering for sale to the National Gallery of Australia,

Cham people, Vietnam
Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara Padmapani with attendants
9th–10th century
bronze, gold
height: main figure 56 cm; attendants 34 cm each

I hereby represent, promise and warrant that:

(i) *I am the sole owner of the Item;*

(ii) *I have the right to enter this transaction;*

(iii) *I have received no notice of any claim that may affect any of the promises and warranties I make in this agreement and in particular, I know of no adverse claim or notice relevant to the ownership of the Item;*

(iv) *The Item is free from all orders, liens or encumbrances;*

(v) *By this agreement I transfer, free of all claims, full legal and equitable title in the Item to the National Gallery of Australia;*

(vi) *The importation of the Item into Australia is in conformity with the laws of Australia.*

In the event that I am in breach of any of my representations, promises or warranties, I agree that

(i) I shall return the purchase price plus 12% interest computed from the date of the sale, or the fair market value of the item as of the date the title's invalidity is declared or agreed, whichever is the greater; and

(ii) I indemnify the National Gallery of Australia against any awards, expenses, costs or any other like losses incurred as a result of my breach.

Vendor/dealer's name and signature

Douglas Latchford

Figure 6: Douglas Latchford's letter of warranty, signed 7 March 2011 © NGA

on 31 August 2011, the three Cham bronzes were approved for acquisition by the National Gallery's governing Council. The cost of the acquisition was primarily drawn from government funding dedicated to the development of the collection.

Even though the acquisition went ahead and the NGA's due diligence requirements were met, provenance research was neither complete nor exhaustive. In particular, because the three bronzes were treated as a group, described in acquisition documents as "Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara Padmapani with attendants—Vajrapani and Padmapani", the comfort taken from the publication record was perhaps disproportionate. In all three published references consulted prior to acquisition (see above), only the main figure **[Fig. 3]** was illustrated and discussed, with no reference to the other two smaller sculptures. The significance of this was magnified when the Vajrapāṇi image **[Fig. 5]** was found in June 2011 to have been advertised for sale separately by another dealer—Alexander Goetz (also spelled Götz)—in the early 2000s.[5] Inquiries regarding this inconsistency with

[5] Goetz's web page (https://asianart.com/gotz/vajrapani.html) was first accessed by National Gallery staff on 14 June 2011 and remained online as of 4 August 2026. The Vajrapāṇi was first recorded in public in late March 2001, when Goetz presented it in Asia Week New York (International Asian Art Fair, Ltd 2001: 47, illustrated, and Cotter 2001). It was subsequently published in *Arts of Asia* in 2002 and advertised prominently during Asian Art in London, Fall 2002.

Latchford's account of the provenance were not resolved prior to acquisition, although Latchford claimed that he had given Goetz the Vajrapāṇi to sell, later changing his mind and deciding to keep the group together (National Gallery correspondence with Latchford, 8 August 2011). National Gallery staff wrote to Goetz in August 2011, seeking information that might either corroborate or complicate the known ownership history. The message was not answered.

At the time of the acquisition, the NGA understood that its legal and ethical obligations were met if an object was exported from its country of origin before the entry into force on 24 April 1972 of the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. While there was little evidence to establish that this was the case, nothing had been found that seemed to contradict the purported 1969 unrestricted export from Vietnam. No parameter other than predating the 1970 Convention appears to have been applied to the export of the bronzes, including that Vietnam was at the time the site of ongoing armed conflict. In August 2011, the National Gallery was unaware that the Cham bronzes would be among its last major acquisitions of historic Asian art.

The Unravelling

Although today the late Douglas Latchford has arguably surpassed Subhash Kapoor as the world's most notorious supplier of stolen Asian art, in 2011 he was still widely regarded as an expert collector, generous donor, and sometimes seller of the finest works of art from mainland Southeast Asia. His assiduous promotion of Khmer cultural heritage, in particular, and donations of money and works of art to the NMC had resulted in decorations from the Cambodian government, vouchsafing his good character and the works that he sold.[6]

The larger Avalokiteśvara Padmapāṇi bronze **[Fig. 3]** was first described by curator and art historian John Guy as "the most important Buddhist icon to be documented to date" (2008: 16), an encouraging description of a work of art under consideration for Australia's national collection. However, above that quote, Guy also stated that it was "newly discovered". This is not remarked upon in National Gallery records from the time of the acquisition. While it appears that this line of inquiry was not pursued in 2011, the acquisition and collecting history of the three bronzes began to unravel when they were reviewed in 2014–2015 as part of the NGA's Asian Art Provenance Project, initiated in response to the Australian government's seizure and repatriation to India of the Śiva-Naṭarāja **[Fig. 1]**, acquired in February 2008 from Subhash Kapoor (Campbell 2019). A number of factors regarding the legal and ethical status of the Cham sculptures gradually heightened the National Gallery's concerns. Principal among these was a statement by Guy: "their provenances are unclear, but it must be assumed that they were recovered by illegal diggers, principally in Quảng Nam [province]" (2011: 316).

[6] According to English language reports, Latchford was awarded the Grand Cross of the Royal Order of Monisaraphon in 2008 and Commander of the Royal Order of Saha Metrei in 2009 (Mashberg 2021a, 2023).

Concerns arising from these statements were compounded by inconsistencies in the prior histories of the works that began to emerge in correspondence with Latchford almost immediately after their acquisition. In particular, he shifted from describing Ian Donaldson as an old family acquaintance from whom he had acquired the works through an intermediary, to identifying him as someone Latchford knew from Hong Kong and had become more closely acquainted with after Donaldson moved to Thailand (National Gallery correspondence with Latchford, 8 Sept. 2011). Later still, Latchford claimed that he had invented the intermediary at Donaldson's request (National Gallery conversation with Latchford, 4 Nov. 2014).

Unease was reinforced by growing public scrutiny of Latchford's collecting practices, which intensified in 2012 when he was identified as "the Collector" in a civil action suit brought to prevent the sale by Sotheby's in New York of a monumental sandstone sculpture of Duryodhana (Melody Rod-Ari, this Special Edition, fig. 1), which had been looted from Koh Ker in northeastern Cambodia (DOJ 2012). This 10th-century imperial temple complex is the same site discussed by Edelstein & Morasco in their study of the statue of Hanuman returned from the Cleveland Museum of Art (this Special Edition, fig. 1). Today, Koh Ker has become synonymous with Latchford's pillage of Khmer heritage. The complaint stated that in 1972 "the Collector" had bought the sculpture knowing it was looted and later conspired to sell it. Latchford strenuously denied involvement (Mashberg 2012). Soon after this came the news that the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York was in possession of two sculptures—a pair of kneeling attendants—also associated with Latchford and wanted back by the Cambodian government (Mashberg & Blumenthal 2012).[7] They were returned to Cambodia in 2013, followed by the Duryodhana in 2014 (DOJ 2013; U.S. Attorney's Office 2014).

Behind the scenes, concerns were also growing at the National Gallery due to questions from Jason Felch and Michaela Boland of *The Australian* newspaper (Boland & Felch 2014) about the museum's Kushan period seated buddha **[Figure 7]**. These were prompted by an anonymous tip that the provenance for a similar sculpture at Singapore's Asian Civilisations Museum was bogus (Felch 2015). In late 2014, Boland & Felch published an article alleging that New York-based dealer Nancy Wiener had acquired both Kushan buddha sculptures from an antiquities trafficker in India, with the same ownership history fabricated for each of them. In a 2015 article on his blog *Chasing Aphrodite*, Felch named art historian Donald M. Stadtner as the source of the false provenance story. Stadtner said that the chain of ownership had been concocted by none other than Latchford, who had boasted of this to him in private (Felch 2015). This claim, shared by works sourced from different dealers years apart, had originally appeared to support the validity of the "Ian Donaldson" provenance to the National Gallery. However, the hints of collusion between Wiener and Latchford, allegations that the Mathura seated buddha's

[7] "Two Kneeling Attendants", 10th century, acc. nos 1987.410 and 1992.390.1; and 1989.100 and 1992.390.2: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/904942.



FIGURE 7: Seated buddha, Kushan period, 2nd c. CE, Mathura, Uttar Pradesh, India; H.: 129.5 cm; National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, former acc. no. 2007.217; deaccessioned 2015, repatriated 2016 © NGA

provenance was forged, and increasing awareness of Latchford's connections to stolen Khmer cultural heritage undermined confidence in the legitimacy of the supplied provenance for the Cham bronzes.

While interrogating the chains of ownership that had been accepted at the time of acquisition, the NGA's Asian Art Provenance Project researchers contacted all dealers of works examined under its remit. In November 2014, researchers contacted Latchford, seeking information that might help clarify the backgrounds of both the Kushan seated buddha and the Cham sculptures. A flurry of emails from him contains vehement denials of Stadtner's assertions, threats of legal action against Stadtner and Felch, and the first mention of a medical condition that later became a standard reason for Latchford's inability to respond to inquiries (National Gallery correspondence with Latchford, 8, 9 and 10 Nov. 2014). Also at this point, Latchford claimed he had fabricated the middleman and he had acquired the Cham bronzes in the late 1970s rather than the early 1970s as previously asserted (telephone conversation between National Gallery and Douglas Latchford, 4 Nov. 2014).[8]

[8] The author has been a member of the NGA's

Researchers also contacted Nancy Wiener, seeking documentation that would support the purported chain of ownership for the Kushan seated buddha. While stressing her professional integrity and reaffirming the provenance, Wiener was unable to provide any substantiating evidence. In a supposed show of good faith, she refunded the purchase price of the work and co-donated it to India along with the National Gallery. This was announced on 6 March 2015 (NGA 2015), although the physical repatriation was not effected until mid-December of the following year. Days later, on 21 December 2016, Nancy Wiener was arrested and charged with criminal possession of stolen property and conspiracy. The complaint against her specifically refers to the Kushan seated buddha, its illegal origins, and its forged provenance; it states that Wiener:

> and her coconspirators have trafficked in illegal antiquities for decades. Transporting looted cultural property from the site of the theft to the ultimate buyer through intermediary countries [...,] used a laundering process that included restoration services to hide damage from illegal excavations, [undertook] straw purchases at auction houses to create sham ownership histories, and the creation of false provenance to predate international laws of patrimony prohibiting the exportation of looted antiquities (New York State 2016).[9]

The charge eliminated confidence in the Donaldson provenance for the Kushan seated buddha, as well as for the three Cham bronze sculptures, especially given the generally-held belief that the complaint's unnamed Co-Conspirator #1 was Douglas Latchford and Co-Conspirator #2 was Emma C. Bunker (e.g., Mashberg & Blumenthal 2017; Paviour 2017). Bunker (1930–2021) was a specialist in Asian bronze art with a decades-long association with the Denver Art Museum; she was a friend of Latchford with whom she had co-authored several books. The complaint describes how the co-conspirators

collection research and management team since 2015 and is one of a number of researchers, internal and external, who have contributed to the project under discussion in this article. Provenance research at the National Gallery is guided by collection management policies that outline requirements for due diligence and provenance research in relation to loans, acquisitions, and deaccessions. Decision-making in relation to the outcomes of provenance research is, in accordance with these policies, within the remit of the Director, the National Gallery's governing Council, and the federal government Minister responsible for the arts. The policies describing these decision-making delegations and decision-making criteria are available at https://nga.gov.au/about-us/policies-and-plans/. In accordance with privacy legislation and that staff were acting at all times on behalf of the National Gallery in accordance with established processes and within the parameters of their roles, individual team members are not named in this article.

[9] In the years since Nancy Wiener's arrest and subsequent guilty plea on 30 September 2021, many works of art sourced from the eponymous galleries of Wiener and her late mother Doris Wiener (1922–2011) have been returned to their countries of origin (Mashberg 2021b). Doris Wiener was trading in stolen and trafficked art in New York City from the 1960s, later working with her daughter Nancy, who continued to trade in illicit antiquities—including her mother's stock after Doris Wiener's 2011 death—up to her 2016 arrest. See New York State 2016 for further details.

used their publications to assist in the laundering of stolen art and worked with Nancy Wiener to provide ownership histories for illicit items in her stock.[10]

The apparent conspiratorial connection between Bunker and Latchford was of particular concern to the NGA: their publication, *Khmer Gold: Gifts for the Gods* (2008), was one of the three published references to the works cited in the acquisition paperwork for the Cham bronzes. Additionally, since Bunker was regarded by many as an expert in mainland Southeast Asian bronze sculpture,[11] the National Gallery, at the time of acquisition, had asked for and obtained her opinion on the sculptures. In an undated letter, she describes them as of "superb quality and the best examples of Cham sculpture that I know". She also added provenance details that supported the narrative that Latchford had already provided (National Gallery correspondence with Bunker, August 2011).

From today's perspective, it is surprising that the mounting causes for concern did not result in immediate deaccession, but the NGA's decision-making parameters at the time were contingent on the discovery or provision of incontrovertible evidence of wrongdoing with specific reference to the work or works in question. Despite concerns that the provenance had been falsified and that the vendor appeared to have been involved in the illicit trade in Asian cultural material, such evidence had not been uncovered. Furthermore, while the provenience or findspot for the sculptures was generally believed to be in Vietnam, Cham influence had extended into neighboring countries; without knowing the country of origin or date and circumstances of export, applicable laws could not be identified with certainty.

In the absence of firm evidence, the NGA remained on a course of fact-finding. Bound by the confidentiality agreement signed in 2011—an agreement the National Gallery was unwilling to break due to Latchford's readiness to threaten legal action—the association between the Cham bronzes and Latchford was still not public and the sculptures remained published online as having been bought from a "private collector, London". Over the following few years, ongoing attempts to glean more information from Latchford—after March 2017 solely through lawyers—revealed nothing except that he was purportedly too ill to respond.

The Beginning of the End

In 2015, the National Gallery engaged a former justice of the High Court of Australia, The Honorable Susan Crennan AC KC, to conduct an independent review of the NGA's Asian Art Provenance Project, assessing whether works of art within the scope of the project had a satisfactory provenance and if the information available established when those objects had left their country of origin. Her conclusion for the three Cham bronzes was that the provenance was problematic, warranting further enquiries. Four years later, these and several other works of art from the original review remained unresolved as research had not yielded enough

[10] In the DOJ 2012 complaint, Latchford had been anonymized as "The Collector" and Bunker was referred to as "The Scholar".

[11] This reputation did not extend to leading academic specialists in the field—*Editor's note*.

evidence for decisive action. The new director of the National Gallery, Nick Mitzevich, returned to Mrs Crennan in April 2019 to seek a way forward. With her guidance, the NGA revised its acceptable standard of evidence from criminal (beyond reasonable doubt) to civil (balance of probabilities). Even considering the new information that had emerged regarding Latchford and the Cham bronzes in the intervening years, however, Mrs Crennan did not consider that the civil standard of evidence had been met. The sculptures remained in limbo.

This stalemate began to crumble later in 2019, when on 27 November, in New York, a previously sealed indictment against Douglas Latchford was made public (U.S. Attorney's Office 2019). A warrant was issued for his arrest on charges of wire fraud conspiracy, conspiracy to commit offenses against the United States, wire fraud, smuggling, and entry of goods by means of false statements, all relating to alleged trafficking in stolen and illegally exported Southeast Asian antiquities. Latchford, reportedly in a coma in Bangkok, could not be extradited to face the charges (Mashberg 2020). He died on 2 August 2020, eulogized in the international press initially in an ambivalent tone, citing his expertise, Cambodian decorations, and old-school Indiana Jones-like self-characterization as an "adventurer scholar", as well as the untried indictment (e.g., Noce 2020). The tone quickly shifted, however, with Tess Davis's *Antiquities Coalition* article painting a vivid image of Latchford as a villain almost without peer (Davis 2020). Over the following years as information about Latchford's practices became more available and better known, the latter view became prevalent. An *in rem* charge on 14 July 2021 (DOJ 2021) further detailed an intricate web of subsistence looters, a Khmer Rouge ringleader, middlemen along the Thai border, and their star customer, known to them as "Sia Ford"—Douglas Latchford. The ringleader, "Looter-1", is described as a former Khmer Rouge child soldier who began assisting his father in temple looting at the age of 18. By the 1990s, Looter-1 was directing a 450-strong illicit workforce of looters across Cambodia.

The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) complaint roughly coincided with the 29 July 2021 launch of the NGA's new provenance decision-making framework and the announcement of its first direct outcome: the repatriation of 14 works of art to India.[12] Appended to the Due Diligence and Provenance Policy, the new decision-making framework operationalized Mrs Crennan's 2019 recommendations, allowing the National Gallery to more effectively navigate grey areas of legal uncertainty. One such area was where charges had been laid but defendants not convicted, as was the case, at the time, for both Kapoor and Latchford. Another area was where a groundswell of information about the business practices of an individual had irretrievably tainted a work of art, even where there was no evidence of wrongdoing specific to that work. The original

[12] 13 objects sourced from Subhash Kapoor (Art of the Past) and one from William H. Wolff (Far Eastern Antiquities). Another three sculptures sourced from Art of the Past were deaccessioned at the same time but required further information to establish their countries of origin. One was later repatriated to India, another to Pakistan, with a further sculpture yet to have its origin identified.

parameters focused on whether there was sufficient unquestionable evidence so that the Australian government could, under the Protection of Moveable Cultural Heritage Act 1986, seize a work if requested to do so by a foreign government.[13] The new framework

> considers available evidence about both the legal and ethical aspects of a work of art's history. If, on the balance of probability and on the basis of available evidence, it is considered likely that an item was stolen, illegally excavated, exported in contravention of the law of a foreign country, or unethically acquired, the National Gallery will take steps to deaccession and repatriate [it] (NGA 2021).

The new framework removed constraints imposed by the earlier emphasis on direct and unquestionable evidence of wrongdoing. Given what was by then known about Kapoor's business practices, this shift facilitated the deaccession and repatriation of remaining works of art sourced from his gallery, Art of the Past, in New York to India, based on the probability that they had been stolen and/or illegally exported. Even in cases where works were not believed to have false documentation or to have been illegally exported, they were deaccessioned because the reputation of and accusations against the vendor rendered them no longer fit for purpose, overshadowing any narrative role they could fulfil in the collection. With this first action, the provenance decision-making framework allowed the NGA to address an issue that had been undermining its reputation for close to a decade.[14]

The next step was to apply the framework to other works of concern from Southeast Asia. Foremost among these were the three Cham bronzes under discussion. With Latchford's demonstrably egregious reputation, continuing research focused on the hope of uncovering concrete information regarding which of the three possible countries of origin the works had been found in, exported from, and were, therefore, the cultural property of. Art-historical analysis and inquiries of experts in Indonesian, Lao, Cambodian, and Vietnamese art and archeology[15]

[13] Contingent on demonstrating that a work was: (1) illegally exported from its country of origin, and (2) imported into Australia after the Protection of Moveable Cultural Heritage Act 1986 took effect (1 July 1987).

[14] Another key dimension of the NGA's response from 2014 was to analyze and rectify the due diligence and other procedural shortcomings that had facilitated the acquisition of works of art from Latchford, Kapoor, et al. requiring increasingly detailed levels of inquiry, assurance, evidence, compliance, and oversight, subject to regular review and improvement.

[15] NGA researchers contacted scholars and other consultants in public and non-government institutions in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and around the world, but were unable to extend their network by this means to government authorities in Vietnam. Lacking a direct contact, the National Gallery wrote to the Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in Canberra in February 2021, advising then-Ambassador HE Nguyen Tat Thanh about the research project and inviting him to discuss the Cham bronzes and any other works of art of Vietnamese origin in the national collection. No response was received then or in early July 2023 when the ambassador was again contacted to advise him that the outcome of the research was that the works would be repatriated to Cambodia.

determined that the sculptures were indeed of Cham origin.[16] At the time, however, archeological research on Cham material outside Vietnam was extremely limited, so the absence of comparable works elsewhere could not be taken as conclusive evidence of a Vietnamese origin.

In parallel, Cambodia's Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts (MCFA) announced in late January 2021 that Douglas Latchford's daughter, Nawapan Kriangsak (นวพรรณ เกรียงศักดิ์, also known as Julia Ellen Latchford Copleston; b. 1971), was returning 125 works of art that she inherited upon her father's death—reportedly one of the world's greatest private collections of Khmer art and valued at US$50 million (Mashberg 2021a)—to Cambodia. This announcement provided an avenue for the greatest leap forward to date in the NGA's investigation of the three Cham bronzes. Buried in coverage of the mass repatriation was news that Nawapan Kriangsak was also assisting Cambodian government researchers by providing access to her father's records (Jackson 2021).[17] The National Gallery contacted her to request similar assistance, which was generously granted through her representative, Charles Webb. Unfortunately, these records yielded little information not already available to the NGA—namely the transaction details from when the works were paid for. According to Webb, correspondence with the National Gallery and many files related to these works had been deleted by Latchford's assistant when the 2016 New York complaint against Nancy Wiener was lodged, leaving no information relating to the origin of the Cham bronzes.

This welcome assistance did not provide the hoped-for clarity concerning the origins of the bronzes and, indeed, perhaps muddied the waters with information that Latchford was illegally sourcing works not only from Cambodia, but also from Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos. He may have also lied at times about the country of origin of certain works of art to obscure their illegal export from neighboring countries. Webb did, however, provide an introduction to Bradley Gordon, a member of the Cambodian government's research and repatriation team, which finally boosted the mystery of the origins of the works from obscurity to headline-worthy resolution.[18]

[16] This had been questioned by one of the archeologists contacted by NGA researchers, who suggested that the artworks may instead relate to sculptures associated within the Śrīvijayan maritime sphere.

[17] Additionally, the return implied that repatriation was more important to Latchford's heir than enforcing the NGA's confidentiality agreement with her father. From this point the National Gallery felt that it could acknowledge the source of the sculptures without concern regarding legal consequences, in spite of legal advice that the confidentiality agreement remained binding after the death of Douglas Latchford.

[18] Bradley Gordon of Phnom Penh-based legal firm Edenbridge Asia is an American expatriate lawyer and long-term resident of Cambodia and Thailand, whose efforts in bringing the conversation about stolen Cambodian heritage to the doors and hallways of museums and galleries around the world helped to elevate the visibility of this stolen heritage and facilitated the return of significant numbers of looted objects, including many that had passed through Latchford's hands. Under the authority of the Cambodian MCFA, Gordon and his team—comprised of Edenbridge Asia staff, Ministry archeologists and researchers, and expert collaborators—have worked together for well over a decade. Their work with former looters to uncover the hidden pathways of Cambodian cultural objects from their points of origin, through smugglers, brokers and dealers to museums and collectors the world over has had unparalleled success (Savchuk 2025).



Map 1: Tboung Khmum province in southeastern Cambodia © Google Maps

The missing link was a now-familiar individual. He was identified in the U.S. Department of Justice complaint concerning the "Skanda on a Peacock" from Koh Ker as "Looter-1" (DOJ 2021), but was code-named "Lion" by the Cambodian research team. Later identified by his real name, Toek Tik, he became well-known thanks to the publication of his story in articles and documentaries released from late 2021 onwards (e.g., Mashberg 2021c, 2021d). When NGA researchers first spoke with Bradley Gordon, Lion's collaboration with Cambodian authorities was not widely recognized. In June 2021, Gordon promised to review all works of art in the Australian national collection thought to be from Cambodia and all Khmer works (possibly originating in Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, or Vietnam) and show them to his sources, including Lion. Knowing Gordon had a particular interest in Latchford, high-resolution images of the three Cham bronzes were shared—without high hopes that they would be recognized. Just two weeks after the images were provided, news came that Lion had identified the bronzes as originating from Tboung Khmum (ត្បូងឃ្មុំ), a province in southeastern Cambodia bordering Vietnam **[Map 1].**

Additionally, Lion offered to work with those involved in their excavation to provide further details (NGA correspondence with Gordon, 19 July 2021).

Over the next few months, Gordon and his team, working with Lion and his collaborators, put together a detailed account of the excavation of the sculptures. Meanwhile the National Gallery continued to examine and gradually close off other avenues of inquiry. Pending submission of a report from Cambodia that would be evaluated against and reconciled with all other information regarding the works, the three Cham bronzes were deaccessioned from Australia's national collection on 3 December 2021. Repatriation, the recommended disposal method, was contingent on confirming whether the works were illegally excavated in and exported from Cambodia or elsewhere or, in fact, forged. The latter consideration was prompted by advice from Charles Webb in November 2021 that while he had not come across any evidence that the bronzes were modern works masquerading as ancient Cham bronzes, Latchford had been known to occasionally, either knowingly or unknowingly, sell faked works of art. Cambodian sources had admitted to producing counterfeit Khmer material for him (NGA conversation with Webb, 19 Nov. 2021). While the amount of the clay core around which the sculptures were cast was insufficient to sample for thermoluminescence testing for accurate dating, metallurgical analysis conducted by NGA conservators in 2022–23 supported the authenticity by confirming that the composition of the bronze was consistent with that of other works from mainland Southeast Asia produced between the 9th and the 11th century.

In July 2023 a final report detailing the discovery of the findspot of the works from the time their photographs were first shown to Lion in August 2021 was lodged with the National Gallery. The report requested the repatriation of the bronzes to Cambodia and was the culmination of two years-worth of research by the team comprising members of Edenbridge Asia, Heimberg Barr LLC (U.S.), and archeologists from Cambodia's MCFA. Over the years of their cooperation, the research team's interactions with Lion had impressed upon them his extraordinary memory, both in terms of detail and accuracy. In this case, Lion recalled removing the sculptures with the assistance of another looter from a particular rice field in the vicinity of Kor village in Tboung Khmum province in 1994 **[Map 2]**. The team visited the area, initially with Lion, five times between July 2021 and January 2022. On the first visit Lion introduced them to two Cham villagers who had worked with him, using metal detectors to find and remove cultural material from the area. They were able to point out the place where the sculptures were found, although at the time it was inaccessible in a flooded rice field. On the final visit, in the dry season, with guidance from one of those villagers—code-named Falcon—the team was able to access the findspot where the two Avalokiteśvara Padmapāṇi images were said to have been buried together, with the Vajrapāṇi bronze unearthed alone a few meters away.[19] According to Lion he had then

[19] The story of finding the works is evocatively recounted by Falcon in an interview with the Australian news outlet ABC in Ford & Worthington 2023 and in a complementary television program "Foreign Correspondent: Treasure Hunters" screened



Map 2: Kor village in Tboung Khmum province, bordering Vietnam © Google Maps

taken the three sculptures to a broker near the Thai border, a man referred to in the DOJ 2021 complaint as "Sleeping Giant". It is known that this broker supplied Latchford, among others, with trafficked cultural property,[20] although the chain of custody of the works is unconfirmed from their delivery to Sleeping Giant until the early 2000s.

The substance of the report had been shared with the NGA well in advance of its final submission. The eyewitness testimony and detailed information the report contained tipped the balance of probability for the National Gallery, particularly considering that a decade of effort had yielded no credible alternative modern history for the works. While the bronzes were likely created in what is now Vietnam in the ancient period, they were buried in southeastern Cambodia, perhaps in the ancient period or possibly centuries later, for unknown reasons.[21] Given Lion and Falcon's testimony that they had been clandestinely excavated in and illegally exported from Cambodia, they would be considered Cambodian cultural property under Australian law. This aspect of the NGA's decision-making framework is

the same day on ABC TV: https://iview.abc.net.au/video/NC2310H014S00. See also Davies 2024.

[20] For a discussion of how international demand in the art market drives the looting of cultural property in Southeast Asia, see Carter & Chhay in this Special Edition.

[21] Bradley Gordon reported to the NGA that Falcon and others in Kor village believe that a Cham ruler was buried in the vicinity and that the bronzes and other Cham objects they unearthed were brought south by a royal retinue. As discussed above, at the time that the NGA was trying to establish the modern findspot of the works, no Cham material of this type was known to have been found outside Vietnam. The research undertaken by the Cambodian repatriation team has highlighted the need for further research and systematic archeological excavation around Kor village and elsewhere in the area to gain a better understanding of the history of the Cham in ancient Cambodia. The three Cham bronzes likely represent only a small part of a much broader body of material that could contribute to a fuller understanding of both Cambodia's history and that of the Cham people in the region.

aligned with Australia's Protection of Moveable Cultural Heritage Act 1986. Although there is nuanced debate around both the legal and moral ownership of cultural material and some observers have raised ethical questions regarding the return of the works to Cambodia (e.g., Brehm 2025), the works were imported while the Act was in effect. Had the National Gallery been unwilling to return them, an alternative outcome could have had Cambodia invoking the Act and requesting the Australian government to seize and repatriate the works, as was the case with India and the Śiva-Naṭarāja in 2014.

Plans for a handover were gradually put into place, hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic which not only slowed progress with the investigation, but also took the life of Lion in late 2021 (Mashberg 2021d). In the intervening period, extensive discussions took place regarding other Khmer and Cambodian works of art in the National Gallery's care. NGA staff also met with the Cambodian research team and arrangements were eventually made for the team to travel to Canberra to examine additional works and participate in the handover ceremony for the three Cham bronzes **[Figure 8]**.

On 28 July 2023, the National Gallery staged a private ceremony for the Cambodian community. Aunty Jude Barlow, an elder of the Ngunnawal people, the traditional custodians of the land on which the National Gallery is built, welcomed participants to her Country. The only Cambodian Buddhist monk in the region, the Venerable Phin Sokol, Abbot of Khemararangsi Buddhist Temple, then blessed the sculptures and the proceedings. Mr Kong



Figure 8: Ceremonial Buddhist blessing of the Cham bronzes, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 28 July 2023 © NGA

Vireak, Undersecretary of State in the Cambodian MCFA, remarked on the important contribution such returns make to the healing of Cambodia in the wake of colonization and the subsequent civil war. Ms Kunthea Chhoun, Senior Researcher at Edenbridge Asia, spoke passionately and movingly of the work she and the research team undertook that led to the return and of the invaluable contributions made by Lion and Falcon. In closing, the Australian Government's Special Envoy for the Arts, Ms Susan Templeman MP, officially handed the works over to the Ambassador of Cambodia, HE Cheunboran Chanborey, who welcomed the move, commenting that "In a world that often focuses on divisions, let this occasion serve as an inspiring example and the role model of international cooperation in fostering a deeper appreciation and respect for the cultural heritage that binds us all" (NGA 2023). The event culminated in the signing of a loan agreement.

The NMC—a longtime partner of the NGA—is currently planning an

expansion to accommodate returning cultural objects. Until the new facilities are completed, the National Gallery will retain custody of the three Cham bronzes on loan.[22] During this period, the sculptures will continue to serve as ambassadors for Cham, Cambodian, and Southeast Asian Buddhist heritage. They also stand as symbols of the achievements that can be obtained when a source country or community and a collecting institution engage in a genuinely open dialogue. The ceremony was emblematic of the sentiment expressed by HE Cheunboran Chanborey, with the National Gallery creating an event primarily for members of the local Cambodian community, many of whom were first time visitors. Regrettably, in the lead-up to the ceremony, efforts to contact members of the small Cham diaspora in Australia and reconnect them with their material heritage were unsuccessful. As a result, members of the Australian Cham community were unable to contribute to, or participate in, the ceremony.

A New Beginning

The "deeper appreciation and respect for the cultural heritage that binds us all" is ironically the underlying philosophy that brought the Cham bronzes and many other repatriated works to the National Gallery of Australia in the first place. A relatively young institution, the NGA opened its doors in 1982 after 17 years of planning and collection development. A National Art Gallery Committee of Inquiry was established in 1965 "To report on the proposal for a National Art Gallery with particular reference to the functions of such a gallery" (Menzies 1965). The Committee's 1966 report defined an acquisition policy that continues to frame collecting activities to this day. One of its recommendations was to collect "art representing the high cultural achievement of Australia's neighbors in southern and eastern Asia and the Pacific Islands" (National Art Gallery Committee of Inquiry 1968).

In the 1960s, collecting Asian and Pacific art represented an important shift in Australia's self-perception: from an antipodean outpost of the United Kingdom to a modern nation engaging on its own terms with its region, seeking to facilitate a better understanding of its neighbors. In the decades since, the NGA has increasingly become a reflection of Australia's emerging multicultural identity, of which its neighbors are an ever more integral part. Today, provenance research and evolving global conversations regarding colonization and the illicit trade in cultural objects—and the need to grapple with their legacies in collecting institutions—prompt the National Gallery to reconsider both its collecting strategy and its existing collection. Continuing to reflect and celebrate Australia's diversity while respecting

[22] The National Gallery returned the works to Cambodia unconditionally. The subsequent loan—initially for three years and extended in 2026 to six while the new museum building in Phnom Penh is under construction—reflects the long-standing relationship of trust between the NGA, the NMC, and Cambodia's MCFA. That relationship dates to 1990, during preparations for the exhibition *The Age of Angkor: Treasures from the National Museum of Cambodia* (22 Aug.–25 Oct. 1992), for which the NMC made its first-ever international loan of 35 works.

the rights of creator and descendant communities presents a new challenge. This repatriation story highlights a promising avenue to achieving the same goal once filled by collections, one that rather than damaging descendant communities and source countries offers the opportunity to both foster that respect and appreciation and to elevate and to engage with diaspora communities.

These Cham bodhisattvas represent one small story among the many thousands represented by unethically or illegally traded works of art in collecting institutions and private collections the world over. Even after years of research, many questions remain (and are likely to remain) unanswered about how these works of art journeyed from a field in Tboung Khmum province to the NGA. These objects represent only the tip of the iceberg of unanswered questions about Cham art, history, and mainland Southeast Asian Buddhism that they might have helped answer had they been scientifically excavated within their archeological contexts.

The silver linings are, however, manifold. The research project only began to bear fruit when the National Gallery started collaborating. This collaboration was key not only to identifying the point of origin and facilitating the return of the sculptures to Cambodia. The Cambodian research team also opened an unsung chapter of Cambodia's history with the identification of a very significant area for future archeological examination that includes not only Cham and Khmer but also neolithic sites. Future excavations may provide some of that lost context. The project also led to Edenbridge Asia employing a Cham student in law to join their team at the time of research. Masita Maat became the first Cham woman in Cambodia to become a lawyer; she has since left the law firm in Phnom Penh.

The repatriation process has been received, almost without exception, as a positive outcome to be celebrated, rather than as the loss of an asset: the sculptures will continue to function as points of understanding, connection, and education. The "loss" to the collection is a gain in terms of the ongoing ability to achieve the intention that was initially fulfilled by the acquisition: genuine connection between people through the intermediary of material culture.

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A Welcome Reunion: Cambodian Heritage, Diaspora, and the Ethics of Return in the Art of Phung Huynh

Rebecca S. Hall[1]

Abstract—This article examines how Cambodian American artist Phung Huynh's *Return Home* series reframes debates on Khmer antiquities, repatriation, and cultural healing through the lens of diaspora. Drawing on the author's experience as a museum curator and on conversations with the artist, it explores how Huynh juxtaposes portraits of presumably looted Khmer sculptural heads in Western museums with photographs of headless statues that remain in Cambodia. The installation foregrounds the enduring consequences of war, colonialism, modern looting, and displacement while emphasizing Cambodian understandings of sacred sculpture as an ancestral presence. Ultimately, the article argues that contemporary art can foster dialogue on ethical museum practice, strengthen community engagement, and contribute to processes of cultural restoration.

Keywords: Contemporary Art; Cultural Healing; Diaspora; Khmer Sculpture; Phung Huynh; Repatriation

Introduction

In recent years, news stories and publications have drawn considerable attention to Khmer masterpieces held in major U.S. museums that have become the focus of repatriation efforts to Cambodia and Thailand.[2] Yet many objects that remain in regional museums and private collections across North America receive far less attention, including broken and damaged sculptures removed from their source countries under a variety of circumstances. These minor, fragmented sculptures might contain hidden visual clues about their origins, but more often than not they remain mysterious and without information about their sites of origin or chains of ownership. These sculptures have spent decades locked away in museum or private storage areas awaiting attention from interested staff or researchers. How can museum curators, collections managers, scholars, and community members reconcile the gap between the larger repatriated masterpieces gaining international attention and these small and often unnoticed objects?

The problem of sprawling collections of fragments and what to do about unprovenienced and orphaned objects

[1] Independent scholar, Los Angeles.
Email: rebeccashall@proton.me.

[2] See, for example, the many articles published by the New York Times since the 2010s, including Mashberg & Blumenthal 2014, Mashberg 2021, Mashberg & Bowley 2022, Bowley & Mashberg 2023, Mashberg 2024, 2025, Ives 2025, Mashberg 2026.

https://doi.org/10.69486/114.2.2026.9 © The Siam Society Under Royal Patronage

from Southeast Asia now housed in U.S. museum collections is large. A delicate hand with no arm, peaceful buddha heads with no bodies, and elegant torsos with no arms or legs are difficult to ignore because they point, literally, to a severed connection with a grand past. They also make tangible the once common desire of dealers, collectors, and museums to add historic Southeast Asian objects to their collections.[3] Often considered not worthy of display, these broken items sit ignored, passed over for more easily identifiable objects that are perhaps less viscerally detached from their original homes. Museum professionals and scholars have a responsibility to acknowledge the meanings of these objects, however small, for source communities. In so doing, precedent can be established for a more inclusive approach that acknowledges the complex histories associated with these fragments. Institutions working with members of the Cambodian diaspora, for instance, can create opportunities for learning, cultural pride, and healing; these collaborations establish pathways for more complex understanding of the larger issues of trauma, theft, and displacement.

During my tenure at the University of Southern California Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena, California (USC PAM) between 2018 to 2025, I saw first hand how Los Angeles-based Cambodian American female artist Phung Huynh (b. 1977) merged community and personal perspectives concerning broken images, loss, and provenience. Huynh creates artworks that unite reverence for the past, a love of community, and a drive for community healing. In what follows, I share her words and her work in the broader context of restitution and repatriation to add new perspectives and suggest new pathways for connections as part of these important discussions.

Artist Phung Huynh and the Visibility of Loss

Longstanding effects of colonization, war, genocide, and diaspora continue to shape Cambodian people around the world. In Cambodia, recovery comes in many forms as communities confront the enduring impact of U.S. bombings, the lasting devastation of the Khmer Rouge, and the poverty produced by decades of conflict between the 1960s and the 1990s. Healing from such trauma remains essential for communities to thrive. Cambodian refugee communities in the United States confront many of these challenges, striving to maintain connections to their heritage and pursuing paths to recovery while navigating complexities of distance from the land and ancestors that ground their identities. For Cambodian communities, healing takes multiple forms, including the return of stolen or looted Khmer antiquities—most notably the figural Hindu and Buddhist sculptures once part of monumental temples of the Khmer Empire, centered at Angkor (9th–15th centuries). These carved images are recognized by Cambodian people as

[3] Not every separated head and body were broken as a result of modern looting or illicit trafficking. Some were broken long before removal. Some were documented and removed during the French colonial period, as seen in the case of the pre-Angkorian Harihara head from the Musée Guimet in Paris, which was returned to Cambodia in 2016 in exchange for another piece. See Vachon 2016.

ancestors, violently removed from a fractured homeland.

The removal of stone sculptures from their religious and political structures has transpired for centuries in the regions once part of the Khmer Empire.[4] The motives varied, from warring neighbors who ransacked royal buildings as a means of undermining Khmer power to collectors whose demand for ancient sculptures enabled looters to plunder temples with little regard for local communities or the significance of these sites. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, French colonial officials, scholars, and collectors sought Khmer sculptures and architectural fragments for collections in Paris and elsewhere. Some removals were undertaken with the authorization or acquiescence of Cambodian authorities, including King Norodom I (r. 1860–1904); these situations were complicated because Angkor and Siem Reap province remained officially under Siamese control until 1907. Following Cambodia's independence from France in 1953, the plundering that began as colonial acquisition became an even larger-scale assault on temples hidden in the country's dense forests (Crosbie-Jones 2021). The issue was further complicated by the widespread looting of Khmer temples after 1975, when Cambodia was engulfed in war and the systematic destruction of the country's infrastructure and cultural heritage was widespread. The subsequent dispersal of these sculptures into international collections created tangible opportunities for governments and communities to seek their return. Yet despite the vastly different circumstances and actors involved, these episodes produced a similar result: the removal of sculptures that hold deep personal and spiritual meaning for people across Southeast Asia and their relocation to private and public collections around the world.

In a postcolonial world that prioritizes historical facts and the legal circumstances of an object's removal, the emotional weight of cultural heritage removed from its original context can be challenging to convey. For the communities from which these objects come, the distinctions between colonial acquisition, wartime looting, and illicit trafficking may do little to diminish the sense of loss. As the repatriation of ancient sculptures creates an international language of restoration and repair, communities, scholars, and curators must confront the full scope of this history and imagine new pathways forward. Contemporary artists engage with these concerns, demonstrating that enduring problems sometimes require creative and unconventional approaches. The work of Phung Huynh offers a powerful example of how art can help foster empathy and create a tangible understanding of the losses experienced across Southeast Asia.[5]

[4] Throughout much of this article, I focus on Cambodia as a means of anchoring the discussion of Huynh's work. Contemporary classifications, however, do not fully capture the complexity of the Khmer Empire, whose territories extended across parts of present-day Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam.

[5] Artists both in Southeast Asia and its diaspora are creating works of art confronting these concerns. See, for example, the work of Leang Seckon (b. 1974), whose mixed-media practice frequently draws on Cambodia's histories, memories, and cultural heritage. Among his works is a piece celebrating the return to Cambodia of a Harihara head, taken to Paris in



Figure 1: Installation view of *Return Home* exhibition at Luis De Jesus Los Angeles, June–Aug. 2024 © Phung Huynh & Luis De Jesus Los Angeles

As invested parties work towards righting the theft of religious sculptures and other objects from vulnerable Southeast Asian communities, Huynh's artwork—specifically her *Return Home* series, exhibited at the contemporary art gallery Luis De Jesus Los Angeles from 22 June to 17 August 2024[6] —reminds viewers of institutional roles in the illegal art market and the outsized impact of broken and looted art on traumatized communities. Through a discussion of Huynh's corpus, this article incorporates excerpts from a conversation with the artist; these excerpts provide a means for gaining insight into the continued trauma of a partially destroyed and widely dispersed cultural heritage and its impacts on the Cambodian diaspora. Huynh's work focuses attention on the dispersal of broken Khmer sculptures across museums in the West. By juxtaposing thoughtful, compassionate portraits of broken heads from museum collections with diaphanous, floating headless bodies, Huynh gives viewers a glimpse into the scale of the problem and invites the public to become an active part of the solution. She further enables an exploration of the conditions necessary for inclusive dialogue and community empowerment,

1889 and its reunion with its surviving body in 2016. See: https://www.rossirossi.com/works/s4755-dead-and-reborn-again; also note 3.

[6] See: https://www.luisdejesus.com/artists/phung-huynh/series/return-home.

underscoring that engaging directly with these recent histories is vital to addressing the ruptures that transpired throughout the 20th century **[Figure 1]**.

The trauma experienced by Cambodian people is reflected in the destruction of temples and theft of many Khmer statues and antiquities.[7] Artworks from sites built during Cambodia's monumental and historic kingdoms, most notably the Khmer Empire, were gradually sought after by collectors living outside the country. As wars, genocide, and poverty became on-the-ground realities for Cambodian communities, temples and archeological sites throughout the country were vulnerable to destruction and theft. Stories abound of high-ranking generals, soldiers, and local groups plundering temples and historic sites, with sculptures disappearing from temple façades and interiors (Hauser-Schäublin 2016; Miura 2015, 2016). Indiscriminate pillaging became widespread in the post-Khmer Rouge years, continuing into the early 21st century (Aglionby 2003). Villagers cognizant of the thefts had little power or ability to stop them from happening. Accounts from villagers around Siem Reap and the larger Angkor region tell of the overnight disappearance of local images and locals' inability to prevent such losses from occurring (Miura 2016).

[7] The long history of looting of Khmer Empire temple sites has changed over time. Because the temple mountains built by kings were the literal and symbolic centers of power, they were often damaged in the many battles between the Khmer and neighboring kingdoms, with central images stolen or destroyed by conquering armies.

The Donut Shop Series: Picturing the Refugee Experience

Artist Phung Huynh knows the impact of the Khmer Rouge genocide well. Born in Vietnam to a Cambodian father and Vietnamese mother, she grew up within a family shaped by multiple histories of displacement. Her father escaped the war from southern Cambodia into Vietnam where he met Huynh's mother, whose own family had already endured the trauma of escaping political instability in southern China. Huynh's parents then fled political turmoil in Vietnam, reaching a refugee camp in Thailand before eventually resettling in Los Angeles by way of Michigan, arriving in the United States in late 1978. Huynh is now firmly rooted in southern California, dividing her time as an artist, educator, and mother. Fully committed to her love of art and passion for drawing, Huynh pursued studio art as both an undergraduate and a graduate student, finding her way through a system not always ready to encourage diverse voices and perspectives. Undeterred, Huynh, with empathy and compassion as her driving forces, built her name as an artist creating visibility for underrepresented communities. Given her multidisciplinary practice, Huynh divides her attention between creating large scale public murals and installations and more intimate pieces displayed in gallery settings. Her research-based projects empowering unseen voices inevitably led her back to her refugee community.

Huynh's understanding of cultural perception, the pressures of hegemony, the dangers of stereotypes, and a need for open discussions about immigrant communities in the United States have

informed her artistic output. Huynh is deeply involved in asserting visibility for her community, creating an expansive body of work around Southeast Asian refugee families and their experiences and influence in southern California.

In 2019, Huynh began her *Pink Donut Box* series, a testament to the strength and resilience of Cambodian and Vietnamese refugees. A key concern for Huynh in creating this work was to foreground the significant contributions of Cambodian Americans to southern California communities, using ownership of donut shops as a lens through which to examine their economic and cultural impact.[8] By drawing detailed portraits of engaged and activist Cambodian and Vietnamese Americans on pink donut boxes, Huynh's initial steps in developing this series focused her attention towards Cambodian-owned donut shops as she sought to reclaim the power of storytelling for the community itself. For each portrait, Huynh had long conversational interviews with the subject and incorporated the goal of capturing not just their visual likeliness but also the essence of their experiences. Through this work, Huynh shows Cambodian refugees created new stories about what it meant to be American **[Figure 2]**.

Expanding further in her pursuit of Cambodian American donut shops as a cornerstone to understanding Southeast Asian refugee communities in California, Huynh created a second portrait series on pink donut boxes, *Donut W(h)ole*. This series focuses specifically on the stories of first and second generation "Khmerican" kids who were raised in donut shops. *Donut W(h)ole* features bold portraits of those children, now adults, with expressions of power and joy. Employing serigraph printing as her image-making technique, Huynh tenderly juxtaposes one or more historic photos of the subject as a kid, either with their family or in their family's donut shop, with a contemporary portrait **[Figure 3]**. *Donut W(h)ole* further exemplifies Huynh's role as an artist giving power and presence to her community, with the series gaining local and national media attention (Li 2022; Quijano 2022; Ulaby 2022).

I spoke at length with the artist for insight into her artwork, her artmaking process, and her vision for its reception.[9] Her sensitivity and purpose resonate most clearly in her own words, interspersed in the text below. Pairing detailed research with concern for being true to the subject is a central priority for Huynh, evidenced by the warmth and wonder of the *Pink Donut Box* and *Donut W(h)ole* series. Huynh's detailed methodological approach continues to inform her work as she moves into new subjects. Reflecting on her research and its central role in connecting with her areas of focus, Huynh states:

[8] The connection between Cambodian refugees and donut shops began with self-proclaimed "donut king" Ted Ngoy, whose interest in donuts began when he first arrived as a refugee in California in 1975. After Ngoy completed the training program for the popular American donut chain Winchell's, he worked as a Winchell's donut shop manager. Once financially stable, he began purchasing independent donut shops in southern California and leasing them to other Cambodian refugees, helping innumerable families establish themselves in communities across southern California. See *The Donut King*, directed by Alice Gu (Logan Industry, 2020): https://www.imdb.com/title/tt10214496/.

[9] A recorded phone conversation between the author and Phung Huynh took place in Los Angeles on 11 August 2025.



Figure 2: ***Chef T*****, graphite on pink donut box, 63.5 x 77.47 cm, 2019–2020. From the Pink Donut Box series © Phung Huynh & Luis De Jesus Los Angeles**

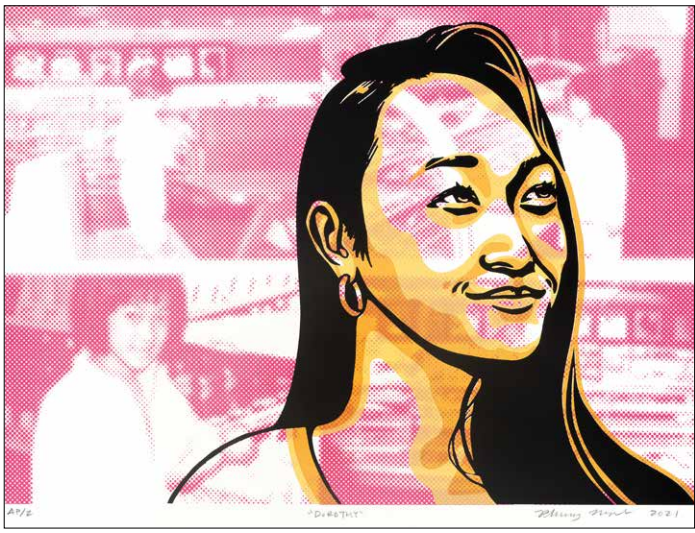


Figure 3: ***Dorothy Chow*****, silkscreen print on paper, 51 x 66 cm, 2021. From the** ***Donut W(h)ole*** **series © Phung Huynh & Luis De Jesus Los Angeles**

I approach my research with an open mind and without arrogance; my goal is to learn from others and grow my work from that process. My first phase is always listening, gathering information, then asking questions, responding, and finally probing. In the case of the donut kids, making portraits of kids who are second, third generation Cambodian American with Cambodian refugee parents who survived the genocide, I came across the work of Dr Jaspal Sandhu, a professor of public health at University of California, Berkeley, whose interest in donut shops and the Cambodian American experience came from a student who grew up in a donut shop. Dr Sandhu and his students began collecting stories and finding more "donut kids". Dr Sandhu connected me with many of the people he's been engaging with. I asked them questions, and then we connected, finding out, oh, you also speak Teochew! Or, oh! Your mom went to one of the two associations that I grew up in, in [L.A.] Chinatown. And that's the beauty of collaboration, how we intersect and make a project grow. This is at the heart of my projects. They continue to grow bigger than I could ever imagine or expect. And I really believe that we do better when we work together, as opposed to gatekeeping, because this work is not about me. I'm an artist who's a conduit to highlight these stories while I'm learning too. And that's how I approach research. It's a gift.

Huynh rarely loses sight of her personal connections to the stories she pursues. She also ensures that her collaborators are credited as part of her process. She recognizes that her focus on community and diaspora requires her to be humble and open minded while maintaining a relentless focus on her end goals and what she wants to achieve through each series she creates.

Return Home: Searching for Answers

With the tangible satisfaction of generating work that empowers her community, Huynh then shifted her attention to an issue that has been on her mind for years, since a visit to the Angkor Archeological Park in 2012: the destruction of Cambodia's artistic heritage in the form of Angkor's headless bodies **[Figure 4]** and the connected issue of body-less heads from Cambodia found in museum collections across the Western world. Huynh explains the initial thoughts behind this new body of work:

> It was always something that bothered me that I would see mass-produced images of buddha heads that were used as everyday objects to decorate homes. And I remember years ago having a Japanese exchange student saying that these displays appalled her. That was one of the things that stood out to her when she came to United States. She said that it's just not normal, that Buddha has to be in his entire body. And then going back to Cambodia since 2012 with my sons and going to Angkor Wat and the temples and seeing headless statues of the Buddha was really disturbing. I made a connection with the fact that there are heads in museums and these buddha statues from Cambodia in museums perpetuate the normalcy, the norm that we can just see Buddha decapitated. That's what started the series.



Figure 4: Headless buddha image in the Angkor Archeological Park, 2006
© Rebecca Hall

In explaining the impetus for her series, Huynh again begins from personal experience. Her distinct memory of discussing the display of buddha heads as decoration with a Japanese exchange student became a key moment for her to understand and contextualize her discomfort with the display of many broken Khmer religious sculptures in museum galleries. Huynh pushed further into this uneasiness to find the complex histories behind the global circulation of Khmer antiquities. Bringing the personal and the universal together again, she set out to create her new series, *Return Home*. The intention behind *Return Home* is to initiate critical dialogues on the pressing issues of provenance research and repatriation within the collections of American institutions through the close examination of Cambodian sculptures believed to have been looted.

While many Khmer sculptures have suffered damage or loss over centuries through warfare, iconoclasm, abandonment, and other historical processes, a significant number of objects were also removed from temples and archeological sites during the late 20th century. Fragments and sculptures were smuggled out of Cambodia and entered the international art market or private collections. The exquisite beauty of Khmer art, combined with decades of conflict, instability, and poverty, created conditions exploited by dealers and collectors, most notably Douglas A.J. Latchford, also known as Pakpong Kriangsak (ภัคพงษ์ เกรียงศักดิ์, 1931–2020; Crosby-Jones 2021; Chea et al. 2021; Bowley & Mashberg 2023). As U.S. museums increasingly sought to acquire and display exceptional works of Khmer art, collections of Angkorian sculpture expanded rapidly in North America during the second half of the 20th century and the early 2000s. Meanwhile the impact of this recent looting created further trauma for Southeast Asian communities for whom the temples and their sacred icons were important manifestations of their ancestors. Huynh wanted to capture this stark dichotomy in her work.

To initiate this new series, Huynh sought out examples of Khmer buddha, deva, and bodhisattva heads in U.S. museum collections. Her first steps focused on detailed research that led her to expand her understanding of the theft and lucrative market for stolen Khmer sculptures. Huynh found details about Latchford particularly chilling, inspiring her to dedicate more time learning about the intricate web of theft that involved dealers, scholars, curators, and looters. She followed this research by investigating museums whose Khmer art collections repeatedly appeared in web searches and published articles. Finally, she identified specific buddha, deva or bodhisattva heads for further research, examining not only objects directly connected to Latchford but also the broader networks of looting, collecting, and removal that have dispersed Khmer sculptures around the world. In her initial collection of drawings for the series, Huynh selected heads from collections at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET), Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA), Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Norton Simon Museum (NSM), Asian Art Museum of San Francisco (AAMSF), and USC PAM.



Figure 5: ***The Asian Art Museum of San Francisco Head of a female deity B60S100*** **from the** ***Return Home*** **series, 2024; 104 x 84 cm © Phung Huynh & Luis De Jesus Los Angeles**

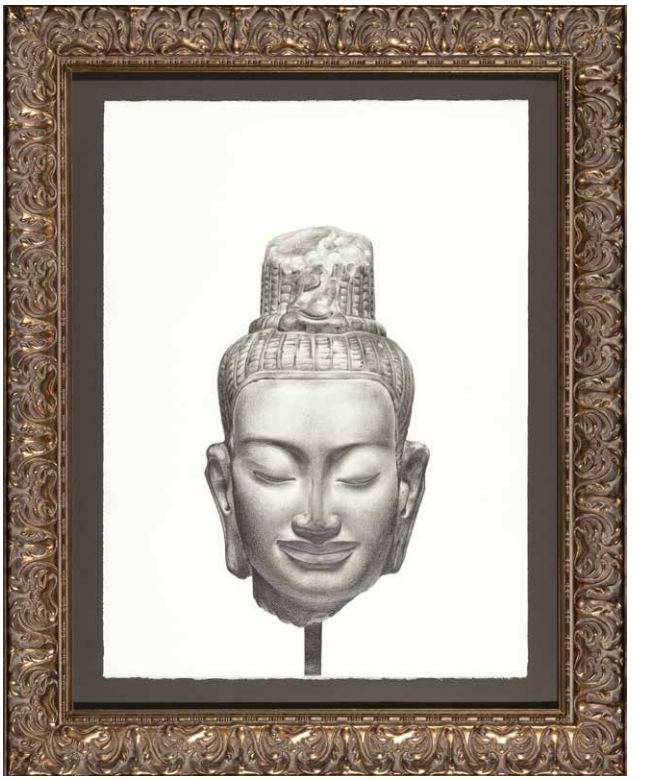


Figure 6: ***Cleveland Museum of Art Head of Lokeshvara 1955.47*** **from the** ***Return Home*** **series, 2024; graphite on paper, 104 x 84 cm © Phung Huynh & Luis De Jesus Los Angeles**

Once she selected a particular head for study, Huynh contacted the corresponding curator, explaining in her communications that she was an artist with Khmer heritage interested in looting and repatriation. In this way Huynh continued to seek engagement and conversation with experts before beginning each drawing.

Throughout the process of creating this series, Huynh made a great effort to travel to museums and talk with curators, with varying degrees of success; some curators chose to not respond while others made a point to engage with Huynh for greater transparency and as an opportunity for both parties to learn. Huynh upholds the work of Dr Sonya Rhie Mace of the CMA as exemplary (Mace 2018; Mace & Porte 2021). Dr Mace provided a model for collaborative cultural repair and stewardship that has gone far beyond expectations. She acknowledged the harm inherent in collections of Khmer art and created conversations, training, and shared knowledge with her Cambodian counterparts, described in detail by Edelstein & Morasco's article in this Special Edition. Dr Mace, employing the same collaborative approach with Huynh, took time with her to have long conversations on Zoom and gave Huynh the opportunity to spend time at the CMA during a visit by staff members from the National

Museum of Cambodia. This opportunity facilitated knowledge and connection between different groups invested in the future of Cambodian antiquities.

In executing *Return Home*, Huynh set out to create an installation that gave viewers a sense of loss and beauty, drawing them into discussions about the irreversible damage sustained by the art, heritage, culture, and people of Cambodia. Turning again to the power of portraiture, the artist focused on creating detailed, naturalistic graphite drawings of individual broken heads of buddhas, bodhisattvas, and Hindu deities **[e.g., Figure 5]**. Once completed, the drawings were mounted in ornate gold frames, chosen specifically because of the similarity to common methods for displaying Western paintings in museums and galleries. For months Huynh drew these portraits of the Hindu and Buddhist deity heads in elaborate detail, executed in a manner equivalent to her graphite portraits of Southeast Asian refugees for the *Donut Box* series. As a result, she has become familiar with every detail of each head's surface and feels a close personal connection to each one. Such a connection is essential to Huynh's achievement in this work, lying at the heart of efforts by many Khmer people, both within Cambodia and in the diaspora, to see Khmer works believed to have been illicitly removed returned home.

The detailed depiction of each individual head makes tangible the loving care that Huynh puts into her portraits. The artist does not shy away from showing the damage that the sculpture has endured, as evidenced on each head's surface and in its broken edges. For example, in her portrait of the CMA head of the Bodhisattva Lokeśvara (acc. no. 1955.47), Huynh captures the extraordinary peacefulness embodied by the downcast eyes and ever so slightly upturned mouth of the Bodhisattva of Compassion **[Figure 6]**. The head's physical features integrate seamlessly with the sculpture's smooth surface, inviting viewers to imagine the scale and power of the work when it was whole. But Huynh never lets us forget that this is a fragment: at the top and the bottom of the head, the surface changes. The figure's broken topknot of hair includes a headless miniature buddha effigy and the neck has a raw, uneven edge that gives clear evidence to the violent removal of the head from its body, either through a deliberate or accidental break.

In another portrait, Huynh chose to give viewers a better understanding of the uneven, broken edges of these heads by depicting the USC PAM Avalokiteśvara (acc. no. 1996.1.3) at an angle from the bottom **[Figure 7]**. The viewers see the rippled and raw surface of the broken stone, in stark contrast with the smoothly sculpted exterior. A long dark rod sticks out from the center of the severed neck, a physical reminder of a head's journey in the world of dealers and collectors, where the focus was on treating the head as an aesthetic object displayed upright far from its original home.

When installed in a gallery, the drawings are paired with Huynh's photographs of isolated headless Khmer statues, both Buddhist and Hindu, dating to the Khmer Empire period in Cambodia or its neighboring countries. The photographs are printed on a trans-



Figure 7: ***USC Pacific Asia Museum Avalokitesvara 1996.1.3*** **from the** ***Return Home*** **series, 2023; graphite on paper 104 x 84 cm © Phung Huynh & Luis De Jesus Los Angeles**



Figure 8: ***Angkor Wat Naga Buddha Statue with Jasmines*****, 2023, from the** ***Return Home*** **series; print on poly sheer fabric, 244 x 91 cm © Phung Huynh & Luis De Jesus Los Angeles**

lucent white organza fabric designed to float in the space of the gallery **[Figure 8]**, reminiscent of the long white banners known as *tung aphithoam* (ទង់អភិធម្ម) commonly displayed during funeral ceremonies throughout Cambodia (Hall 2019).

Huynh sees violence, pain, and loss in these broken images—those in storage far from home and the others, *in situ*, missing the essential elements that would make them whole again. In her words:

> I think the juxtaposition is very important. It is symbolic of the diaspora, the head in one place, the body in another. The work is about bringing everything together; the dismembering is being healed. The banners were inspired by Khmer funerary banners. I decided to make banners as part of this installation because what we see is a death. These images are not stone or mud. They are a vessel for divine and our ancestors. As a lot of Cambodians have said, when you decapitate a divine image, you've killed our ancestor.
>
> And as I began learning about Cambodian funeral banners, I'm like, yes that makes sense. That's what this work

> is about. I wanted to emulate, through those sheer translucent banners, this idea of the spirit, that we're not just looking at stone statues, and to create an experience. I didn't want just hanging pieces of art objects, like drawings or photographic banners, but an experience. Luis, from the gallery, had this beautiful idea to arrange the work in the specific gallery that had windows at the top, so it feels like you're walking into a temple. I felt like that installation achieved that effect. When you walk into a temple at Angkor, you *feel* it (her emphasis).

By bringing portraits of dislocated buddha, bodhisattva and other deity heads into dialogue with photographs of headless bodies, Huynh stages a meditation on loss that is at once personal, communal, and transnational.

Huynh brings forward an often intangible but essential understanding held within Cambodian communities: Khmer Empire stone sculptures are not mere historical objects but living ancestors whose well-being is inseparable from that of the land and its people. These ancestral spirits, known as *neak ta* (អ្នកតា), or "ancient ones", inhabit carved images, natural features, and village shrines and are regarded as the true owners of the territory and protectors of community life (Work 2019). Their presence shapes daily rituals, offerings, and ceremonies, while scholars have noted that *neak ta* have long been deeply entangled with political authority and cultural vitality in Cambodia (Kent 2020). This worldview helps explain why the restitution of looted Khmer sculptures is so urgent for Cambodian communities: repatriation is not merely a legal or cultural matter, but an act of restoring ancestral power, spiritual and communal well-being after the violent ruptures of the 20th century.[10]

The significance of *neak ta* becomes especially clear through the example of Ta Reach, among the most revered ancestral figures in contemporary Cambodia **[Figure 9]**. His nearly five-meter-tall image at Angkor Wat receives a regular stream of offerings and requests for protection, good fortune, and healing—not only from residents of Siem Reap but also from members of the Cambodian diaspora worldwide (Warrack 2011). The conservation project led by Simon Warrack in the early 2000s demonstrates the depth of communal attachment to such images: when the original head of Ta Reach, long separated from the body, was returned from Phnom Penh, nearly one hundred community members gathered overnight to prepare offerings, music, and a full ritual welcome for the ancestor's reconstitution (Ibid., 47–48).

This episode makes visible the broader Cambodian understanding that sculptures are not inert objects but powerful embodiments of *neak ta* whose integrity affects collective well-being. Broken fragments, especially heads, carry spiritual potency and their return can renew community strength and healing. In this context, efforts to reclaim looted or stolen Khmer sculp-

[10] For a discussion along similar lines, see Carter & Chhay, this Special Edition—*Editor's note*.



Figure 9: Statue of Ta Reach ("King of the Ancestors") in the south shrine at the western entrance to Angkor Wat, Siem Reap, Cambodia © Rebecca Hall

tures are inseparable from the spiritual ties that bind Cambodian people to their ancestors, their land, and their ongoing recovery from historical trauma. And thus, to Cambodians, repatriation is not simply about the physical return of objects. When these images return to their home, the larger story is about returning narratives, restoring dignity, and reasserting the spiritual, ancestral presence embedded in Khmer sculpture. These sensibilities are collectively inherent components of Huynh's work.

Return Home: Activation, Reception, and Next Steps

Once the drawings and banners of *Return Home* were fully installed at the Luis de Jesus gallery, the final component in mounting the exhibition was extending an invitation to classically trained Cambodian dancers to activate the gallery space **[Figure 10]**. Huynh sees incorporating dancers as an essential part of the work. With this music performance, visitors can hear the sounds and understand that the dancers are manifestations of *apsara*s or celestial dancers. As each element falls into place at the opening of *Return Home*, Huynh acknowledges the emotional result:

> It felt like a ritual of appreciating and honoring my ancestors. It was healing for our community. And I collaborated with Mea Lath, a renowned classical Cambodian dancer who grew up in Long Beach. She's a refugee as well. Before the dance began, she explained the importance of classical Cambodian dance. And she also said the purpose is to bless the space and to offer blessings to the audience. A large part of my practice is community and connecting. The opening was meaningful and beautiful for everyone who attended, including my mom who was there and made the entire experience even more special.
>
> This kind of work is about activating the spiritual and the transcendental, because



Figure 10: Classical Cambodian dancers from the Modern Apsara Company, at opening of *Return Home*, exhibition at Luis De Jesus Los Angeles, 22 June 2024
© Phung Huynh & Luis De Jesus Los Angeles

when the statues are looted and dismembered and decapitated, the spirit is killed. The cultural context is completely murdered too. By bringing the dancers in, we remind people about the cultural context of this work, along with temples and how we as a people honor our ancestors and celebrate each other and connect through our culture and our divine and through the Buddha and so on and so forth. And so that's one piece that pushes it beyond being just an art installation. It's a spiritual, cultural installation experience. As you know, the genocide wiped out 90% of artists, musicians, architects, sculptors, painters, and the majority of monks were also killed between 1975 and 1979. In that context, for me, it's an honor that I am even an artist.

Being a Cambodian American artist, I'm not only trying to preserve where we come from in our past but simultaneously exploring the question of how we move forward. I learned Cambodian dance later, in my 40s, whereas a lot of these dancers learn from the age of four. The movements are very difficult. Classical Cambodian dance has over 4,500 movements that function as both movement and prayer, meaning it's not just a performative spectacle for people to look at. It has a function, and dancers become messengers from heaven. And I love that so much. In the body, in the hands, in the dance are not only prayers, but our stories,

> stories about love, stories of our mythology, of Hanuman, of Sita. Dance carries so much power. Without it, the work wouldn't have that impact.

Because of her focus on honoring her ancestors and healing for her community, Huynh understands the essential role that dancers play in activating the space and facilitating meaning not just for Cambodian Americans but also for visitors to the exhibition. Her goal is to work collaboratively with institutions where this series is installed to always incorporate classical Cambodian dancers at the opening to bless the space. These dancers add layers to Huynh's work because of the rich histories they bring, the beauty of their movements, and their roles in connecting art and visitors with their homeland. The artist invested herself in this endeavor; she spent years working with dancer Mea Lath, taking dance classes and experiencing firsthand the complexities and stories involved in performing classical Cambodian dance.

Huynh pays close attention to the meanings of this body of work, both on a personal level and as a form of healing for her community. The central role of the ancient Khmer sculptures as ancestors to Khmer people and the clear need for healing for Khmer people after so many years of stress and trauma has informed her decisions about the series. But she has not forgotten the wonder and inspiration of these Khmer images for anyone who sees them. Huynh envisions all these objects working together to highlight the beauty and magic of this work and its cultural impact **[Figure 11]**. She wants to give viewers the chance to appreciate and enjoy the brilliance of her ancestors, recalling the way she was awestruck on her first visit to the Angkor Archeological Park, feeling it on both corporeal and spiritual levels.

> I want the work to draw attention to the harm and to injustice tied to the legacy of colonialism and I want people to think about how museums are implicated in the looting—the taking out of cultural context when these objects are no longer in temples but are now in Western museums. I hope my work helps bring awareness to the looting and theft and helps bring justice. We need to have deep and meaningful conversations about what repatriation looks like. It's not always about returning the artwork but giving Cambodia a say in where the host museum is and how they're managing the works, how they are displayed and received and so on and so forth. My role as an artist is about creating a cultural experience, establishing cultural awareness, and having connection. When the works are returned to Cambodia, monks are there to bless, dancers are there to welcome the statues back. For me, that kind of experience is what I'm interested in: that engagement and the ideal space for display.

Huynh recognizes that this work holds meaning beyond her personal experience. As with the *Pink Donut Box*



Figure 11: Installation view of *Return Home* exhibition at Luis De Jesus Los Angeles, June–Aug. 2024 © Phung Huynh & Luis De Jesus Los Angeles

and "donut kids" series before *Return Home*, Huynh's artwork functions as a love letter to her community. Simultaneously, she works to communicate the issues and histories of her community to non-Cambodian allies and to people unfamiliar with the historic artworks and the contexts of their removal from their home. If her work can serve a multitude of purposes including teaching others about Cambodia and its diaspora, advocating for restitution and greater cultural sensitivity in the dispersal of looted or stolen Khmer art, and honoring the connection between this work and her ancestors, then she will consider it a success.

> I hold firm that it is great for anyone to be interested in this work. For me, the center of the work is the celebration of Cambodian culture, especially with what Cambodians have been through, from French colonialism, American wars fought in Southeast Asia, the genocide, and now fighting Thailand about border disputes. Cambodia's been through so much, so the work celebrates Cambodian people throughout the diaspora and in Cambodia, and how we love to share our heritage and our culture with the world. That's the thing about Cambodian people. They love to welcome anybody. They love to share; when we go to Cambodia, everyone's so warm and welcoming. My ideal audience is somebody who appreciates and connects with the Cambodian story and experience. I am interested in how it resonates with them. In the context of everything that's going on right now in

> the U.S., visibility for refugees is important. Let's say someone coming from Central America sees this work and connects with it, or it could be folks who survive genocide. It could be people who just love art, it could be people who love justice and want to see justice, but no matter who the audience is, if they're willing just to be open and experience what I'm trying to do with my community, I welcome that.

Huynh reiterates that her *Return Home* series is for everyone to view and learn from. She is cognizant that in creating this work she has a responsibility to help the public see the complexity of museums and their collections. Her goals are to acquire more visibility for Cambodian American refugees, to expand people's understanding of war and its longstanding impacts on the affected communities, and to facilitate more conversations around museums' collecting practices and responsibilities in the 21st century.

Huynh has spent many years working through the traumas experienced by her community, her family, and herself. She has a firm understanding of the role of diaspora in shaping the Cambodian experience, both in Cambodia and globally. As she engages with her Cambodian heritage and brings concerns about representation and community into her work, she shows how issues of trauma and healing can be manifested in contemporary art in a way that is poignant for all viewers. Through her *Return Home* series, Huynh demonstrates how, given the right context, broken and difficult objects in museum collections can take on new lives. Her sensitivity to the subject of fragmented Khmer Empire images highlights the loss that the destruction and looting of art and heritage has not only within the country of Cambodia, and its neighboring countries, but in its global diaspora.

Concluding Remarks

The story of Khmer art in the wake of war, genocide, and global dispersal is ultimately a story about the endurance of cultural memory and the ongoing work of repair. The broken sculptures, including heads separated from bodies and ancestors dispersed across continents, remain vivid reminders of the ruptures of the 20th century and the violence enacted upon Cambodia's people, land, and heritage. As contemporary efforts at repatriation gain momentum and as communities across Cambodia and its diaspora reaffirm their ties to these sacred images, new possibilities for healing continue to emerge.

Phung Huynh's *Return Home* series exemplifies how contemporary art can enter this space of historical fracture and offer new forms of witnessing, mourning, and restoration. Her artistic practice expands the role of the artist to become a facilitator of cultural renewal. In so doing, Huynh demonstrates that broken objects need not remain inert symbols of past harm, but can become catalysts for conversation, empathy, and agency. Huynh's work calls upon museums to acknowledge their complicity in dispossession, to strengthen collaborative relationships with Cambodian communities, and to imagine

ethical futures for the care and display of Khmer art. She also empowers viewers and visitors—no matter their heritage—to understand the stakes of these conversations, giving physical connection to abstract debates about ownership while asking urgent questions about survival, heritage, and belonging.

In foregrounding the experiences of displacement and resilience across generations, Huynh opens a path toward collective healing that extends far beyond the gallery. Her work invites viewers to reckon with the afterlives of colonialism and internal conflicts while also celebrating the creativity, strength, and generosity of Cambodian communities worldwide. Ultimately, *Return Home* looks toward a future in which fractured histories can be acknowledged, ancestors honored, and the sacred made whole again, not solely through restitution, but through art that insists on connection, compassion, and the possibility of return.

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Glass Exchange and Changing Networks at Phromthin Tai, Central Thailand

Xu Siwen,[1] **Thanik Lertcharnrit**[2] **& Yang Yimin**[3]

Abstract—This study examines glass beads from Unit S4 at Phromthin Tai (PTT), Lopburi, to investigate changing exchange networks during the transition from the early to later first millennium CE. LA-ICP-MS analysis shows that the assemblage is dominated by m-Na-Al 1 glass associated with southeastern India, while m-K glass, linked to South China Sea exchange networks, occurs only in a few earlier contexts. Comparison with the previously published S3 assemblage reveals a marked shift from m-K glass toward South Asian m-Na-Al glass within the Mekong Interaction Sphere. The identification of v-Na-Ca glass further expands the compositional diversity of the PTT assemblage.

Keywords: Compositional Analysis; Exchange Networks; Glass Beads; LA-ICP-MS; Late Iron Age–Early Historic Transition; Phromthin Tai

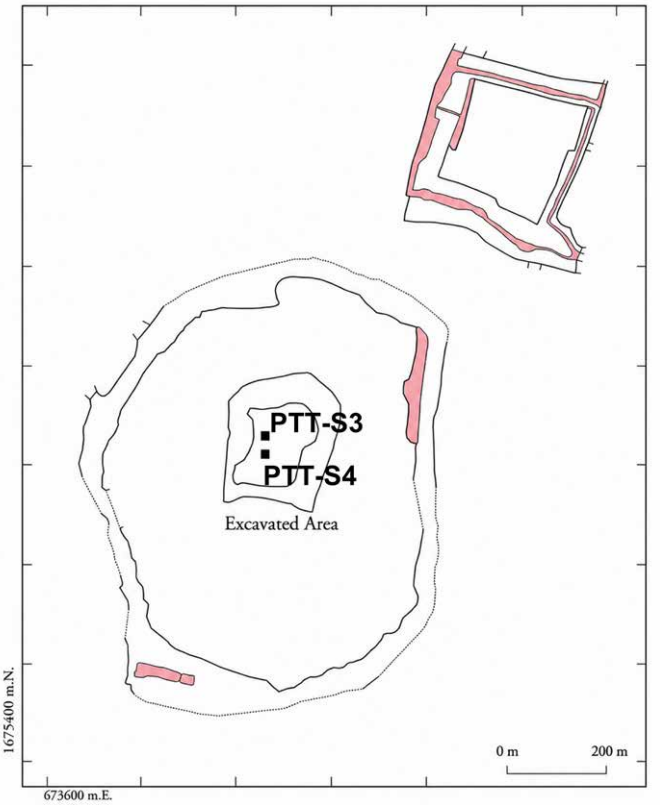
Introduction

Glass beads are important indicators of exchange, craft technology, and social interaction in Iron Age Southeast Asia. From the second half of the first millennium BCE, communities in the region became increasingly connected through networks linking South Asia and East Asia. Compositional studies have shown that different glass types, including mineral potash (m-K) glass, mineral soda-alumina (m-Na-Al) glass, mineral soda-lime-alumina (m-Na-Ca-Al) glass, and others, circulated through distinct exchange systems (e.g., Carter 2015; Dussubieux et al. 2024). The m-K glass is often associated with earlier South China Sea exchange networks, while m-Na-Al glass became more widespread in later regional exchange systems, including inland routes connected with the Mekong Interaction Sphere (e.g., Bellina 2015).

Ban (village) Phromthin Tai (พรหมทินใต้; PTT), located a short distance north of the city of Lopburi, central Thailand, is a key site for investigating these changing networks **[Map 1]**. Its long occupation from the Late Bronze Age (700–500 BCE) to the late first millennium CE and its position near important metal working areas, suggest that the community was well placed to participate in regional interaction. Previous research by Alison Carter et al. (2022) analyzed glass artifacts mainly from excavation unit PTT-S3 and identified a diverse assemblage dominated in burial contexts by m-K glass, alongside m-Na-Al glass and other less common compositions dating to Early and Late Iron Age periods (500 BCE–500 CE). Lankton & Dussubieux (2013) first identified a chronological shift from m-K glass to m-Na-Al glass

[1] University of Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing.
[2] Silpakorn University, Bangkok. Corresponding author. Email: thanik@su.ac.th.
[3] University of Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing.

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Map 1: The moated site of Phromthin Tai with excavated units S3 and S4
© Thanik Lertcharnrit

during the first millennium CE. Building on this observation, the study on PTT-S3 glass linked Phromthin Tai to both earlier South China Sea exchange routes and later inland networks.

However, glass beads from PTT-S4 remain poorly studied **[Figure 1]**. By conducting a compositional analysis of beads from this excavation area and comparing the results with those previously reported for PTT-S3, this study reassesses whether different sectors of the site reflect changing access to glass, evolving exchange networks, and similar temporal shifts in bead circulation. The aim is to refine our understanding of Phromthin Tai's role in glass exchange networks in central Thailand and mainland Southeast Asia during the transition from the Late Iron Age to the Early Historic period.

Glass Materials

There are two main excavation units at the site of Phromthin Tai, namely PTT-S3 and PTT-S4. Since 2004, systematic excavations directed by Thanik Lertcharnrit (Department of Archeology, Silpakorn University) have demonstrated that the site was occupied from the Late Bronze Age to the mid-late first millennium CE (Thanik 2014). Each unit measures 6x6 meters in size and they are situated near each other: PTT-S3 unit is located one meter north of PTT-S4. PTT-S3, excavated in 2007, contains 35 burials representing 36 individuals (2200–1800 BP), while five subsequent excavation seasons conducted between 2009 and 2019 uncovered a further 34 burials in the adjacent PTT-S4 unit. Although comprehensive ^{14}C dating has not yet been undertaken, the chronology of the cemetery is primarily based on stratigraphic relationships and associated archeological materials, with the S4 burials generally assigned to the Late Prehistoric and Early Historic periods (6th–8th c. CE). Both units yielded similar cultural deposits, including burials, copper-smelting debris (e.g., slag and fragments of clay molds), beads, polished stone tools, ceramic sherds, and metal objects. However, regarding burials, there are some differences in terms of grave goods; PTT-S3 yielded more stone beads, while PTT-S4 burials are associated with more glass beads and ceramic vessels.

Based on their size and color, a total of 30 glass beads from PTT-S4 were selected for analysis in this study **[Fig. 1]**. As presented above, most m-Na-Al glass



Figure 1: Glass beads analyzed from PTT-S4; the scale bar is 2 mm © Xu Siwen

beads were recovered from contexts dating to the 6th to 8th centuries CE. However, a few m-K glass beads were recovered from deeper stratigraphic contexts, suggesting that they may have been deposited during an earlier phase of site occupation. Most beads are monochromatic, whereas PTT-10 and PTT-26 are composite beads consisting of a red glass core surrounded by an outer layer of orange glass.

Methods

The chemical composition of the glass beads from PTT-S4 was analyzed by laser ablation inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry (LA-ICP-MS) at Beijing Createch Testing Technology Co., Ltd. LA-ICP-MS was composed of an ICP-MS (AnalytikJena PQMS) and a matching RESOlution 193 nm laser ablation system. The laser ablation was set with a spot beam diameter of 38 μm, frequency of 5 Hz, and energy density of 5 J/cm^2. High-purity helium was used as the carrier gas. The analysis process consisted of 3 seconds (s) preablation to remove the corrosion layer, 15 s background, 45 s ablation time, and 25 s purging time. Five standard reference materials were used to calculate the chosen elements: NIST 610, NIST 612, and Corning reference glasses A, B, C and D. We referred to the data from Pearce et al. (1997) to determine the concentrations of minor and trace elements. The relative standard deviation of major elements is mostly lower than 3%, while that of trace elements is mostly lower than 9%. The relative error of major elements is mainly ±5% and that of trace

Table 1: Distribution of glass type in PTT-S3 and S4

Glass type	S3	S4
m-Na-Al	19	20
m-K	27	6
m-Na-Ca	1	2
v-Na-Ca	–	2
m-Na-Ca-Al	9	–

element ranges mainly ±10%. The standard reference materials and accuracy used for calibration are nearly identical to those from the analysis in the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, USA (Dussubieux & Bellina 2018; Then-Obłuska & Dussubieux 2023), thereby ensuring the comparability of the compositional data.

Glass Types and their Origins

The complete composition data of all the samples from PTT-S3 and PTT-S4 are presented in **Online Appendix Table S1**.[4] Based on their flux types, four glass groups were identified and compared in the following summary **Table 1**.

The m-Na-Al Glass

The dominant group from PTT-S4 is m-Na-Al, accounting for 67% of the analyzed assemblage. The m-Na-Al beads are characterized by high Na2O (10.79%–19.58%) and Al_2O_3 (4.30%–12.60%) contents and low MgO (0.21%–1.02%) contents. Based on the characteristics of Ca, Ba, U, Sr, Zr elements, m-Na-Al glass can be divided into multiple subtypes, which correspond to different regions and chronological periods (Dussubieux & Wood 2021). All these beads have low U (4.09–19.99 ppm) and high Ba (264.50–1341.00 ppm), Sr (156.79–556.85 ppm), and Zr (282.43–1094.90 ppm) contents, broadly comparable to m-Na-Al 1 subtype classified by Dussubieux et al. (2010), which is characterized by U (1–21 ppm), Ba (499–1363 ppm), Sr (228–518 ppm), and Zr (141–981 ppm). The production of this subtype of glass is generally considered to have been concentrated in South Asia. Based on isotopic and trace element analyses, Dussubieux et al. (2025) further demonstrated compositional differences between glass manufactured in southeastern India and that produced in Sri Lanka. Most of the m-Na-Al 1 glass unearthed at PTT-S4 falls within the characteristics typical of production in southeastern India. The m-Na-Al 1 glass from PTT-S3 (Carter et al. 2022) exhibits a similar compositional distribution, suggesting that the two adjacent sectors may have participated in the same trading network **[Figure 2]**.

Notably, one orange bead (PTT-26), consisting of a red glass core surrounded by an outer orange layer, shows higher P_2O_5 (1.56% and 1.61%) and MgO (2.43% and 2.44%) contents. The elevated MgO

[4] Available at: https://doi.org/10.69486/114.2.2026.10b.

and P_2O_5 contents are unlikely to reflect the use of plant ash as a primary flux, but probably resulted from components introduced during secondary glass working associated with the addition of copper colorants (Dussubieux et al. 2013). Similar orange glass beads have also been reported from Non Ban Chak (โนนบ้านจาก), Udon Thani province, northeast Thailand (Dussubieux et al. 2024).

The color range of PTT-S4 m-Na-Al 1 glass is very wide, including blue, black, yellow, green, orange, red, and amber. Blue samples generally contain elevated Cu, while black samples contain iron in the range of 1.46%–2.84%. Their characteristic black color, despite this relatively low iron concentration, is likely attributable to Fe-S chromophores rather than iron oxides. This coloring mechanism has been documented in black glasses from Thai and Burmese archeological sites (Dussubieux et al. 2020, 2024; Xu et al. 2025). The amber-colored glass contains a high concentration of Fe_2O_3, suggesting that its coloration is primarily attributable to Fe ions. Both the yellow and green glasses contain elevated concentrations of PbO and SnO_2, consistent with the intentional addition of lead tin yellow type II as an opacifier (Xu et al. 2022a). The green glass further exhibits a significantly higher Cu content; the combined effect of Cu and lead tin yellow type II particles is responsible for the observed green hue. The red and orange samples are enriched in Cu, Fe, and Pb. In particular, the orange sample exhibits markedly elevated Cu and Pb contents, creating favorable conditions for the precipitation of cuprite (Cu_2O) (Bandiera et al. 2020), which is likely responsible for its distinctive coloration.

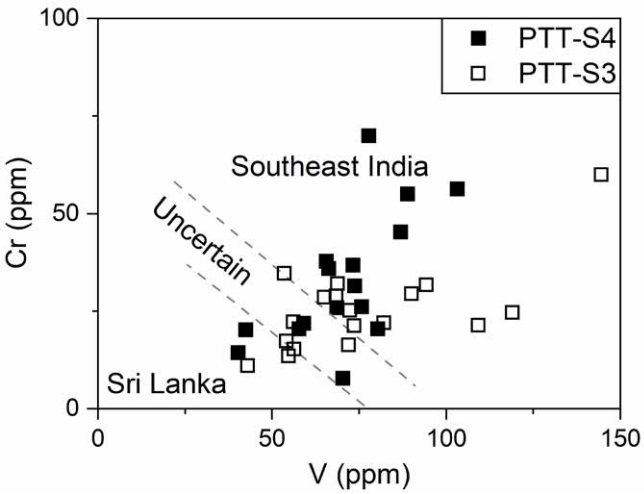


Figure 2 The potential origin of m-Na-Al glass from PTT-S3 and PTT-S4. Data of PTT-S3 from Carter et al. 2022 © Xu Siwen

However, LA-ICP-MS analysis detected no significant compositional differences between the red and orange areas of sample PTT-26. The color contrast is therefore likely related to variations in the size of internally precipitated crystalline particles rather than differences in bulk chemical composition (Theja et al. 2014).

The m-K Glass

The m-K glass is characterized by elevated K_2O and low MgO concentrations, reflecting the use of mineral-derived potash as the alkali source. Although its exact production centers remain uncertain, geochemical and archeological evidence indicate that this glass tradition was widely distributed across mainland Southeast Asia and southern China during the late first millennium BCE and early first millennium CE (Dussubieux 2016). It formed an important component of the South China Sea exchange networks.

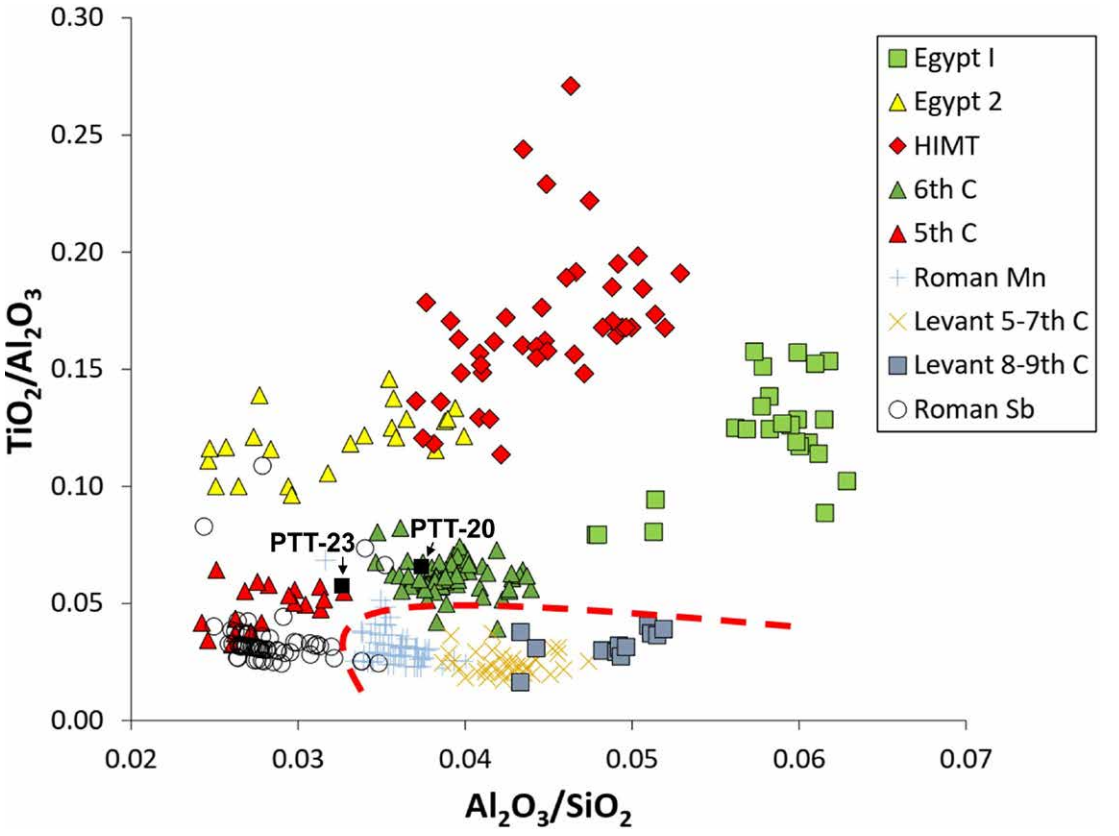


Figure 3: Classification of m-Na-Ca glass. The dashed line marks the approximate compositional boundary between Egyptian glasses (upper left and right) and Levantine glasses (lower right). HIMT = High Iron Manganese Titanium © Xu Siwen, adapted from Freestone 2021

Potash glass is present but less common in the samples analyzed. Four dark blue samples belong to the m-K-Al subtype, with high K_2O contents ranging from 10.40% to 13.50%, Al_2O_3 between 3.24% and 4.23 % and low CaO between 0.61% and 1.05%. Two additional blue samples belong to the m-K-Ca-Al subtypes, with higher CaO (1.24%–2.94%) and lower Al_2O_3 (0.94%–2.27%). In contrast to the more abundant m-K glass identified in PTT- S3 (Carter et al. 2022), m-K glass from PTT-S4 occurs only in small quantities. Most of these beads (except for PTT-13) were uncovered from the deeper stratigraphic contexts **[Online Appendix Table S1]**, indicating that they belong to earlier phases. This chronological distribution suggests a decline in the use of m-K glass and its eventual disappearance during the Late Iron Age.

The four dark blue glass samples are colored with cobalt and exhibit markedly elevated concentrations of manganese and barium. The cobalt source is identified as a Co-Mn-Ba type, which was the dominant cobalt pigment employed in Iron Age cobalt blue glass production across Southeast Asia (Dussubieux 2016).

The m-Na-Ca glass

The m-Na-Ca glass originated in the Mediterranean region and was widely distributed from the 8th century BCE to the 8th century CE. It has been identified

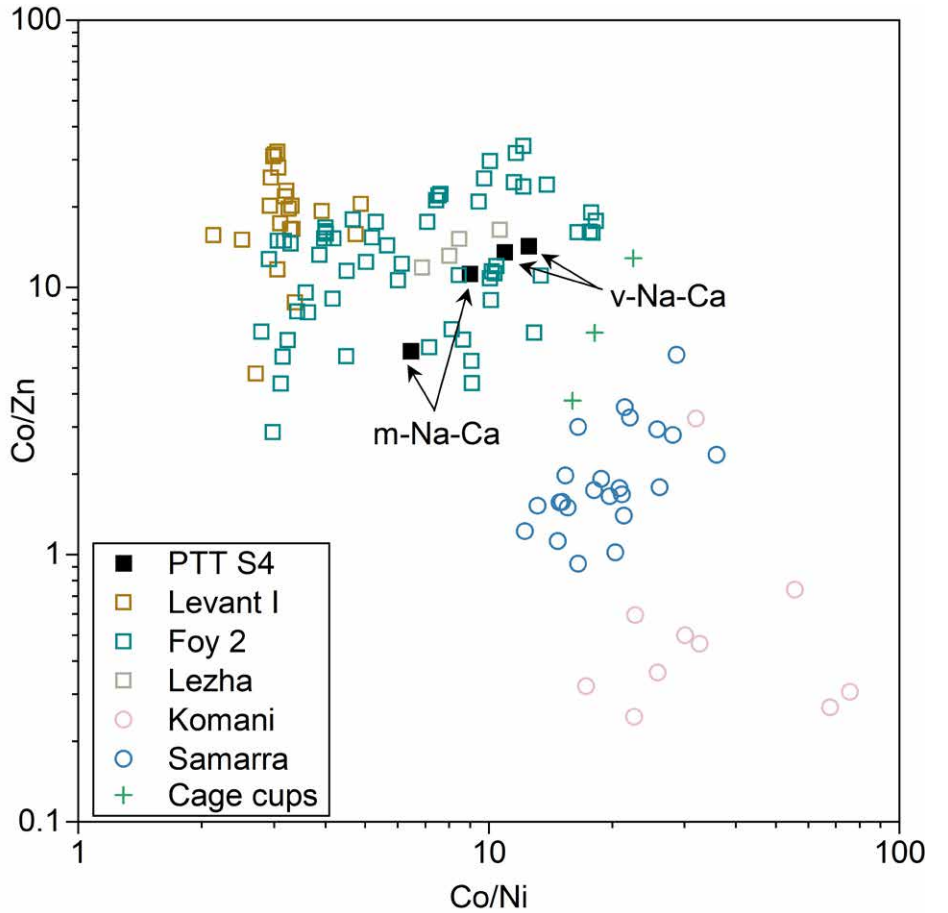


Figure 4: The characteristics of cobalt blue glass from PTT-S4 and Middle East. Cross-shaped: Roman period; Hollow block: late antique period; Hollow circle: early Islamic period. Data from Schibille et al. 2016, 2018, Cholakova et al. 2017, Neri et al. 2019 © Xu Siwen

at archeological sites including Ridiyagama in Sri Lanka, Arikamedu, and Karaikadu in India; Phu Khao Thong (ภูเขาทอง) and Khuan Lukpat (ควนลูกปัด) in southern Thailand; Lach Truong in Vietnam; and Angkor Borei in Cambodia (Dussubieux et al. 2012; Dussubieux & Gratuze 2013).

Two dark blue beads (PTT-20 and PTT-23) from PTT-S4 are made of m-Na-Ca glass. They are characterized by high Na_2O (4.88% and 16.47%) and CaO (9.24% and 8.37%) contents, together with low MgO contents (0.95% and 0.93%). The Na_2O content in the PTT-23 sample is relatively lower, likely attributable to preferential leaching of sodium during surface weathering, as laser ablation did not completely remove the weathered layer.

Based on the Al_2O_3/SiO_2 and TiO_2/Al_2O_3 ratios (Freestone 2021), both glass samples are consistent with Egyptian primary glass production **[Figure 3]**. Sample PTT-20 shows the closest affinity to 6th-century Egyptian glass, whereas PTT-23 corresponds to 5th-century Egyptian glass. Their compositional characteristics therefore suggest a production date in the 5th to 6th centuries CE,

in good agreement with the age of the archeological layer at Phromthin Tai.

Both beads were colored using a cobalt-based colorant. However, the cobalt source differs from that identified in the m-K glass samples. Gratuze et al. (2018) have demonstrated that temporal changes in cobalt colorants used for glass production in Europe, West Asia, and North Africa during the first millennium CE can be distinguished by their Ni and Zn signatures. As shown in **Figure 4**, the high Co/Zn and low Co/Ni ratios of the PTT-S4 samples closely match those of Late Antique glass, when compared with published compositional data for cobalt-blue glass from the Late Antique and Early Islamic periods. This observation indicates that the cobalt colorant is consistent with the cobalt source used during the Late Antique period and provides independent support for the 5th- to 6th-century CE chronology inferred from the Egyptian primary natron glass.

The v-Na-Ca Glass

Two additional beads (PTT-14 and PTT-24) from PTT-S4 are distinguished by their elevated MgO contents (3.71% and 4.41%), which are substantially higher than those of the m-Na-Ca glass beads. Accordingly, they are assigned to the v-Na-Ca type. Similarly, the cobalt colorant responsible for the dark blue coloration exhibits low Zn and high Ni concentrations, a compositional signature consistent with that of the cobalt source used in the m-Na-Ca glass described above **[Fig. 3]**.

The production of the v-Na-Ca glass type was likely related to the Sassanian Empire (Mirti et al. 2008). Small beads of identical composition, manufactured using the drawing technique, have been identified at numerous sites across Southeast Asia, including Maliwan in lower Myanmar (Dussubieux et al. 2020), Ban Non Wat (บ้านโนนวัด) in northeast Thailand, and Angkor Borei in southern Cambodia (Carter 2013), as well as in East Asia, including Xinjiang (Xu et al. 2022b) and Taiwan (Wang et al. 2025), suggesting their distribution through exchange networks connected to the Sassanian Empire **[Map 2]**.

Exchange Networks

The transition from the Late Iron Age to the Early Historic period is clearly marked at Phromthin Tai by a shift in the composition of the glass bead assemblages: the earlier PTT-S3 assemblage (mainly 100–500 CE) is dominated by m-K glass, whereas the later PTT-S4 assemblage (600–800 CE) is dominated by m-Na-Al glass. The compositional differences between the PTT-S3 and PTT-S4 glass beads mainly reflect changes in glass supply over time. The identification of v-Na-Ca glass in PTT-S4, a glass type not previously reported from PTT-S3, further expands the known compositional diversity of the site's glass assemblage.

The predominance of m-Na-Al glass is particularly noteworthy because this type has been widely linked to production centers in southeastern India and Sri Lanka. Recent studies have shown that the m-Na-Al 1 subtype became increasingly important in mainland Southeast Asia during this transition period, connecting Southeast Asian sites to South Asian exchange networks (Carter et al. 2021; Dussubieux et al. 2024).



Map 2: Distribution of archeological sites mentioned in this study in relation to glass bead exchange networks © Xu Siwen

The PTT-S4 m-Na-Al 1 beads fit well within this broader technological tradition, suggesting that PTT-S4 was strongly connected to the Mekong Interaction Sphere through the circulation of South Asian glass (Carter et al. 2023).

In contrast, m-K glass represents only a minor component of the PTT-S4 assemblage and is largely restricted to earlier archeological contexts. Compared with the earlier PTT-S3 assemblage, which contains a substantially higher proportion of m-K glass, the PTT-S4 assemblage indicates a gradual shift in glass supply over time. This transition, however, was not abrupt. Two m-K glass beads (PTT-17 and PTT-18) and one m-Na-Al glass bead (PTT-19) were recovered from the same context, demonstrating that the two glass traditions overlapped for a period before m-Na-Al glass became dominant. A similar coexistence of these glass types was also observed in Burial 20 of PTT-S3 (Carter et al. 2022).

The changing composition of the glass assemblages may be related to the development of trade associated with the emergence of Funan as a major political and commercial center in mainland Southeast Asia during the early centuries CE (Carter et al. 2021). The presence of small quantities of m-Na-Ca and v-Na-Ca glass further demonstrates that PTT-S4 was not supplied through a single exchange network or from a single source. Some m-Na-Ca glass beads were also found in PTT-S3 and Non Ban Chak (Carter et al. 2022; Dussubieux et al. 2024). Although these compositions are relatively rare, their presence indicates continued access to diverse glass exchange networks beyond the dominant South Asian-linked network.

Overall, the PTT-S4 assemblage reaffirms previous interpretations that multiple glass exchange systems coexisted in central Thailand during the Late Iron Age and continued into the Early

Historic period. The new compositional data from PTT-S4 further strengthen the evidence for the growing importance of South India- and Sri Lanka-linked networks within this broader system of exchange, while also demonstrating that these connections existed alongside other, less prominent sources and exchange networks.

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The Peter David Koret Collection of Tai Narrative Manuscripts at the University of California, Berkeley: Introduction and Index

Trent Walker[1]

Abstract—This article introduces and contextualizes an extraordinary archive compiled by the late pioneer of Lao literary aesthetics, Peter David Koret (1959–2020). This 98-box, 233-fascicle collection, now housed at the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, is one of the most extensive gatherings of Tai-language narrative texts in North America. Written on palm leaf and bark paper in various Tai languages, the collection's 137 manuscripts illuminate Koret's career-long exploration of the poetic beauty and pan–Southeast Asian circulation of traditional verse novels. To facilitate further research into Lao, Khuen, and other understudied Tai literary cultures, a full catalog with citations and paratextual details—cross-referenced to the summary index in this article—is presented in a separate online appendix.

Keywords: Lao Literature; Manuscripts; Noncanonical Jataka Tales; Southeast Asian Buddhist Literature; Tai Khuen Literature

Introduction

The Peter David Koret Collection of Tai Narrative Manuscripts is among the largest of its kind outside of Southeast Asia. Acquired across at least three decades by the late Dr Koret (1959–2020), the manuscripts reflect his deep expertise and wide-ranging interests in traditional Southeast Asian verse and prose. Koret was a pioneering American scholar of Lao and other Tai narrative literature, with a special emphasis on the complex and rarely studied aesthetic structures of classical Lao poetry. The manuscripts he collected represent his specific research interests as well as his broad appetite for reading, translating, and appreciating Southeast Asian verse and prose. As with the suite of manuscripts he gathered, Koret's scholarship opens our eyes to the delicate metrical forms, rich emotional textures, memorable plots, winsome underdogs, and sly wisdom that characterize traditional Tai literature beyond the royal court.

This survey article introduces this important collection, now housed at the University of California, Berkeley, and contextualizes it vis-à-vis Koret's intellectual interests and contributions. Koret's peripatetic journey as a U.S. Peace Corps volunteer, graduate student, faculty member, educator, and independent scholar enabled him to collect and work with manuscripts across several countries. The Berkeley manuscripts reflect the depth of his engagement with one of the least studied forms of nominally Buddhist literature in Southeast

[1] University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.
Email: ttwalker@umich.edu.

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Asia: vernacular-language traditional novels, primarily in verse, that adopt the generic framework of noncanonical jataka tales. With few exceptions—including, notably, a tranche of astrological and ritual texts—the manuscripts in this collection record the traditional novels that Koret focused on in his PhD dissertation (Koret 1994), mostly in the Lao language from Laos, along with parallel examples in the Lao/Isan language from northeast Thailand and the Tai Khuen language from eastern Shan State, Myanmar. It is precisely Koret's enduring focus on these traditional novels—as opposed to the more explicitly Buddhist texts typically foregrounded in most Southeast Asian manuscript collections—that make the collection so valuable for readers and researchers.

The present article unfolds in four sections. I begin with an overview of Koret's life and his intellectual contributions to Southeast Asian studies, with a special focus on his work on traditional novels and prophetic literature. This overview is accompanied by a tentative reconstruction of when and where Koret acquired each of the main categories of manuscripts in the Berkeley collection. I then turn to a more detailed physical and philological overview of the manuscripts, with an emphasis on their value as witnesses for the study of traditional Southeast Asian novels. In the penultimate section, I detail the methods I used to organize, analyze, and catalog this collection. For reasons of space, the full catalog of the collection is available only in the separate **Online Appendix**, which provides details on the title, subject, origin, date, and paratextual features of each manuscript, along with citations of parallel manuscripts in print catalogs and online databases.[2] The final section of this article offers a simple alphabetical index that gives a bird's-eye view of the collection and facilitates cross-referencing.

Peter David Koret: A Life in Southeast Asian Letters

Koret's manuscript collection mirrors several distinct phases in his life.[3] Born in 1959 in Rochester, New York, his first extended stay in Southeast Asia was as a Peace Corps volunteer in Thailand, a stint that began in 1984, just two years after he graduated from Bard College with a BA degree in [English] Literature. During his years as a teacher for the Peace Corps, Koret developed fluency in the Thai and Lao/Isan languages, the latter due to an extended stay in northeast Thailand, including in a contiguous group of provinces in the middle of the Isan region: Kalasin, Mahasarakham, Roi Et, and Yasothon. In 1990 and 1991, he spent increasingly long periods in the Lao PDR, especially in Vientiane and Luang Prabang, where his PhD dissertation began to take shape.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, Koret studied closely with a range of traditional scholars, librarians, and modern academics in Bangkok, Isan,

[2] Available at: https://doi.org/10.69486/114.2.2026.11b.

[3] For many of the details in this section, I am indebted to Michel Lorrillard of the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), who generously shared of his friendship with Peter over the decades. For additional facets of Koret's biography, see Shih 2021: 99–100, compiled by Peter's friend Karen Sprinkel.

and Laos.[4] During this period, especially in 1990 and 1991, he kept an assiduous schedule of photographing traditional manuscripts from monastic libraries, university collections, and government repositories. Remarkably, he then transcribed many of the images by hand into modern Lao script in a sprawling set of notebooks. This rigorous, time-intensive, and indeed quasi-monastic practice of reading and writing gave Koret unparalleled mastery over a significant body of traditional Lao narrative literature. At the same time, he never ignored the oral dimensions of Southeast Asian literature. Gregarious, outgoing, and uncommonly witty in Lao and Thai, he cultivated a wide range of friendships across both sides of the Mekong. These networks allowed Koret to ground his understanding of classical literary texts within modern-day speech patterns and performance practices, and to frame his academic interventions within existing Lao and Thai scholarly dialogues.

At the end of 1991, Koret left Laos for London to write his PhD dissertation at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) under the guidance of Manas Chitakasem. *Whispered So Softly It Resounds Through the Forest, Spoken So Loudly It Can Hardly Be Heard: The Art of Parallelism in Traditional Lao Literature* remains the most potent account of Lao literary aesthetics to appear in any language. Koret's dissertation made several critical interventions in the field.

First, he established that the study of Lao versification had long been marred by inappropriate comparisons between Lao meters and those of Siamese court literature. The oral context of Lao literature, especially for long narrative texts, requires us to understand local metrical structures on their own terms (Koret 1994: 91–120; Koret 1999: 238–245).

Second, his dissertation continued the work of Louis Finot, Maha Sila Viravong, Anatole-Roger Peltier, and other modern chroniclers of Lao literature by placing traditional novels from the Lao and Isan traditions in conversation with Lanna, Pali, and Thai parallels. One of Koret's long-term ambitions was to establish a robust basis for interlinguistic comparison of literary works across Southeast Asia, a goal that drove his studies of the Khuen and Shan languages later in life and supported by his earlier forays into Khmer and Burmese. A key appendix to his dissertation, styled an "Inventory of Lao Literature" (Koret 1994: 406–426), represents a snapshot of his thinking on this problem in 1994. While Koret surely would have wished to improve upon this early effort, the appendix (along with his extensive bibliographies of print and manuscript sources) is still by far the most useful Western-language source for the comparative study of traditional Lao narrative literature. The full catalog in the **Online Appendix** relies heavily on these portions of Koret's dissertation for the proper identification of Lao works.

Third, his dissertation offered a fresh analysis of one of the most salient aesthetic principles of Lao and other Tai literature, what Koret called "the art of parallelism" (Koret 1995). Over a series of eight chapters and some 261 pages (Koret 1994: 121–382), he built up

[4] For details of these Lao and Thai figures during this formative period in Koret's life, see Koret 1994: v–vii.

a multitiered argument for the process by which the distinctive structures of spoken Lao developed into major and minor forms of literary parallelism. For Koret, parallel pairs of meanings between lines constituted a fundamental building block of poetic meaning. Koret devotes several chapters to uncovering the way such parallel phrases are then set in contrast with or as a prelude to a third concluding phrase, a structure that Koret terms the "AAB pattern". His analysis presented this pattern as a skeleton key for appreciating the composition and revision of Lao narrative poetry at the macro and micro levels (Ibid., 232–274). In contrast to earlier presentations that stereotyped Lao literature as excessively repetitive, he located the creative genius of Lao poets within these complex, nested deployments of parallelism (Koret 2000). The core set of narrative texts that Koret used to make his points on Lao literary aesthetics are well represented among the Berkeley manuscripts.

After completing his doctorate, Koret took up a series of positions, initially in the United States (Arizona State University and the University of California, Berkeley) and then back in Southeast Asia. Between 1999 and 2009, his research moved in two primary directions: One, Koret was engaged in the study of contemporary Lao and Thai literature, translating and commenting on a range of modern prose works. These publications are Koret's most accessible contributions to Southeast Asian studies and helped put key Lao and Thai figures on the map of world literature.[5] Two, Koret began an intensive study of prophetic texts, especially those composed in Laos and Thailand. Never one to shy away from an intellectual challenge, Koret cut his teeth with a brilliant unpacking of what is arguably the most difficult composition in this genre, the mid-19th century Lao poem *Luep pha sun* (ລຶບພະສູນ; Koret 2004). Several manuscript examples drawn from this poem appear in the Berkeley collection (items # 36, 58–61). A few years later, he published an essay that examined the historical context and structural features of a broader range of prophetic texts in 19th- and 20th-century Laos and Thailand (Koret 2007). Some of the prophetic texts cited in this essay appear among his Berkeley manuscripts as well (items # 50, 64–65)

In the last decade of his life, Koret spent extended periods in northern Thailand, first in Nan and later in Mae Hong Son. It was also at this time that he published his *magnum opus*, a 1,134–page translation of a recently discovered first-person historical chronicle of a millenarian uprising during the French colonial era (Koret 2018). *The History of Kham Thong Luang* emerged from three of Koret's core intellectual interests: his immersion in the world of Lao manuscripts, his fascination with prophetic texts and the millenarian movements they spawned, and his commitment to exploring the distinctiveness of individual Southeast Asian voices in history. Koret's unique intellectual journey—especially his decades-long investment in reading and copying manuscript sources—prepared him to complete this final major project, which was

[5] For a full list of Koret's books, articles, and presentations, which goes beyond the scope of this article, see Shih 2021: 101–104.

published just two years before he passed away from brain cancer.

The many places where Koret lived in Southeast Asia between 1984 and 2020 were also the sites where he acquired the manuscripts in the present collection. Koret did not make an inventory of his collection, so we are left to make educated inferences about when and where he acquired the manuscripts now housed at the University of California, Berkeley. Most of the manuscripts in the Lao Buhan script—which comprise the bulk of the collection (items # 2–36, 40–52, 55–64, 74)—were likely purchased at antique vendors at the Talat Sao in Vientiane in 1990 and 1991. Koret may have purchased a smaller number from similar dealers in northeast Thailand during his sojourns there in the late 1980s. It is possible that some of these manuscripts may have been gifted to him by local custodians; further research is needed to determine the exact provenance of individual items. Another significant group of manuscripts in the collection are in the Tham Khuen script from Kengtung, Shan State, Myanmar (items # 111–134). These were likely acquired by Koret sometime after completing his doctorate in 1994, but it is difficult to determine exactly where or when; northern Thailand and Shan State are equally possible. The Khuen manuscripts, the Lanna handwritten and printed examples (items # 81–110), and the lone Tai Lue piece (item # 1) may have been obtained in the last decade of Peter's life when he was living in northern Thailand or during his trips to Shan State. The last significant group of materials in the collection, namely the printed palm-leaf "manuscripts" in Thai script and in the Isan language (items # 75–80), may have been purchased at Buddhist bookstores in Bangkok and northeast Thailand over a longer period, perhaps from the late 1980s to the early 2000s.

Overview of the Collection

In considering the collection as a whole, what is most remarkable is the strong consonance with Koret's research projects over the decades. His acquisition of these materials, largely from market vendors (for the Lao Buhan manuscripts in particular) and booksellers (for the printed materials in manuscript form), was far from random. Apart from a few ritual and astrological examples, Koret purchased manuscripts that aligned with his specific areas of focus, namely Tai narrative literature in verse, in prose and, to a lesser extent, Tai prophetic texts. The indubitable strengths of the collection lie in the narrative texts, particularly those in the Lao and Khuen languages, along with smaller numbers in Isan, Lue, and Lanna (items # 1–35, 37–38, 40–49, 74–80, 92–137). The remaining non-narrative manuscripts, while relatively few, are nonetheless impressive in scope, containing genres such as didactic verse (items # 50–53, 55–57), secular poetry (# 36, 58–63), prophetic texts (# 50, 64–65), and traditional manuals for ritual, medicine, and astrology (# 66–70, 72–73, 81–86, 88–91). Taken together, the collection cuts a distinctive portrait of Southeast Asian written texts composed between the late 17th and early 20th centuries, with a special emphasis on literary materials

and practical manuals that fall outside of the normative Buddhist Canon. The emphasis on "secular" literature—that is, less explicitly Buddhist works oriented more toward laypeople than monastics—is very much in keeping with Koret's intellectual path. Since most surviving monastic collections in Southeast Asia are strongly tilted toward Buddhist compositions in Pali or in a Pali-vernacular bitextual format (Walker 2022), the collection's focus on vernacular titles is a distinctive strength.

The primary scripts found in the collection include Lao Buhan (Old Lao script, known as Thai Noi/Tai Noi in northeast Thailand **[Figure 1, top; Figure 3; Figure 4]**), four distinct variants of the Tham script, including Tham Lanna **[Figure 2, bottom]**, Tham Lao **[Figure 1, bottom]**, Tham Lue **[Figure 2, top left]**, and Tham Khuen **[Figure 1, middle; Figure 2, top right]**, along with modern Thai script (for script tables detailing these writing systems, see Walker 2026b). The languages featured include all those associated with the scripts above, namely Lao, Lanna (Tai Yuan/northern Thai), Lue (Tai Lue/Dai Lue, spoken in Xishuangbanna in Yunnan province, China, as well as in diaspora communities in Laos and Thailand), Khuen (Tai Khuen/eastern Shan, centered in the former state of Kengtung in northeastern Myanmar and in Khuen-speaking areas across the border in northern Thailand), Isan (the variety of the Lao language used in northeast Thailand and nowadays most commonly written in standard Thai script), Thai (central Thai/Siamese), along with a few shorter passages in Pali.

The date and location for the production of the manuscripts can be discerned as follows: The Lao-language manuscripts appear to be mostly from Laos itself rather than northeast Thailand; information in the colophons indicates that they were mostly produced by Lao scribes during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in what was then the French protectorate of Laos **[Figure 4]**. A few of the protective wooden boards even feature stickers with prices in kip, the currency of Lao PDR. This evidence is in keeping with the basic facts of Koret's life, notably his frequent trips to the Talat Sao market in Vientiane in 1990 and 1991. The Lanna handwritten manuscripts and the single Lue manuscript lack dated colophons, but based on their condition and paleography, they also likely date from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Lanna manuscripts are surely from northern Thailand. The lone Lue example includes paratexts in modern Thai script and, as such, spent as least part of its life in northern Thailand. A few of the Khuen manuscripts on palm leaf feature colophons that indicate they were produced in the early to mid-20th century; most were likely inscribed in and around Kengtung, Myanmar. The printed texts in manuscript form in the Isan and Lanna languages were produced in the late 1980s and early 1990s in Thailand by leading printers of Buddhist books in Bangkok[6] and northern Thailand.[7] The most

[6] Items # 75–80 were printed by Luk S. Thammaphakdi; on this influential Buddhist publishing house, see Wolfson-Ford 2019: 147–148; also Silpsupa 2024: 88–93.

[7] Items # 92–100 were mostly printed by two



Figure 1: Palm-leaf manuscripts in different scripts; top: Lao Buhan script (item # 8, *Nāng īng dāi* ນາງອີງດາຍ, 1894 CE); middle: Tham Khuen script (item # 113, *Tutiya mālaiya* ᩈᩩᨲᩥᨿᩮᩣᩋᩣᨿᩮᩣᩃᨿᩣᩴ, early to mid-20th c.); bottom: Tham Lao (item # 37, *Kinnali* ᨠᩥᨶᩴᨶᩃᩤ, 1896 CE) © Trent Walker



Figure 2: *Sa*-paper manuscripts in different formats prior to cataloging; top left: stab-stitched manuscript in Tham Lue script (item # 1, *Suthon*, late 19th or early 20th c.); top right: leporello-folded manuscripts in Tham Khuen script (item # 123, *Pāet lāeng ʻǭk yǭt* ᩋᩮᩥᩣᨦᩃᩮᩫᩣᨿᩬᨲ, 1993 CE); bottom: leporello-folded manuscripts in Tham Lanna script (items # 81–91, various manuals for rituals, medicine, and astrology, late 19th or early 20th c.) © Trent Walker

recent documents in the collection are the Khuen manuscripts on paper, which Koret may have purchased in Myanmar or from Khuen communities in northern Thailand. The colophons of these indicate that they were all produced around 1993 and 1994 in Kengtung, Myanmar.

In terms of format, the collection consists primarily of handwritten texts, fitting the traditional definition of manuscripts. A substantial minority, however, are printed texts in formats that match or imitate traditional manuscripts (Silpsupa 2024: 85–99). These include the Isan-language texts, printed in Thai script on palm leaves stacked in the ordinary pothi format, as well as some of the Lanna-language texts, printed in Thai script on cardboard folded into the traditional leporello format. Both groups of texts have the format, feel, and function of manuscripts, despite the circumstances of their production. Most of the texts they transmit were transcribed directly from handwritten sources and are generally not available in a modern book format. The Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley also has a sizable collection of such materials from Cambodia and central Thailand; a similarly large collection at the Library of Congress was cataloged in this journal by Ryan Wolfson-Ford (2019: 148–154).

Regarding the traditional handwritten manuscripts that make up the bulk of the collection, there are two primary formats: 1) the palm-leaf (*Corypha lecomtei* or *Corypha umbraculifera*) manuscript in stacked pothi format, typically bound through one or two string holes and enclosed with heavy wooden boards; and 2) the accordion-folded leporello manuscript, made from bark-pulp paper harvested from the *sa* (*Broussonetia papyrifera*) or *khoi* (*Streblus asper*) tree in Southeast Asia.[8] The former type is carved with a metal stylus before being rubbed with ink, while the latter is inked directly on the page with a traditional dip or quill pen (Peera 2022: 75–78). Most of the pothi-style manuscripts in the collection were bound with a single thin string, though a significant number of the Lao manuscripts were bound with two thick strings. None of the examples used wooden pegs to hold multiple fascicles together. Most of the Lao-language palm-leaf examples were bound between wooden boards, but none of their Khuen counterparts were.[9] A third manuscript type, found only in one example in the present collection, is the stab-stitched manuscript, typically fashioned of doubled sheets of *sa* paper and inked with traditional pens in a manner analogous to the leporello (Helman-Ważny et al. 2021; Sowmeya et al. 2024: 120–122).

Each manuscript format can be found in a variety of different dimensions **[Fig. 1; Fig. 2]**. The single stab-stitched example follows a traditional format used among the Lue and other Tai groups in Yunnan and along the Chinese border in Southeast Asia (Wharton 2017: 49; Apiradee 2018: 41; Helman-Ważny et al. 2021: 144–145). Leporello-folded manu-

publishers still active in northern Thailand, namely Lampang Sangkhaphan in Lampang and Tharatong (Thara Thong) in Chiang Mai.

[8] For material analyses of comparable manuscripts, see Helman-Ważny et al. 2021: 159–165; Sowmeya et al. 2024: 122–123; 127–133.

[9] For more on various pothi binding options in Southeast Asia, see Ciotti 2023: 157–169.



Figure 3: Detail of scribal colophon from item # 13, *Sang sinsai* ສັງສິນໄຊ, 1876 CE (Lao Buhan script) © Trent Walker

scripts can vary widely in size. The largest ones in the collection are the handwritten single-volume Khuen examples, some of which are as large as 50 × 20 × 20 cm (length by width by height), while the smallest are the printed Lanna examples, each fascicle of which measures only about 40 × 5 × 0.5 cm. Palm-leaf manuscripts tend to cluster around two main sizes (Walker 2018: 21–23). The long-format examples are around 50 to 60 cm long x 5 cm wide and vary widely in height, depending on the number of folios/leaves. The tallest or thickest examples in the collection contain over 400 folios, stacked to a height of 25 to 35 cm. Short-format palm-leaf manuscripts are equal in width, but tend to have a much shorter horizontal length, typically between 20 to 30 cm. Their height varies depending on the number of leaves, but the longest ones in this collection are about 100 folios, reaching around 15 cm in height.

Though the manuscripts themselves are of relatively recent vintage, many of the texts they record date back several centuries. The lengthy Lao narrative epic in verse, *Sang sinsai* ສັງສິນໄຊ, is typically attributed to the late 17th century, though without contemporary material evidence (Koret 1994: 14). There are two copies of this text in the collection (items # 13–14); one example, copied in 1876 **[Fig. 3; item # 14]**, is also the oldest dated manuscript cataloged here. Other early dated examples, all in the Lao language and Lao Buhan script, include *Thāo sangkhathat* ທ້າວສັງຄະທັດ from 1883 (item # 26), *Nāng īng dāi* ນາງອີງ ດາຍ from 1894 **[Fig. 1, top; item # 8]**, *Kinnalī* ກິນນະລີ **[Fig. 1, bottom; item # 37]** and *Mūnla čhanti* ມູນລະຈັນຕິ from 1896 (item # 25), and *Thāo nyī* ທ້າວຍີ່ from 1897 (item # 40). Most of the remaining dated manuscripts hail from the 20th century, with a significant cluster between the 1910s and 1940s **[Figure 4]** and another in the early 1990s **[Fig. 2, top right]**.[10] For almost all the texts represented in the collection, save those with an authorial colophon, no date of composition is known. Most of the narrative

[10] Whenever the colophons include sufficient calendar data, I calculate the most likely solar dates through the SEAC software program developed by Lars Gislén (https://www.particle-nuclear.lu.se/lars-gislen/downloads) on the basis of the work of J.C. Eade (1995).



Figure 4: Detail of scribal colophon from item # 29, *Thāo kāp lāng* ທ້າວກາບລາງ, 1932 CE (Lao Buhan script) © Trent Walker

works took the form represented in manuscripts between the mid-18th and early 20th centuries, paralleling developments in narrative literature across mainland Southeast Asia.

A detailed philological study of the paratexts found in this collection, including the scribal colophons, exceeds the scope of this article. The full catalog includes information regarding which manuscripts have colophons and some of the details contained therein. I conclude this section with an illustrative example of a scribal note: the colophon from item # 29, a copy of the Lao verse novel *Thāo kāp lāng* ท้าวกาบลาง or *Lord Bamboo Sheath* (Peltier 1988: 410). After completing the main text, paginated from folios 1–125 (each having a recto and verso side), the scribe added the following colophon on the final unpaginated leaf:

> śa || baḥ busḍaḥsăṅkḷāṣ tai 2475 ṫûa ṗī kāp săn dai vā ṗī vạk tœn 9 k̇hœn gāṁ 1 văn 3 _ khā bḷaḥ cô ācān bæṅ tai k̇hian lœaṅ jāṣ k̇haṅ / || cunlaḥsăṅkḷāṣ t̄ai băn 294 ṫûa ṗī || ◯ || bḷaḥ âṅ 50 jāṣ dāv kāp lāṅ hai āv ◯ bå băn jāṅ ṫī hḷĕk mœaṅ hḷvaṅ lâṅ / mā ẏū mœaṅ viaṅ căn || k̇hå hai phū k̇hā mī bḷaḥ- ◯ hẏā ṗănyā ăn lœk læp _ k̇hå hai mī cai ạn ◯ nạm k̇hô su nai dāṁ cāṁ sīn suṣ bāṁbĕṅ / ṫai kæv k̇hå hai t̄ai thœṅ hạṅ nīlaḥbān jaḥhvăn yạt _ k̇hå hai tai kœṣ hạṅ vaḥṫīṅ kæv ḅāk jaḥhvăn t̄æ dạn _ k̇hå ẏā tai ṫi ṫian k̇hay ācān phū k̇hian _ | (transliteration follows Walker 2026a).

[May there be] p[rosperity!] Buddhist Era 2475, Lesser Era 1294, a *kap san* year, a monkey year in the Thai reckoning, ninth lunar month, first waxing day, a Tuesday

> [equivalent to 2 August 1932]. I, Master Phaeng, wrote down this story of the Lord [from] the *Fifty Jatakas* titled *Lord Bamboo Sheath* for Uncle Phan, a blacksmith from Luang [Prabang] who has come to reside in Vientiane. May I be endowed with deep and keen wisdom and intelligence. May I be of humble heart, that I may penetrate the Dharma, uphold the pure precepts, and cultivate the Three Jewels. May I reach the lofty level of Nibbāna, peak of the heavens, and may I be reborn in the crystalline heavenly plane of [Ta]vatiṁ[sa]! Please don't criticize me, the scribe.

While a thorough study of the colophons attached to Lao literary manuscripts remains a desideratum, we can nevertheless discern some general patterns in this example. First, after a brief opening invocation, the scribe records the date the manuscript was copied in the Buddhist Era (*buddhasakarāja*), the Lesser Era (*cullasakarāja*), or both, along with various other calendrical data. Next, the scribe—almost always a male monastic or former monk—names himself (Master Phaeng) and/or his sponsor (Uncle Phan), and, more rarely, the location where he performed his work (Vientiane). Scribal colophons almost always repeat the title of the work in question (*Lord Bamboo Sheath*); in this case, the scribe positions the work as a noncanonical jataka, though this novel is not part of any known *Paññāsajātaka* ("Fifty Jatakas") collection in Pali. The scribe then declares his aspirations for worldly and supramundane benefits, culminating in Nirvana. Finally, he adds a short apology for any shortcomings in his craftsmanship. In broad outline, these features align closely with the scribal colophons produced in non-royal contexts in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia during the 19th and early 20th centuries (Silpsupa 2022: 159–166; 223–231; Walker 2018: 74–98). Master Phaeng's 1932 colophon is on the long side for the Koret collection; others include only a subset of the features found in this example.

Archival and Cataloging Methods

When Koret passed away in 2020, the bulk of his manuscripts, notebooks, and printed materials were under the custodianship of a friend in Oakland, California. In 2021, this friend arranged for them to be donated on Koret's behalf to his onetime employer, the University of California, Berkeley. They were received by UC Berkeley's South/Southeast Asia library through the efforts of Virginia Shih, Curator for Southeast Asia and Buddhist Studies Collections. Shih coordinated the archiving of the collection, including commissioning archival boxes for the manuscripts, and later arranged for the collection to be transferred to UC Berkeley's Bancroft Library. Under her supervision, Koret's extensive collection of printed books in Thai, Lao, Burmese, Khmer, and other languages will be incorporated into UC Berkeley's library catalog in the future (Shih 2021: 92–93). In 2021, Shih recruited me to

begin the cataloging process for the palm-leaf and bark-paper manuscripts in the collection, a process that would ultimately take four years and multiple trips to Berkeley to complete.

Several factors eased my cataloging work. For one, the manuscripts are largely in excellent condition, though many would benefit from thorough cleaning. Most are complete, meaning that the texts they contain can be read from beginning to end, with no missing pages. This is true of all the Thai- and Tham Khuen-script manuscripts, as well as most but not all of the Lao Buhan manuscripts. When pages are missing, it is typically the first few and the last few only. For scholars of literary narratives in the Lao and Khuen languages, the presence of so many complete or nearly complete versions of both well-known and rare texts makes this collection particularly valuable. Along with manuscript collections in Laos, Myanmar, and north and northeast Thailand, the manuscripts gathered here serve as key witnesses for future editions of Tai literary works. Koret's choice to focus on complete manuscripts in good condition suggests that he formed his collection with such an aim in mind.

The folded-paper manuscripts in Tham Lanna script as well as some of the short-format palm-leaf manuscripts in Lao Buhan and Tham Lao script comprise unique collections of texts, usually for ritual, medicinal, magical, predictive, or astrological purposes. Following Silpsupa Jaengsawang's terminology for Lao documents, these are mostly "multiple-text manuscripts", produced by a single scribe all at once, rather than "composite manuscripts", produced by multiple scribes over a period of time (Silpsupa 2022: 36–44). As bespoke compilations organized by the individual scribe or scribes who created them, these manuscripts do not usually bear distinctive titles. Several of the Lanna examples feature a range of diagrams and illustrations, mostly with astrological connections **[Fig. 2, bottom]**. In lieu of a native-language title, I have provided a short descriptive title for each of these manuscripts, followed by a more detailed account of the contents, where appropriate. Several short-form palm-leaf manuscripts written in Lao Buhan and Tham Lao scripts were compiled from originally separate manuscripts; these meet Silpsupa's definition of composite manuscripts. Whenever possible, I have tried to separate these items into their constituent parts, though in the case of some of the astrological examples (e.g., items # 66–67), this task proved beyond my abilities.

For the narrative manuscripts on palm leaf, I began the cataloging process by making sure all the leaves were in the correct order. This entailed untying the original strings, sorting the folios by their native pagination systems (numeric, alphabetic, or both in combination; see Bounleuth 2016: 59–62; Silpsupa 2022: 81–83), and then retying the manuscripts in their proper sequence, with the old strings when possible or new ones if the old ones had deteriorated beyond repair. Most of the manuscripts were already in the proper order, save perhaps a few folios. Some examples were nearly entirely mixed up. Such disarray was most likely the condition Koret acquired these manu-

scripts in; for the ones he read and used himself, he would have presumably restored them to their original sequence. Reordering the folios was a particularly important step for identifying the titles in multiple-text and composite manuscripts. Many examples that on cursory examination seemed to represent only a single text in fact contained several different items. These multiple-text and composite manuscripts have each been assigned a single box to preserve the way scribes and local librarians grouped them over the years. In the catalog, however, they are notated as separate items for the convenience of researchers.

In contrast to the traditional manuals, few of which present their own native titles, it was possible to identify a secure title or titles for almost all of the narrative manuscripts. Koret presumably would have been able to find his way around his own manuscript collection easily, given his expertise in the literary genres represented. But for the present researcher, this task was initially quite daunting. A minority of the manuscripts were wrapped in pieces of newspaper that included Koret's handwritten notes, typically just a title in Lao script. A few other manuscripts bore white stickers on their wooden covers, upon which Koret had also written a title identification. For reasons unknown to me, not all the titles found in the newspaper wrappings were accurate, in contrast to those on the stickers, which almost always provided the correct title. To ensure that the titles provided in the catalog are as accurate and useful as possible, I focused my identification work primarily on two pieces of paratextual information: (1) marginal notes concerning the title, generally found on the left margin of the first page of Lao Buhan examples and on separate front and rear cover pages for Khuen manuscripts **[Fig. 2, top right]**; and (2) scribal colophons, almost always found in the last few leaves of a given manuscript, which often mention the title along with the copy date and the name and aspirations of the scribe and/or sponsor **[Fig. 1, top; Fig. 3; Fig. 4]**. Since the most frequently lost folios of palm-leaf manuscripts are those at the beginning and the end, in some cases these paratexts were no longer available. In these cases, I gratefully rely on Koret's handwritten identifications, with the caveat that some of his notes may have gotten inadvertently mixed up over time. Whenever possible, I have checked my identifications against similarly titled manuscripts available through online databases of Southeast Asian manuscripts.

For confirming the titles of Lao and Khuen literary narratives, several resources proved especially useful. For Lao narrative texts, particularly those in verse, Koret's "Inventory of Lao Literature and Index of Titles", which appears as an appendix to his 1994 dissertation, is an invaluable tool. Whenever possible, for the entry of each Lao literary narrative in the catalog, I have provided a citation of the page number from Koret's inventory, since his work offers ample references to Lao- and Thai-language publications concerning the narratives in question. In addition, Lao texts summarized in Louis Finot's classic overview (1917) or Anatole-Roger Peltier's more detailed survey (1988) are cited by their respective page numbers. Isan-

language printed manuscripts that have parallels in the Library of Congress collection are cited by the corresponding page and item number in Wolfson-Ford's catalog in JSS (2019). For Khuen narrative texts, mostly in bilingual Pali-Khuen prose, Peltier's trilingual guide (1987) is essential. For each of the applicable Khuen manuscripts, I have referenced a corresponding text by item number in Peltier's 1987 book. For titles not found in the publications discussed above, I have cited parallel digitized manuscripts by code number (for details, see Abbreviations in the **Online Appendix**). My primary intention in citing these print and online resources is to allow researchers to quickly connect to other relevant sources for the study of the manuscript in question.

For ease of reference, I have divided the manuscripts into eleven groups in terms of primary language (Lue, Lao, Isan, Lanna, and Khuen) and format (stab-stitched *sa* paper, long-format palm leaf, short-format palm leaf, leporello-folded *khoi* paper, leporello-folded *sa* paper, printed palm leaf, printed leporello, and photocopied leporello). Each group contains between 1 and 33 boxes of materials, for a total of 98 custom-sized, archival-standard clamshell cardboard boxes, each of which Virginia Shih specifically commissioned from the Preservation Department at UC Berkeley Library. Each box often contains a single item, that is, one manuscript in the pothi, leporello, or stab-stitched format. As mentioned above, many manuscripts consist of several distinct titles, and I have cataloged these as separate items. The 98 boxes therefore contain a total of 137 distinct items, each of which is cataloged as a separate title. For narrative texts in verse, it is common for the entire text, even if it stretches to hundreds of folios, to be contained within a single fascicle, a bound portion of text often known as a *phuk* ᨾᩩᨠ ("that which is tied together; a bundle") in various Tai languages. For prose texts and for more specifically Buddhist compositions, however, including those in Pali and in bitextual Pali-vernacular formats, it is conventional to bind off portions with string after a certain number of folios, often around 24 (two full cycles of the traditional alphabetic pagination system). This convention was extended to leporello manuscripts and to printed texts in the pothi and leporello formats, meaning that a single text or item may consist of multiple separate fascicles. To the untrained eye, each fascicle may look like a separate manuscript; this is especially the case for multi-volume leporello manuscripts divided into separate fascicles **[Fig. 2, top right]**. The 137 items thus comprise a total of 233 fascicles, ranging from just a handful of folios to well over 400, the longest being 489. The average fascicle in this collection is closer to 60 folios, meaning the entire collection may be around 15,000 folios or 30,000 pages in length.

The manuscripts that Koret collected thus form an impressive collection that illuminates his core research interests, with notable strengths in long, complete, and well-preserved copies of Lao and Khuen narrative works. To extend Peter Koret's intellectual legacy and to facilitate new studies of Lao, Khuen, and other Tai literary and Buddhist tradi-

tions, the digitization of this collection at UC Berkeley, should funding support be obtained, would be a welcome development. For the time being, the manuscripts are available to researchers on-site at the Bancroft Library; the collection has already played a critical role in the hands-on teaching of manuscript studies to graduate and undergraduate students at UC Berkeley and Stanford University. Since the manuscripts are in the United States and will eventually be findable through American library databases,[11] the present catalog foregrounds the American Library Association–Library of Congress (ALA-LC) romanization system for titles as opposed to the Royal Thai General System of Transcription (RTGS) preferred by this journal.[12] These ALC-LC romanizations are always supplemented by original script versions, modern Thai- or Lao-script conversions and Indic-based graphic transliteration (Walker 2026a) in the full catalog presented in the **Online Appendix**.

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Summary Index

To make finding selected manuscripts as painless as possible, I close this article with a summary index, composed of two separate lists: 1) Alphabetic Index of Titled Items, and 2) Alphabetic Index of Untitled Items. These are organized by English alphabetical order for the standardized ALA-LC titles and include item numbers for easy cross-referencing with the catalog. Titles that are represented by multiple items in the catalog, sometimes in different formats or languages, thus appear under a single entry in this format, as in *Pāt lāeng ʻǭk yǭt* (# 97, 123, 132). For readers already familiar with Southeast Asian literature, these lists are intended to provide a rapid way to gauge the scope of the collection and find manuscripts of interest.

Alphabetic Index of Titled Items

ʻĀi rǭi khǭt (# 99)
ʻAlǭng hǭi khāo (# 125)
ʻAlǭng mot som (# 120)
ʻAlǭng phra čhao din nīeo (# 127)
ʻAlǭng ying dāo (# 126)
ʻAnāthapindika (# 115)
ʻĀnisong būat (# 110)
ʻIn sai sāt (# 44)
Būa hom būa hǭng būa hīao (# 35)
Būa hǭm pan kāp (# 128)
Čhampā sī ton (# 15)

[11] For an overall catalog entry for the collection, see: https://search.library.berkeley.edu/permalink/01UCS_BER/ergbi/alma991086575265106532.

[12] For the ALA-LC system for Thai, see: https://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpso/romanization/thai.pdf (revised 2011); for Lao, see: https://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpso/romanization/lao.pdf (revised 2012). When discussing titles and other Tai-language terms outside of their strict presentation at the head of each catalog entry and in the indices, I follow the RTGS system. Pali and Sanskrit words, when discussed outside of a title, are romanized according to the standard system of ISO 15919:2001 (https://www.iso.org/standard/28333.html). The conversion of Khuen, Lanna, Lao, and Lue titles to Thai script follows typical Thai conventions. Lao and Isan titles are romanized according to the ALC-LC system for Lao; for Khuen, Lanna, and Lue titles (for which there is no ALC-LC system), I have followed the ALC-LC system for Thai. I have adjusted the romanization of the Khuen and Lue titles slightly to match local pronunciation (notably by de-aspirating selected consonants). For the Lanna titles in Thai script, I have retained the unmodified Thai ALC-LC system.

Čhanthakhāt (# 23)
Čhittakumān tham čhāng sām ngā (# 129)
Čhiwahā lin kham (# 92)
Čhōdokkasatthī (# 114)
Dūan sām khai nam (# 54)
Hā (# 71)
Hā nǭi (# 62)
Hǭi hai (# 101)
Hǭk dǭn (# 27)
Kā yǭm (# 121, 122)
Kaisǭn dǭk būa (# 64)
Kāp pha munī (# 50)
Khun thưng khun thūang (# 6, 74)
Kinnalī (# 37)
Lātthanā pha vēt (# 73)
Mæ rāng 32 phūa (# 103)
Mahāvong tæng ʻǭn (# 20)
Mahāwičhaiyyačhādok (# 117)
Manīčhan (# 130)
Manīčhantakuman khai sæng (# 96)
Matchā phrayā plā chǭn (# 100)
Mū hin (# 94, 95)
Mūnla čhanti (# 25)
Nāng ʻīng dāi (# 8)
Nāng ʻǭlaphim (# 47)
Nāng khưn dǭk mai (# 118)
Nāng kinnarī (# 109)
Nāng patāčhārā saʻūn (# 93)
Nāng phom hǭm (# 75)
Nāng phom pan (# 131)
Nyā sǭn lān (# 56)
Pæ kham (# 137)
Pæt læng ʻǭk yǭt (# 97, 123, 132)
Panhā phrayā ʻin (# 108)
Pannyāphala (# 12)
Pathomma mālaiya (# 112)
Phainyalāt (# 9)
Phanyā khankhāk (# 32)
Phayā čhakkawatti (# 133)
Phin sāi sǭn lōk (# 55)
Phon hā ngœn hā kham (# 102)
Phrayā bāo nǭi (# 111)
Phuttha thamnwāi (# 65)
Pū sǭn lān (# 53)
Sālā nok ʻīang mōng (# 77)
Sīa khǫ sātā khāt (# 69)
Sīeo phī sīeo khon (# 134, 135)
Sin sai (# 13, 14)
Som sa khưt (# 36, 59)
Som thī khưt (# 58, 61)
Sōphā sǭn lān (# 57)
Sunantakumān (# 136)
Sūt khuan lūang (# 68, 72)
Sut thī ʻāo (# 60)
Suthon (# 1)
Sutthanū (# 98)
Suvannasanyām (# 45)
Suwannamēk mā khon kham (# 124)
Takkatæn mō kham (# 76, 79)
Tamnān phā tæk (# 119)
Tamnān phanyā ʻin (# 38)
Tēčhō yāmō (# 104)
Thammadā sǭn lōk (# 105, 106)
Thāo čhūang hān (# 18)
Thāo kālakēt (# 22)
Thāo kālathā (# 11)
Thāo kam kā dam (# 2)
Thāo kamphā kai kæo (# 5, 31)
Thāo kamphā pā dæk pā samǭ (# 3)
Thāo kamphā phī nǭi (# 24, 41)
Thāo kāp lāng (# 29)
Thāo kham fǭng (# 42)
Thāo kham sǭn (# 43)
Thāo khunlū nāng ʻūa (# 17, 19, 21)
Thāo lin nǭi (# 10)
Thāo mā nyui (# 4, 16, 48)
Thāo nyī (# 40)
Thāo phā khāng nāng kham khāng (# 30)
Thāo sangkhathat (# 26, 34)
Thāo suvannakhīrī (# 78)
Thāo tao (# 28, 33, 46)
Thāo ten dǭn (# 7)
Tulaka (# 116)
Tutiya mālaiya (# 113)
Visutthinyāthikālasūt (# 80)
Wisutthiyā (# 107)

Alphabetic Index of Untitled Items

Lanna magic and astrology manual (# 82)
Lanna magic and healing manual, including magical spells and healing rites (# 89)
Lanna magic, astrology, and ritual manual (# 81)
Lanna medicine and magic manual, including medicinal recipes, magical spells, and healing rites (# 90, 91)
Lanna medicine manual (# 83, 84)
Lanna ritual texts, including liturgies for *kammaṭṭhāna* meditation and healing rites (# 85)
Lanna ritual texts, including protective text on the *pāramī*, calling the spirits of rice, calling the spirits of buffalo, calling the spirits of candles, and other ritual texts (# 86)
Lanna ritual texts, including texts for calling the spirits (# 88)
Lao astrology manual (# 66)
Lao medicine and astrology manual (# 67)
Single-leaf fragments of assorted Lao Buddhist texts in bilingual prose (# 39)
Unidentified fragment of Lao verse narrative (# 49)
Unidentified Lanna legal text (# 87)
Unidentified Lao didactic text in verse (# 52)
Unidentified Lao didactic text in verse for women (# 51)
Unidentified Lao ritual text for calling the spirits (# 70)
Unidentified Lao secular poetry (# 63)

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"In the Beginning…": Samuel Milton's Early Siamese Translations of the Bible

Doug Liao [1]

Abstract—This note examines Samuel Milton's Siamese-language work in Singapore (1819–1825) and introduces his translation of the opening chapter of *Genesis* (ca. 1823). Although known for his contribution to early printing in Singapore, Milton's role in the history of Thai translation and printing has received little attention. As one of the earliest Protestant translators of a biblical text into Siamese and among the first printers using Siamese script, his work sheds new light on the early development of Christian terminology and Thai literary culture.

Keywords: Christian Terminology; London Missionary Society; Samuel Milton; Siamese Printing; Thai Bible Translation; Thai Literary History

Introduction

The story of the translation of the Bible into Siamese (Thai) is usually told the same way: After minimal attempts at translation by Roman Catholic missionaries (which were never printed), Ann Hasseltine Judson (1789–1826), one of the first American Protestant missionaries, translated the *Gospel of Matthew* into Siamese around 1818 while she was residing in Burma. While Judson had a Siamese catechism printed in Serampore, West Bengal, India, her portion of the Bible was never printed. The first resident Protestant missionaries in Siam, Karl Gutzlaff (1803–1851) and Jacob Tomlin (1793–1880), were from Europe and made an ambitious (but unsuccessful) translation of the entire *New Testament* between 1828 and 1832; however, only the *Gospel of Luke* appears to have been printed. After this, American Baptist missionaries and those from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) took up the work and completed the translation of the *New Testament* into Siamese in 1843. The Presbyterian Board then achieved the translation of the *Old Testament* by 1884.

However, the standard works on the history of Thai Bible translation fail to mention that between Judson's and Gutzlaff's translations, Samuel Milton (1788–1849), a British missionary of the London Missionary Society in Singapore, also attempted to translate parts of the Bible into Siamese.[2] While some work

[1] Fuller Seminary, Pasadena, CA (*Alumnus*).
Email: dougliao@fuller.edu.

[2] The standard works on the history of Thai Bible translation also spend comparatively little space on earlier Roman Catholic translations of portions of the scriptures, the most significant example of which is a harmony of the *Gospels* translated by Bishop Louis Laneau in 1685 (https://irfa.paris/en/the-gospel-of-bishop-louis-laneau-1684). For more on Laneau's early translation efforts, see Bunarunraksa 2018: 246–250.

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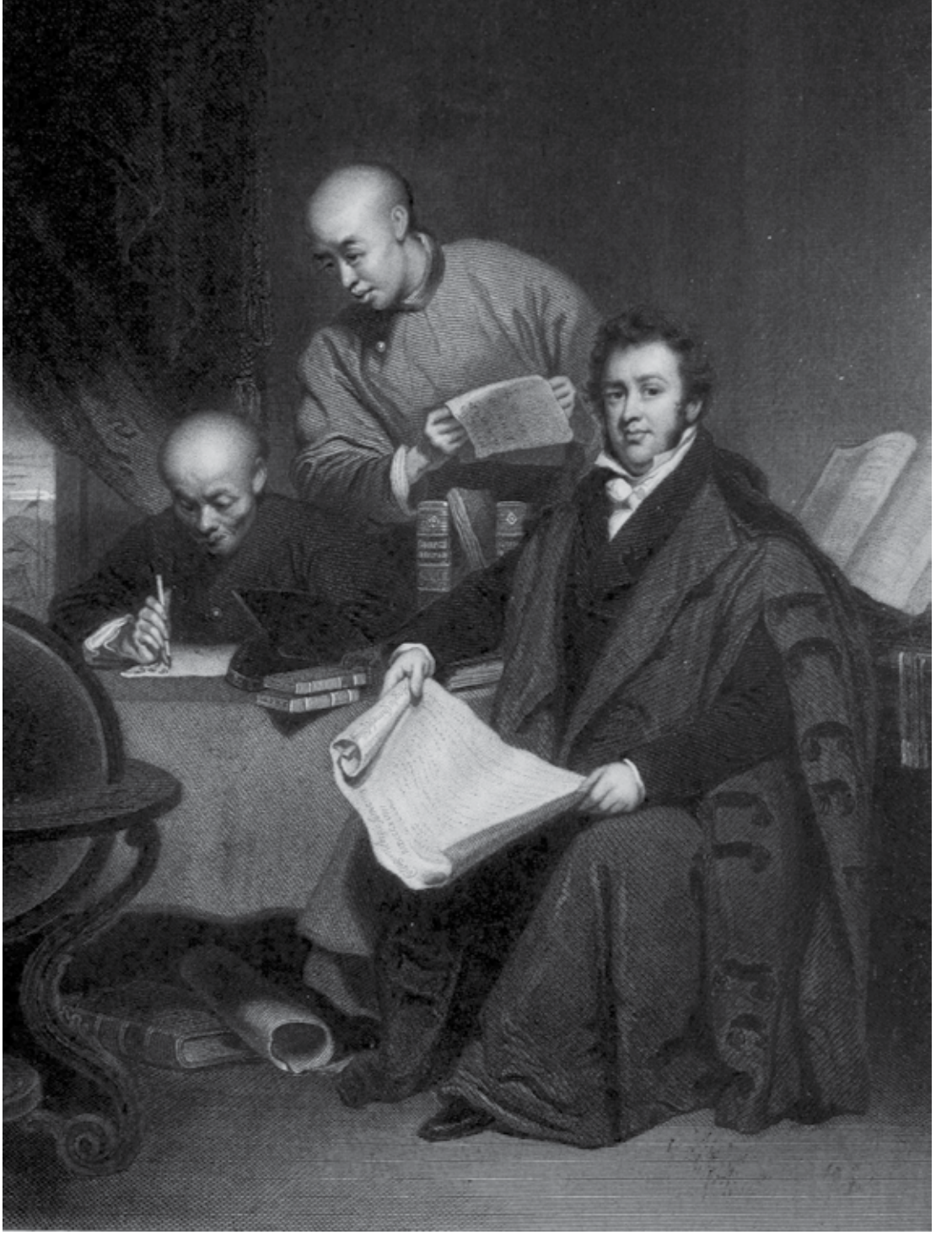


Figure 1: Robert Morrison, the first missionary sent out by the LMS, with Chinese translators; engraving from a painting, 19th c. Public Domain

has been done on Milton's role in the early history of printing in Singapore, he is often unrecognized in discussions of early Siamese translation or printing (although see Lee 2020). As one of the first Protestant translations of a Bible portion into Siamese as well as some of the earliest examples of printing in Siamese script, Milton's work, as part of Thai literary history, should be better known. The present note examines Samuel Milton's work in the translation

of the Bible in the 1820s, focusing on the first chapters of *Genesis*, the only part that has survived. The note concludes by suggesting the value of studying this early translation for those interested in linguistics, the history of Christianity in Thailand, and translation studies.

The History

Background

The London Missionary Society (LMS) was established as an interdenominational mission organization in 1795. In 1804, they sent out Robert Morrison (1782–1834) whose "major purpose was to give the Scriptures to the Chinese in their own language" (Peng 2021: 36) **[Figure 1]**. Because missionaries were not welcome in China, the LMS began to send missionaries to Southeast Asian centers, including Malacca in 1815 and Penang and Singapore in 1819 (O'Sullivan 1984: 61). In these locations, the LMS missionaries worked with local peoples as well as with Asian diasporas, especially Chinese speakers. The LMS also wished to use these sites as bases—translating the Bible and other Christian writings into Southeast Asian languages and sending this literature to other countries in the region. In 1824, they explained:

> the Directors of this Society, viewing with Christian compassion the vast population of the Kingdoms of Siam, Cochin-China [part of present-day Vietnam], and Japan, now sunk in the most debasing idolatry, and without the knowledge of a Saviour, do Resolve, by the help of a gracious Providence, to attempt, as early as practicable, complete Versions of the *Old* and *New Testament* into each of the three languages of the said Kingdoms (*Missionary Register* 1824: 36).

The *Missionary Register* noted that "preparations for the Siamese [translation] are in progress at Singapore" (Ibid.). These translations were supervised by Samuel Milton, the first LMS missionary to arrive in Singapore in 1819. James Sibree notes that Milton had "studied at Gosport" (1923: 18), a missionary academy run by Scottish David Bogue (1750–1825) **[Figure 2]**, where a number of early LMS missionaries and Bible translators were trained, including Robert Morrison and William Milne.[3] Milton was ordained in England on 1 January 1818 at Castle St. Chapel in Exeter and three months later sailed for Malacca as an LMS missionary. The following year, Milton moved to Singapore, where he "commenced that station" for the LMS (Sibree 1923: 18). While his "connection with the Society was dissolved by the Board" in 1825, Milton's time working for the LMS in Singapore was significant, especially because of his pioneer work with Siamese translation and printing.[4]

[3] At Gosport, Milton would have studied Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, enabling him to translate the scriptures as part of the mission strategy promoted by Bogue (Daily 2013: 37–82). His dedication to Bogue is evidenced by Milton's printing of some of his lecture notes while he was in Singapore (Su 1996: 160).

[4] There has not been a significant study of Milton; I was unable to find further details about his life between his dismissal from the LMS and his death in Singapore in 1849.

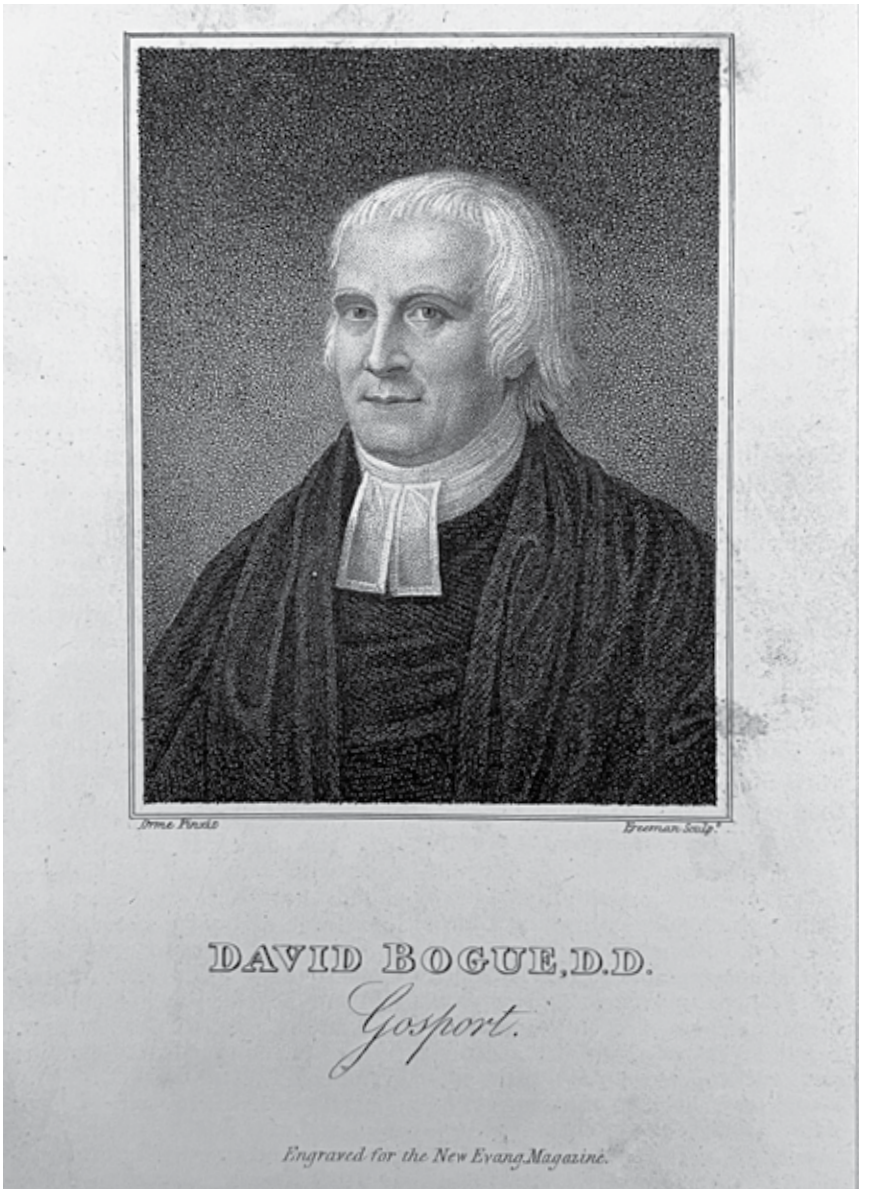


Figure 2: David Bogue was the founder and main instructor at the Gosport Academy, where Milton trained for missionary service; stipple engraving on paper
© Art Institute of Chicago

The Work of Translation

Samuel Milton's translation was done in collaboration with language helpers whom he described as "writers". As was common with missionary habits of the time, Milton did not record their names or give many details about them. However, a letter from 1822 shows the critical role they played in Milton's work:

> I have now three writers [...]. These are Siamese. One is teaching me that language and assisting me in the translation of *John's Gospel* and another is

> composing a *Dictionary of the Siamese language*; he has arranged about fifteen thousand Siamese words according to their alphabet and the other writer is transcribing Siamese books that have been lent for my perusal (Milton 1822a).

The following year, the *Annual Report of the LMS* noted, "the printing of the Siamese Version of *Genesis* has been commenced, and the first chapter, as a specimen of the work, received by the Society. Siamese types are in course of preparation for the printing of a Tract on 'Redemption', composed in that language by Mr. Milton" (London Missionary Society 1824: 53; see also *Missionary Register* 1825: 46). This report draws from a letter from Milton in 1822, mentioning that he is "going on with the translation of the *Book of Genesis* and the *Gospels* into the Siamese language" (1822b).[5] However, that letter does not say that either translation was printed and the sample which was sent back to London was handwritten.[6]

This manuscript of the first chapter of *Genesis* is kept in the Special Collections Library at SOAS, University of London, and will be discussed below. In a letter that was sent with the sample, Milton writes he has "the pleasure to send [...] the first chapter of *Genesis* in the Siamese language, the first I believe that was ever made in the Siamese character. This is the written hand, but I hope soon to send you the *Book of Genesis* in a printed form" (Milton 1823a).

In 1824, Milton reported that he had secured a printing press (complete with Siamese type) from Calcutta. After this, Milton spent much of his time printing "newspapers, summons, Bills of Lading, etc." (Milton 1824: 14–15). Complaining that he had been "distressed beyond measure on account of my time and strength being spent in this manner", Milton suggested that if he had not had to do all this extra work,

> the greater part of the *new* [sic] *Testament* in Siamese would have been printed by this time, whereas for nearly two years I have been obliged to relinquish the study of the Siamese [and Chinese] languages altogether on account of the above circumstances and what little has been printed was translated before I had the Siamese types cast (Milton 1824: 15).

In this same letter, Milton refers to the manuscript of *Genesis*, *Exodus*, and *St. John's Gospel* in Siamese (Ibid., 22) and reports that 200 copies of *Genesis* and *St. John's Gospel* "have been sent to Siam during the past year" (Ibid., 25). The following year, Milton mentioned that, in June 1824, he had sent "my *Catechism* + *St. John's Gospel* in Siamese + 255 pages of my *Siamese Dictionary*" to the LMS

[5] Missionaries of the time generally started Bible translations with the *New Testament* books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (the *Gospels*), which tell the story of Jesus. As the first book of the Bible, *Genesis* was often the first *Old Testament* book to be translated.

[6] Milton reports that people were in the process of cutting Siamese type (1822b). In the letter that was sent along with the sample of *Genesis* 1, he says that a font of Siamese types for printing "would have been done by this opportunity if I had been able to get cases made to unpack the types, which I hope will be accomplished in a few weeks, if I get better" (1823a).

office (Milton 1825: 2), but neither the letter nor the samples seem to have been retained. He also reports the printing of "*Genesis*, *Exodus*, *St. John's Gospel* and my *Catechism* in Siamese" (Ibid., 21), making it clear that he printed all of this at his own cost:

> The Calcutta Bible Society offered to print the Siamese Scriptures, and the Government in Bengal offered to print my *Siamese Dictionary*, but I wished to consult the Directors first on the subject, and wrote more than two years ago, but I have received no answer as yet, and being very unwilling to delay the printing of what had been translated I have spent my own property to give the Siamese an authentick [*sic*] account of the creation of the world with its inhabitants, the departure of the children of Israel from Egyptian bondage, the incarnation, preaching, miracles, suffering, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, and though I should never get my money again it will be no grief to me (Milton 1825: 21).

Much of this lengthy letter (and Milton's other letters) deals with his financial complaints and interpersonal difficulties with other missionaries. Ching Su notes this when summarizing Milton's work in printing:

> In fact, besides explaining his great plans for building and printing or pouring out his grievances, Milton gave few accounts in his letters of his printing practices for missionary purposes. [...] It is ironic that, after spending so much time, energy and money in printing, his ambition resulted in so little output (Su 1996: 160).

As Su notes, Milton's letters describe that he expended much effort in the work of Siamese translation. We will now survey the results of that work before taking a closer look at his translation of the first part of *Genesis*.

The Results of the Work

While Milton refers in his letters to printed versions of his translations of *Genesis*, *Exodus*, and the *Gospel of John*, future missionaries to Siam only refer to the translation of John—although none attribute it to Milton and few seem to have seen copies.[7] John Taylor Jones (1802–1851), the main translator of the first complete printed *New Testament* in Siamese, does not mention Milton at all in the Preface to his 1850 *New Testament* when he surveys the work of previous translators of the Bible into Siamese (Jones 1850: iv). In early letters, Jones mentioned that "a few Chapt[er]s of John have been printed", although he appeared to think it was Gutzlaff's translation (Jones 1833), later specifying that "one or two hundred copies of the 1st 5 chapters of John were printed, and,

[7] O'Sullivan notes that in the Fall of 1831, Milton's co-worker C.H. Thomsen "published the first six chapters of *Gospel of John* in Siamese, which was distributed in Singapore and Penang" (O'Sullivan 1984: 81). This is presumably the version of Milton's translation that later missionaries to Siam might have encountered.

I suppose, circulated" (Jones 1834a). Jones, like other early missionaries to Siam, seemed unaware of Milton's attempts to translate *Genesis* and *Exodus*.

Milton's translation work in Singapore was abandoned in 1825, largely because of interpersonal difficulties. Sandra Hudd notes that the "printing work in Singapore was disrupted for some years when an LMS delegation 'discharged' Milton in 1825—he had gotten carried away with grandiose schemes, offended the Resident, and his colleagues in Malacca thought him 'insane'" (Hudd 2018: 99). Su gives further details:

> The imprudent and flighty performance of Milton led to a factual separation from the LMS in the middle [of] 1825, after two LMS delegates, Daniel Tyerman and George Bennet, examined all his accounts and papers. At the delegates' suggestion, the Directors formally resolved to discharge Milton's connection with the LMS in March 1827. Referred to by the brethren at Penang as 'insane', Milton was the first, but regrettably not the sole, incompetent missionary who was injurious to the Singapore station (Su 1996: 160).[8]

Milton's LMS co-worker, Claudius Henry Thomsen (b. 1782), joined Milton in Singapore in 1822 but focussed on translations in the Malay and Bugis languages. In 1834, he too left the mission "under somewhat of a cloud" (Hudd 2019: 28). Before Thomsen left Singapore, he sold the presses (including the Siamese type) to the Siam mission of the ABCFM for $1,500 (Robinson & Johnson 1834). Initially, the ABCFM elected to keep the press in Singapore, but in 1835 Dan Beach Bradley brought one of the presses to Bangkok where it played a role in later translations of the Siamese Scriptures (*ABCFM Annual Report* 1836: 67). Given the importance of these presses in early Siamese printing, the work Milton did securing the presses and developing type for the Siamese language was likely his most significant legacy for Siamese language work. However, the translation he left behind is also part of his legacy and merits close attention.

The Translation

Description

SOAS Special Collections has a copy of a handwritten selection of *Genesis* 1 (Milton 1823b) **[Figures 3a-b]**,[9] along with an undated letter from Samuel Milton (Milton 1823a), which appears to have been written in June 1823.

The translation consists of two pages of Siamese script with a handwritten title in different ink stating that it is "The first Chapter of the *Book of Genesis*". Despite the title, this is a translation of

[8] In notes offering a rebuttal to "Some Parts of Mr. Milton's Letter of Dec 31, 1824", Robert Morrison suggests that Milton's writing "indicates what has been feared by those who have known him—an occasional aberration of intellect" and notes that earlier in their acquaintance Morrison had "wondered + suspected that there was an incoherence about him" (Morrison 1825).

[9] The first page of the translation of *Genesis* 1 has been reproduced in Breazeale 1986: 219.

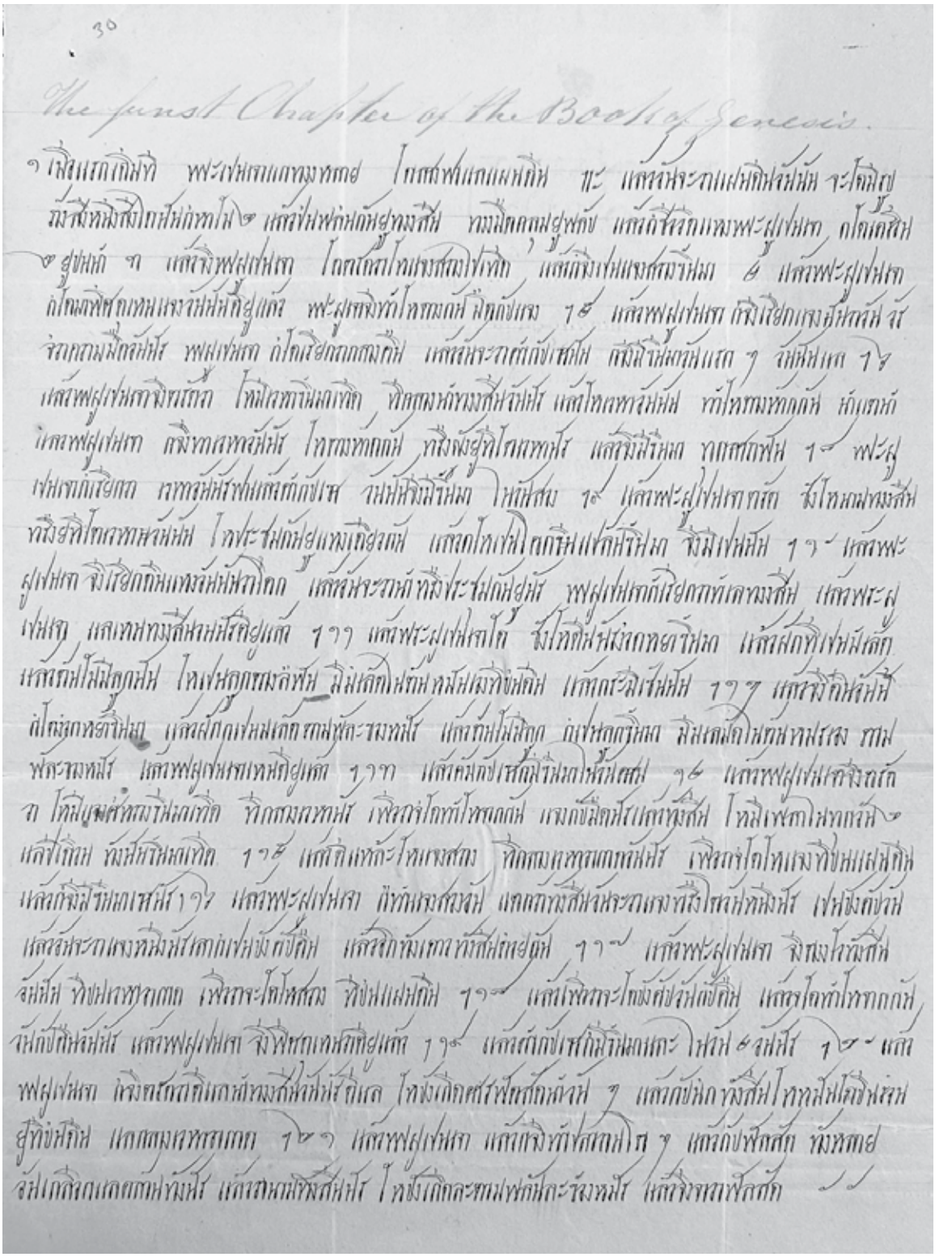


Figure 3a: Page 1 of Milton's translation of *Genesis* 1, Council for World Mission archive © SOAS Library

Genesis 1: 1–21, 1: 25–2: 5a, and 2: 10.[10] Neither the omission of 1: 22–24 (which happens at the page break) or 2: 5b–9 is noted in the text. For a copyist to skip several lines of text is not uncommon, especially when the topics and vocabulary are repetitive, as in this case. However, the omission might indicate something of the copyist's skill in reading Thai or attention to detail.[11] Given that this copy was sent to people in London who would not be able to understand it, the gap may also indicate that this was simply not seen as a task that required much attention.

There is no indication of Milton's source for his translation. Early Catholic translations into Siamese had been made from Latin (Jones 1850: iii). Early Protestant translations of scriptures into Siamese were made from Chinese (e.g., Gutzlaff and Tomlin's translation of the *New Testament*, see Tomlin 1831: 73–74), from Greek (e.g., J.T. Jones's translation of the *New Testament*, see Jones 1850: v–vi), and from English (e.g, parts of the *Old Testament* printed in the 1880s, see Krahl 2005: 76). Milton's letters do not specify from which language he was translating and it is unclear from his translation.

To aid with an analysis of the translation, the **Online Appendices**[12] to this research note provide a transcription of the text with modernized spellings, followed by a fairly literal translation of the text. As discussed below, the handwritten text is difficult to decipher; because of this, the transcriptions are challenging and involved an admittedly subjective process; footnotes have been provided for the most difficult sections.

Value of the Translation

A contemporary reader will find that the orthography of the translation is not what we are used to today. Far fewer tone markers and other diacritical marks, such as the *mai taiku* (ไม้ไต่คู้), occur. Also unrecognizable symbols might be encountered, such as commas over letters **[Figure 4]**,[13] or a glyph which looks like a พ with an extra descender and ascender **[Figure 5]**. This symbol is used to represent the first two or three characters when writing the divine name, *phra phu pen chao* (พระผู้เป็นเจ้า); the same symbol is used in Bishop Laneau's translation of the *Gospels* from 1685.[14] Even common

[10] The regular way to refer to sections of the Bible is by chapter and verse (with the chapter number given before a colon and the verse number given after), and this research note follows this convention. Milton's manuscript does not use chapter numbers, but does include verse numbers, often with the numeral after a *mai yamok* (ไม้ยมก [ๆ]) symbol.

[11] Unfortunately, we do not know whether Milton wrote this selection himself or if the text was copied by someone else.

[12] Available at: https://doi.org/10.69486/114.2.2026.12b.

[13] This appears to be essentially a *mai ek* (ไม้เอก), although it does not seem to have had a consistent meaning at this time: sometimes it functions as the ไม้ไต่คู้ (e.g., in ก็), sometimes as the ไม้เอก used in older Siamese writing to indicate a non-written *a* (ะ-) vowel (e.g., จ่ to represent จะ), and sometimes in place of the *nikkhahit* (นิคหิต) used to indicate a non-written *o*-vowel (e.g., *bon flon* บ่นฟล่น to represent บนฟลน). This symbol is also doubled in a few places (e.g., 1: 11, 16).

[14] This symbol often has the ะ after it, but increasingly the glyph gets used as an abbreviation for all three letters of พระ. This abbreviation is inconsistent; some verses use both forms (e.g., 1: 27). In 2: 2, the symbol is used twice, seemingly as an abbreviation for the entire phrase พระผู้เป็นเจ้า. At other times, the symbol is not used and the word is spelled out (e.g., 1: 10–11, 31).

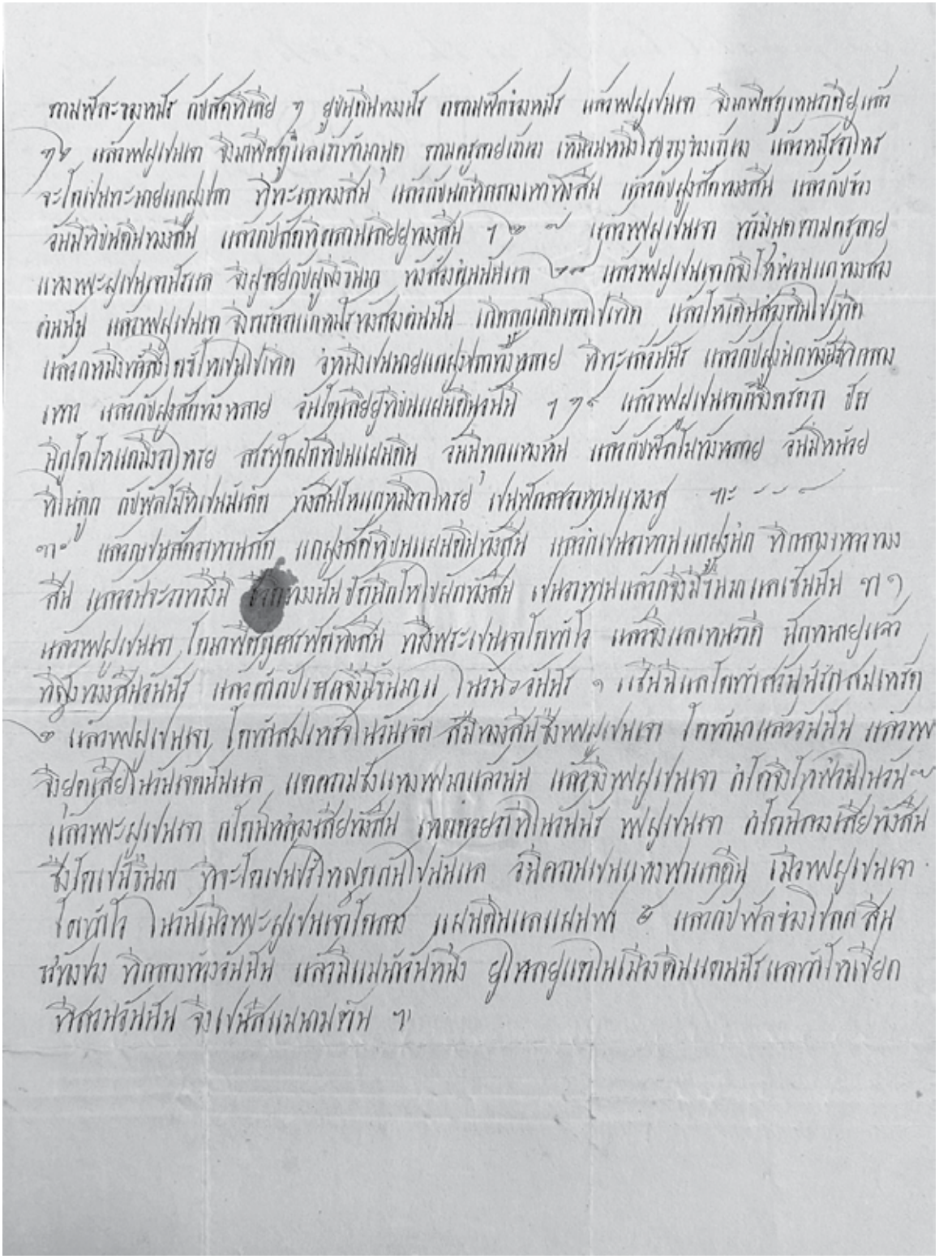


Figure 3b: Page 2 of Milton's translation of *Genesis* 1, Council for World Mission archive © SOAS Library

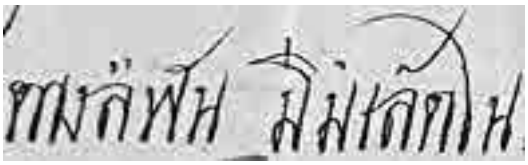


Figure 4: A phrase from *Genesis* 1: 11, illustrating the comma over certain letters in the text, first in its doubled form, and then in its more usual single form; Council for World Mission archive © SOAS Library



Figure 5: The word for God (พระผู้เป็นเจ้า) demonstrating the special symbol Milton's translation used to represent the first two characters; Council for World Mission archive © SOAS Library

letters do not always appear as expected. For example, ไ has a loop at the top and goes to the right; ใ does not circle and has a long-left arc **[Fig. 4]**; โ looks like ใ but after the arc turns right. Little differentiation between letters that are now treated as distinct—both vowels (e.g., อี/อิ/อึ) and consonants (e.g., อ/ว; ท/ห/น)—seems to occur. The spelling is inconsistent: different writings are used for the same words, and some verses include multiple spellings of the same word: e.g., ทั้ง (1: 20, 28, 30, 31, 2: 2), นั้น (1: 5, 8, 10, 11, 27, 28) or น้ำ (1: 9, 2: 10). In other places, the spelling is consistent, but different from that expected today: e.g., อยู่ is consistently spelled ยู.

Some of these modifications may be due to the idiosyncrasies of the writer, but they also indicate how different the Siamese language of the 1820s is from modern Thai. This can also be seen by word choices which might not be made today, such as using *tin* (ตีน) to refer to human feet (1: 28) or personal pronouns which are now considered archaic or rude such as *mueng* (มึง) in 1: 28–29, used for humans; *ku* (กู) in 1: 29, used for God; and *su* (สู) in 1: 29, also used for humans. For these reasons, one of the primary benefits of studying this manuscript is the insight it gives into Siamese writing and language from two hundred years ago.

However, not only the writing and spelling differ from current expectations. Milton's reworking of *Genesis* 1 makes interesting translation choices. Some choices are of special interest to those interested in the practice of early translation. *Genesis* is a highly structured, repetitive text and the translation reflects that. A fair amount of repetition was used throughout the translation. Some of this reflects the source, such as sentences frequently beginning with *laeo* แล้ว; every verse but 1: 1, 2: 1, and 2: 4 starts with แล้ว, in addition to multiple uses at the start of clauses within verses. Other words and phrases often include *an cha wa* (อันจะว่า) in 1: 2, 5, 10, 16, 30 and the emphatic *lae* (และ) at the end of phrases (e.g., ดีและ, 1: 20, 26; นั้นและ, 1: 5, 27, 2: 2–3). Several of these features are now more characteristic of oral than written language, but they are common in the older Thai texts preserved in surviving manuscripts. As an early example of translation into the language, Milton's work provides valuable evidence of how texts were rendered in early Siamese.

Some of these translation choices are also important for understanding the history of Christianity in Thailand. As one example, Milton's work represents an early Protestant attempt

to use language for the Judeo–Christian concept of God. While some work has been done on the standardization of the term for the Christian deity in early Siamese Protestant translations (Liao 2026: 81–85), Milton's work offers early data points that help illuminate this process.[15] Similarly, these choices could illustrate other religious concepts that needed to be translated into Siamese as well as the use of royal language. Milton was not the first to consider how to translate Christian concepts into Siamese. Roman Catholic translators had been at work in the country since the 16th century. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the Missions étrangères de Paris (MEP) did extensive work creating Christian Siamese vocabulary, especially through the translations of Bishop Louis Laneau (1637–1696; see Kantaphong 2019). While we do not know whether Milton had access to Roman Catholic translations, later Protestant translators did (e.g., Gutzlaff 1833: 291; Jones 1834b, 1850: iii, v). Regardless of whether Milton consulted Catholic manuscripts, early Catholic missionaries shaped "many important modes of expressions on religious subjects", setting religious vocabulary and ways of thinking about Christian subjects that had a lasting influence (Jones 1834b). I know of no work investigating the relationship between early Protestant translations and the language used by earlier Catholic translators, but as the earliest existing Protestant translation of scriptures, Milton's work offers an exciting opportunity for such comparative work.

Concluding Remarks

The most significant impacts of Milton's work on the translation of the Bible into Siamese in Singapore were the presses he purchased and the type he created. These were used to print many early missionary translations—first in Singapore and, later, in Bangkok. But Milton's translation is not without interest. As one of the first Protestant translators of a portion of the Bible into Siamese and one of the first printers to use Siamese script, Milton should be better known. His translation offers an early example of Protestant attempts to translate Christian scriptures; the handwritten sample that he sent to England gives an example of Siamese handwritten style from two centuries ago **[Figs 3a–b]**, helping us see some of the development of the Siamese language. Milton's translation also reflects the early challenges of expressing complex Christian concepts in Siamese and provides important evidence of some of the earliest Protestant efforts to standardize Christian terminology. As such, his manuscript of the opening chapters of *Genesis* is of significant value to scholars of Thai Bible translation, the history of Christianity in Thailand, and the development of the Thai language and writing system over the past two centuries.

[15] The word for God in Milton's selection is usually พระผู้เป็นเจ้า, although this occasionally gets shortened to พระเป็นเจ้า (1: 1, 4, 6, 31). Later Protestant translations usually shorten this to พระเจ้า though the longer form is understandable and still used.

Acknowledgments

The letters of Samuel Milton are archived in the SOAS University of London Special Collections and many are available online in SOAS's digital collections. The handwritten sample of the translation of *Genesis* 1 is also in their archives. I am grateful to Beth Croydon for her prompt and helpful assistance in providing me with a copy of the translation and accompanying letter. I am also grateful to Alexandra Kaloyanides who made helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.

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An Additional Note on Nai Mot's Printing of the *Three Seals Laws* in 1849/50

Chris Baker[1] **& Pasuk Phongpaichit**[2]

Abstract—This research note presents additional information on Nai Mot Amatayakul's 1849/50 first printed edition of the *Three Seals Laws*: the law texts assembled by King Rama I and the kingdom's earliest banned book. The volume sent to Paris was probably a proof copy amended before the main print run. The volume in the National Library of Thailand, once believed to be the sole surviving copy, has, as of 2026, gone missing. Nai Mot claimed to have sold or distributed up to 200 copies, so perhaps additional copies may yet survive.

Keywords: Censorship; Early Printing in Siam; Nai Mot Amatayakul; National Library of Thailand; *Three Seals Laws* (*Kotmai tra sam duang*)

Background

In 1849/50, Nai Mot Amatayakul (โหมด อมาตยกุล; 1819–1896) printed the *Three Seals Laws* (*Kotmai tra sam duang*; กฎหมายตราสามดวง) for the first time; in response King Rama III (r. 1824–1851) ordered that the books be seized and destroyed. One copy of the first volume survived in the National Library of Thailand (NLT), as described by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (1862–1943), Yoneo Ishii (1929–2010), and others. In the *Journal of the Siam Society*, Vol. 113, Part 2, we traced this incident in detail (Baker & Pasuk 2025) and revealed that a second copy of the first volume had been lodged at the Bibliothèque national de France (BnF) in Paris since the 1850s and is now freely available on the net. Since then, there has been a discovery and a disappearance; the historic Mot volume has gone missing.

Discovery

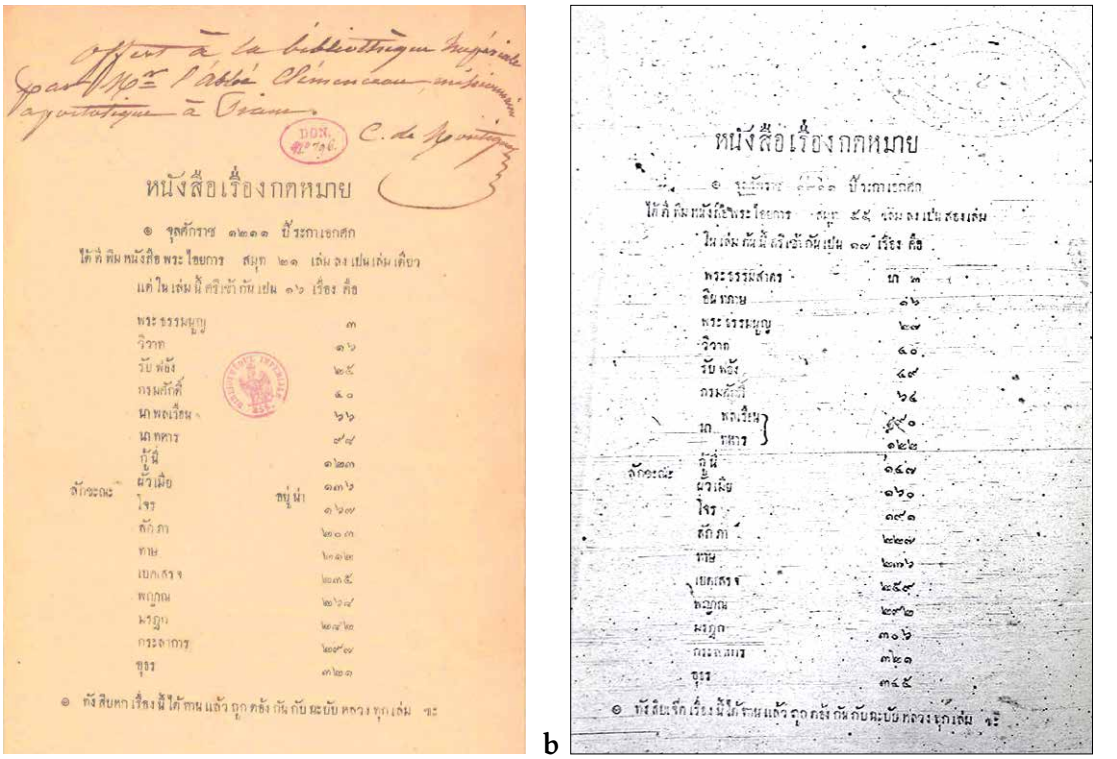
Junko Koizumi (2026) consulted a copy of the NLT volume made by the late Yoneo Ishii and kept in his memorial collection in Kyoto;[3] she noticed three differences between the title pages of the Paris volume and the NLT volume. First, in the NLT volume, the *Phra thammasat* (พระธรรมสาตร) and *Lak inthaphat* (หลักอินทภาษ; Sayings of Indra) have been inserted at the head of the contents; the pagination of the rest has consequently changed but the text and the typesetting are the same. Second, in the upper strapline, the BnF Paris volume states, "printed 21 law texts as one volume, but in this volume there are 16 items" while the NLT volume states, "printed 55 law

[1] The Siam Society, Bangkok. Corresponding author. Email: chrispasuk@gmail.com.

[2] Chulalongkorn University (*Emerita*), Bangkok.

[3] Ishii probably had a microfilm made in the NLT and printed and bound in Japan. It is certainly a copy of the NLT volume as the title page at top right bears the accession stamp of books added to the collection of the Watchirayan (Vajirañāṇa) Library, the precursor of the NLT, but the date in the accession stamp is not readable.

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a b

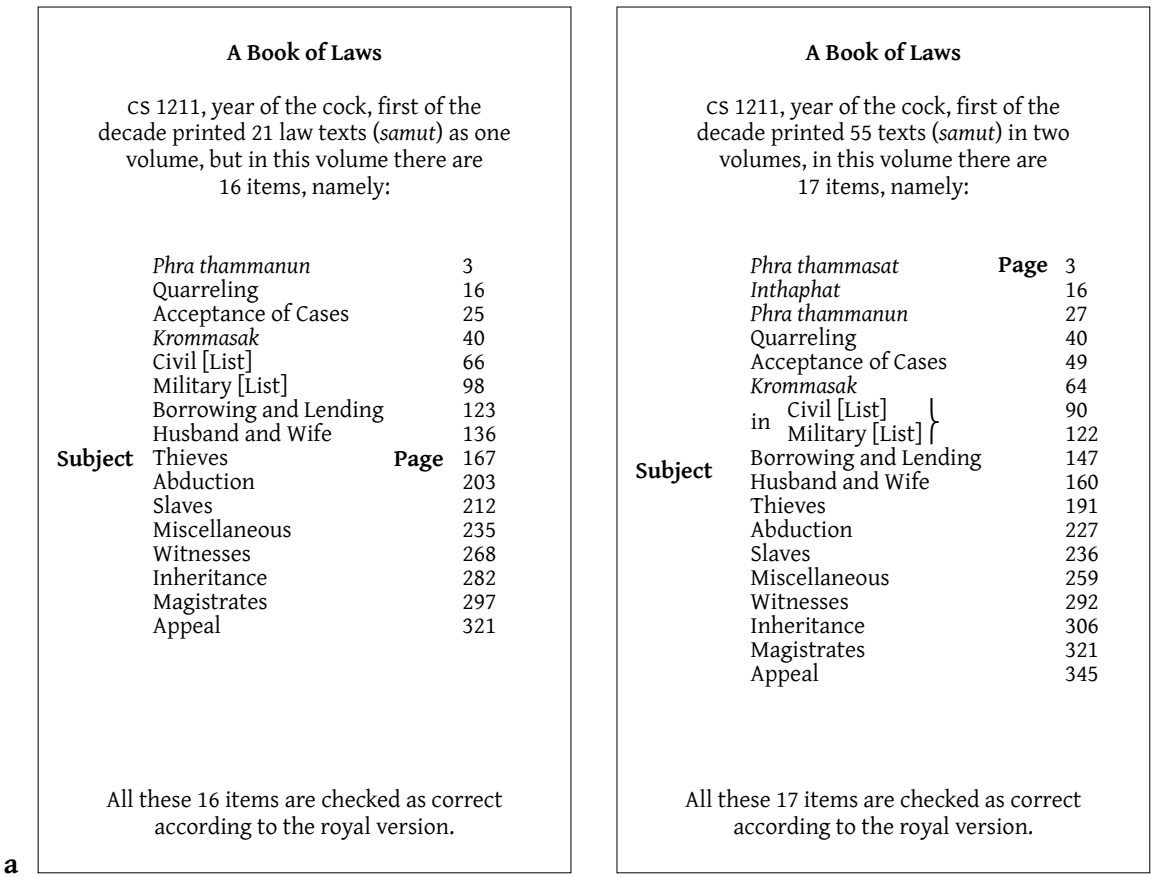
Figures 1a–b: Title page of Nai Mot's edition from the BnF volume in Paris (a); from Yonei Ishii's copy of the NLT volume in Kyoto (b). Public Domain

texts in two volumes, [but] in this volume there are 17 items". Third, some copy-editing is present in the list of contents, including bracketing the Civil List and Military List as one item and changing the spelling and position of the word "Page".

The title of the book and the date are the same. The lower strapline differs only by changing the number from 16 to 17. Overlaying these two title pages shows that they were certainly printed from the same galley tray **[Figures 1–2]**.

How did this happen? Why did Nai Mot go to the bother of resetting the type?

Our guess runs as follows: In 1849 or early 1850, Nai Mot completed the type-setting of the first volume and printed one or more copies for proofing. When he showed these to his associates, someone more knowledgeable on the law than Nai Mot, perhaps Kromluang Wongsathiratsanit (กรมหลวงวงศาธิราชสนิท; 1808–1871), advised him that *Phra tham-masat* and *Inthaphat* should appear at the head of the contents. Nai Mot added these two texts to the set and revised the pagination on all the other pages in the galleys. He took the opportunity to make other corrections on the title page. The upper strapline was evidently faulty. The plan seemed always to print two volumes; "one volume" makes no sense in the sentence. The "volumes of law texts" (พระไอยการ สมุท) presumably refers to the original folding book or *samut thai* (สมุดไทย) and the figure of 21 was perhaps a simple typo for the true



A Book of Laws

CS 1211, year of the cock, first of the decade printed 21 law texts (*samut*) as one volume, but in this volume there are 16 items, namely:

	Phra thammanun		3
	Quarreling		16
	Acceptance of Cases		25
	Krommasak		40
	Civil [List]		66
	Military [List]		98
	Borrowing and Lending		123
	Husband and Wife		136
Subject	Thieves	**Page**	167
	Abduction		203
	Slaves		212
	Miscellaneous		235
	Witnesses		268
	Inheritance		282
	Magistrates		297
	Appeal		321

All these 16 items are checked as correct according to the royal version.

a

A Book of Laws

CS 1211, year of the cock, first of the decade printed 55 texts (*samut*) in two volumes, in this volume there are 17 items, namely:

	Phra thammasat	**Page**	3
	Inthaphat		16
	Phra thammanun		27
	Quarreling		40
	Acceptance of Cases		49
	Krommasak		64
	in Civil [List] / Military [List]		90 / 122
Subject	Borrowing and Lending		147
	Husband and Wife		160
	Thieves		191
	Abduction		227
	Slaves		236
	Miscellaneous		259
	Witnesses		292
	Inheritance		306
	Magistrates		321
	Appeal		345

All these 17 items are checked as correct according to the royal version.

b

Figures 2a–b: English translations of Nai Mot's title page from the BnF volume in Paris (a), and from Yonei Ishii's copy of the NLT volume in Kyoto (b) © Chris Baker

figure of 41. Mot corrected this to 55, also faulty. This same figure of "55 Vols" appears in a reference to the printing by John Taylor Jones (1802–1851) in an article in the *Chinese Depository* for 1850 (Jones 1850: 551).

With these revisions, Nai Mot completed the print run by July 1850. The "panic" (Bradley 1930: 125) over the king's order of seizure began in September of that year. At some point, Nai Mot gave the proof copy to the French missionaries and this found its way to Paris, as described in our article (Baker & Pasuk 2025). We repeat that this is our guess. There may be other explanations.

Disappearance

The NLT volume cannot now be found. Searches carried out in the NLT in April–May 2026 failed to locate the book. At present, Yoneo Ishii's copy in Kyoto is the only record.

This book is a historical artifact. It was one of the first books printed in the kingdom and the first book to be banned in Siam. It had an important part in the transmission of the *Three Seals Laws*. Prince Damrong related how he had the volume lodged in the Watchirayan Library (Narisara & Damrong 2504: 33). It will be very sad if such a historical artifact has been lost.

Although several scholars repeated that this NLT volume was the only survivor of the king's order, in his own memoir Nai Mot wrote that the books were not destroyed and that he sold or distributed up to 200 copies (Mot 2504: 28; Baker & Pasuk 2025: 34). Perhaps another copy has survived elsewhere and will reappear.

Acknowledgments

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(*In*)*visible Presence* at Dib (Bangkok, 21 December 2025–3 August 2026)



Figure 1: Exhibition poster (*In*)*visible Presence*, inaugural exhibition, at Dib Bangkok © Dib Bangkok

Dib Bangkok (ดิบ บางกอก), a new private contemporary art museum in Khlong Toei, opened with the inaugural exhibition (*In*)*visible Presence* **[Figure 1]**.[1] Its name draws on the Thai word *dip* (ดิบ), meaning raw, natural, or unprocessed—a term that suggests both material directness and

[1] Located 111 Soi Sukhumvit 40, Phra Khanong, Khlong Toei, Bangkok 10110 Thailand. See: https://dibbangkok.org/.

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Figure 2: Architectural view of Dib Bangkok showing the museum's open courtyard and exterior © Dib Bangkok

an institutional desire to approach art before it is fully settled into canon. Housed in a repurposed 1980s warehouse in one of Bangkok's most economically mixed urban areas, adjacent to the port and shaped by a long history of labor, migration, logistics, storage, and informal settlement, Dib does not enter the city as a neutral container for art. It arrives with unusual weight.

The museum, not the collection, is new. Assembled over roughly three decades by Thai businessman and singer Petch Osathanugrah (เพชร โอสถานุเคราะห์; 1954–2023), the collection brings into public view works that have circulated in the Thai art market through reproduction, anecdote, and reputation rather than sustained direct encounter. It is also an international collection—over a thousand works by more than two hundred artists worldwide—so that the Thai material is held not in isolation but in deliberate proximity to contemporary practice elsewhere. The stakes of Dib are not only aesthetic. They are historic: what happens when a private collection —formed through one life, one taste, and one network of access—becomes a quasi-public assemblage during a time when the public sector remains organizationally unable to collect an equivalent body of work.

The museum is led by Petch's son Purat (Chaeng) Osathanugrah (ภูรัตน์ [แฉ่ง] โอสถานุเคราะห์) and directed by the Japanese curator Miwako Tezuka. The building was designed by Kulapat Yantrasast (กุลภัทร ยันตรศาสตร) of WHY Architecture, in collaboration with Bangkok-based Architects 49. Kulapat describes his approach as "acupuncture architecture": intervention that activates a place without overwhelming it. At Dib this method is visible in the preservation and reframing of industrial elements,

the use of exposed concrete, the retention of sawtooth skylights, organized around a large central courtyard **[Figure 2]**. The site spans roughly 16,000 m² in total grounds, with approximately 7,000 m² of exhibition space across three floors and eleven galleries.

This review approaches Dib through its inaugural display, making the collection visible while also raising questions about interpretation, authority, and public consequence. Visibility, however, is not the same as interpretation; a museum's authority is ultimately made through the arguments it stages over time. At present, Thailand's infrastructure for collecting contemporary art remains thin; a museum of this scale therefore carries public significance even when privately founded. Dib's importance will not be fixed by its inauguration. It will be determined by whether it acts as if its decisions instigate public consequence in a field where no comparable public collection stands beside it.

The Exhibition

The inaugural exhibition, (*In*)*visible Presence*, (ล่อง[ไม่]หน) curated by Ariana Chaivaranon (อารียนา ชัยวาระนนท์) under the artistic direction of Miwako Tezuka, offers the first sustained public encounter with the collection. Rather than organizing works by chronology, medium, or geography, the exhibition employs a looser set of connectives: material, memory, and presence. Its logic is associative rather than historical. Works are paired through resonance rather than placed in a timeline. This approach is consistent with both the edifice and the museum within it, preferring the register of experience to the register of argument. The range of different materials is one of the show's strongest editorial decisions. Works in oil and metal share rooms with arrangements built from used, abused, and abandoned objects —a lineage that runs through *arte povera* and its descendants that has been one of the most generative idioms in Thai contemporary art since the late 1980s.

The first floor opens at full scale. Marco Fusinato (b. 1964)'s *Constellations* (2015–2025) —canonical images perforated until their surfaces resolve into star-fields provides the keynote. Presence is registered as trace: an action performed on material rather than an image presented for interpretation **[Figure 3]**.

Beside the international names that anchor the exhibition, Dib's commitment to Thai contemporary practice is most telling in smaller, quieter gestures. *Colossum* (2004) and *A letter from Innocenzo X* (2004), two small works by Yuree Kensaku (ยุรี เกนสาคู; b. 1979) seen following *Constellations*, are instructive examples. Spray paint, acrylic, and pen worked into folded aluminum plates retain the sketch-like immediacy of the studio rather than the finish of a completed painting. The plates appear as if they were lifted from a working surface, with



Figure 3: Marco Fusinato, *Constellations*, 2015–2025 (detail) © Dib Bangkok



Figure 4: Surasi Kusolwong, *Emotional Machine* (VW), 2000–2001/2002/ (Permanently Damaged) 2025 © Dib Bangkok

folds, residue, and unstudied lines. Hung alongside more monumental international pieces, they refuse to function as supporting material.

At the end of the floor stands Surasi Kusolwong (สุรสีห์ กุศลวงศ์; b. 1965)'s *Emotional Machine*—an installation built around a 1965 Volkswagen Beetle painted a saturated blue and suspended upside down. The car's hollowed-out shell with its roof facing the ground, recalling a boat or raft, rocks gently as a swing or houseboat when visitors climb inside. The work evokes the traces of lived journeys as well as the aura of the ready-made. Flipped and suspended, it folds into one hybrid vessel of Thai vernacular memory with European road travel and the global circulation of consumer goods. Historically, the work marked Surasi's institutional visibility in Europe in the 2000s; its presentation at Dib allows Thai audiences to encounter, in person, a work well-known through circulation abroad **[Figure 4]**.

The second floor turns the viewer toward remembering. In a small room dedicated to Surat Osathanugrah (สุรัตน์ โอสถานุเคราะห์; 1930–2008)—photographer and Petch's father—hang black-and-white prints from *Vanishing Bangkok*, the series in which Surat set out to document everyday streets, markets, and canals as they were displaced by highways, malls, and suburban expansion. Within Dib, the work operates on two registers: as a social document of an urban Bangkok that has, in many places, ceased to exist and as a family archive embedded within a museum founded by his son and now chaired by his grandson, Purat. This is one place where the museum's private genealogy is most visible: the collection does not only collect "Thai contemporary art" as an abstract category; it also collects a family's own history of seeing and recording Bangkok.

Not far from the Surat room sits Somboon Hormtientong (สมบูรณ์ หอมเทียนทอง; b. 1949)'s *The Unheard Voice* (1995). This first appeared in the artist's introductory exhibition in Thailand after he spent years studying and living in Germany. Somboon acquired wooden pillars from an antique shop, laid them on the gallery floor, and invited monks to chant *suat bangsukun* (สวดบังสุกุล)—a funerary rite ordinarily performed for the dead—over them **[Figure 5]**. The



Figure 5: Somboon Hormtientong, *The Unheard Voice*, 1995 © Dib Bangkok



FIGURE 6: Montien Boonma, *Lotus Sound*, 1992/1999–2000 © Dib Bangkok

ritual ended the useful lives of the pillars both symbolically and functionally: it dispatched them as architectural elements and it mourned what they had once supported. Read against the 1990s, the work functioned as a critique of development's violence: the dismantling of material culture faster than it could be remembered. It is also an example of how Thai contemporary art turned ritual into medium.

The thread linking artists of the same generation through related concerns carries onto the third floor, the majority of which is given to Montien Boonma (มณเฑียร บุญมา; 1953–2000). Montien's distinctive achievement was to fold Buddhist conceptual practice into contemporary artistic production without reducing either. Petch was among Montien's major patrons during the artist's short career. Given Montien's central contribution to Thai contemporary art and the small number of his works in Thai public collections, Dib's holdings now constitute one of the most significant bodies of his work in the country. *Lotus Sound* (1992/1999–2000), an installation of 500 terracotta bells arranged in tiered rows and intercut with hanging golden lotus forms, carries an intimate biography alongside its formal power **[FIGURE 6]**. After learning that his wife had been diagnosed with cancer Montien turned to temples in Chiang Mai for prayer and meditation; the work bears the imprint of that turn. The exhibition closes with *Zodiac Houses* (1998–1999), an architectural-scale structure that invites the visitor into a dim, repetitive geometry recalling both scaffolding and a ritual pavilion: a temporary shrine translated into contemporary sculptural language **[FIGURE 7]**. Both of these works are not simply "spiritual" in theme; they ask that presence be sensed through space, repetition, enclosure, and breath.

The sequence of the exhibition suits the building's vertical narrative. Visitors move from the ground floor's material



FIGURE 7: Montien Boonma, *Zodiac Houses*, 1998–1999 © Dib Bangkok

heaviness toward increasingly luminous and elevated spaces above. A reflecting pool, a translucent skin, and carefully staged vertical circulation altogether produce movement from the industrial to the contemplative. The ground level retains a degree of industrial rawness, while the upper floors become more refined, controlled, and light filled. The sawtooth roof admits diffused light, giving the top floor a calmer and more spiritual atmosphere. This journey from concrete to light is not accidental: it produces a kind of ascent. Architecture here does not simply organize circulation; it gives the visit a symbolic structure in which contemporary art becomes something approached gradually, then encountered in spaces that feel quietly set apart from the city.

Collection and Context

It is a privilege to see these works gathered in one place. Since the late 1980s, Thai contemporary art has been shaped by a transformation in artistic practice that exceeds the inherited languages of painting and sculpture. Artists began to move the field toward installation, performance, media work, happenings, conceptual practice, socially engaged formats, and experimental exhibition-making. Names such as Apinan Poshyananda (อภินันท์ โปษยานนท์; b. 1956), Kamol Phaosavasdi (กมล เผ่าสวัสดิ์; b. 1958), Chumpon Apisuk (จุมพล อภิสุข; b. 1948), and Montien Boonma (1953–2000) stand here less as a canon than as markers of a wider shift: a movement away from medium-based prestige toward contemporary time-based, participatory, ephemeral, or conceptual forms dispersed across objects, documents, and actions. If Thai modern art's institutional culture was anchored in the recognized achievements of painting and sculpture—objects that can be stored, insured, displayed, and valued through established systems—then the contemporary turn posed simultaneous practical and theoretical problems. This contemporary transformation in practice was not matched by an equivalent transformation in collecting infrastructure. The problem was not the absence of artists, exhibitions, or audiences. It was the absence of institutions capable of collecting, conserving, researching, and re-displaying the new emerging forms. This is not to say that Thailand had no collecting institutions or no contemporary art collections. There were private collectors, foundation acquisitions, and institutional purchases throughout the period; Petch was not alone.

Dib enters this public field in the form of a private practice built precisely in relation to that gap. Petch acquired works through galleries and artists' studios rather than auctions. He preferred depth over breadth, and he collected precisely the kinds of work that public infrastructure struggled to hold. The result is a private collection at museum scale, including Thai works from the period in which Thailand's contemporary art organization was least able to systematically collect them. That alone gives Dib art-historical weight that no exhibition platform, however ambitious, can replicate. But the same condition that produces Dib's weight also produces its risk. The collection was assembled by one collector, through one set of relationships, tastes, and access points. In a national context where no comparable public collection exists, Dib's selections—of artists, works, periods, and international juxtapositions—are likely to function not as one reading among many, but as the dominant frame through which Thai contemporary art after the late 1980s is encountered, taught, and remembered. This is an unusual privilege for any private collection, Especially in the case of Thailand.

But this privilege is also where the exhibition's difficulty begins. Holding a collection of this scale forces a curatorial choice the museum has not yet fully made. (*In*)*visible Presence* is generous in what it exhibits and careful in how it shows it, but reluctant to organize works into an explicit art-historical argument. Instead of moving through Thai contemporary practice in terms of chronology, generation, or movement, the exhibition holds its material together through softer connectives. Room by room, the logic is resonance rather than history. For an exhibition whose collection is itself an art-historical document, this is a substantial omission. It is not a curatorial failure. The associative logic is consistent with the architecture and with the experiential register preferred by the museum. But it carries a cost. When canonical Thai works are arranged primarily through the language of material and memory rather than through their position within a developing field, they are read as individual encounters rather than as parts of a history available for study.

Underneath this concern is a wider point. Even with the depth of holdings on view, the exhibition makes legible something the rest of the field has been reluctant to name: the works at Dib are themselves fragments—substantial fragments, but fragments—of a body of Thai contemporary art whose other parts are held in private hands, in artists' studios, in foreign museums, and in informal personal archives across Thailand and abroad. No single private collection, however ambitious, can recompose that whole. The most important effect of (*In*) *visible Presence* may therefore be what it can not announce: the absence of a national contemporary art collection in Thailand suddenly, and forcefully, becoming visible. The case for public collecting is most clearly made/ produced in the space where private collecting has done its best work.

Dib is a legacy institution founded on private wealth, opening after the death of its founder. Its institutional meaning depends on whether that collector's biography can become a sustained mandate. Internationally, the Mori Art

Museum in Tokyo offers one instructive precedent in which a family institution became more than the family by building curatorial leadership and a durable programming logic; domestically, MAIIAM offers a smaller but clearer civic posture in Chiang Mai, grounded in ongoing relationships with artists and scholarship.[2] Dib inherits both lessons under harsher conditions: larger scale, stronger symbolic authority, with no founder in the room.

The deeper problem is not that Dib is private, but that it stands at a scale that few public institutions in Thailand can meet. In that context, private decisions acquire public gravity; a canon held by one collector, one taste, and one line of descent is fragile; that fragility becomes a problem of the field rather than merely of one institution. The responsibility this places on Dib is not to replace the state, but to build usable infrastructure: research and scholarship others can cite, access others can use, and programs that enlarge—rather than eclipse—the wider ecology of collecting, study, and re-display. This does not mean erasing the collection's origin in one life and one taste; rather, it means making that founding sensibility explicit and placing the collection in conversation with the wider field and with the publics who will inherit its consequences.

Dib's importance will not be fixed by its opening year, nor will it be fixed by its first decade. It will be shaped by the institutional practices put in place at the beginning: making curatorial reasoning legible, investing in research, and treating access—archives, viewing, re-display, and study—as a core public function.[3] Over time, the question is not whether Dib can provide a single authoritative account of Thai contemporary art after the late 1980s, but whether it can host the conditions for the production of multiple accounts: through scholarship, sustained programming, and a willingness to let interpretation remain open.

Vipash Purichanont
Silpakorn University
Purichanont_v@su.ac.th

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[2] For institutional background, see Mori Art Museum: https://www.mori.art.museum/en/; and MAIIAM Contemporary Art Museum: https://maiiam.com/ (see also Sébastien Tayac, this volume).

[3] As of June 2026, admission was 750 baht for foreign visitors, with a lower rate for Thai nationals and residents—a high price by the standards of museum admission in Thailand and a significant barrier for students and the general public. The fee is not unreasonable, however, given the costs of conservation, environmental control, security, insurance, and interpretation to international standards, all of which Dib appears committed to maintaining. A discounted student rate would nevertheless make the collection more accessible.

The Bouquet and the Wreath at MAIIAM Contemporary Art Museum (Chiang Mai, 26 July 2025–25 March 2026)



Figure 1: ***The Bouquet and the Wreath*** **exhibition poster © MAIIAM**

The MAIIAM Contemporary Art Museum (พิพิธภัณฑ์ศิลปะร่วมสมัยใหม่เอี่ยม) opened in 2016 in a renovated warehouse in San Kamphaeng,[1] just outside Chiang Mai, with the aim of making a major collection of Thai and regional contemporary art accessible to the public. Rooted in a collection assembled over more than three decades by Jean Michel Beurdeley, his late wife, Patrsi Bunnag (ภัทรศรี บุนนาค; 1941–2015), and Eric Bunnag Booth (เอริค บุนนาค บูทซ์), the museum presents works from its permanent collection alongside a changing program of temporary exhibitions. Named after Chao Chom Iam Bunnag (เจ้าจอมเอี่ยม บุนนาค; 1873–1952), a royal consort of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), MAIIAM

[1] The museum occupies a former warehouse transformed by the Bangkok-based architectural practice "all(zone)", led by Rachaporn Choochuey (รชาพร ชูช่วย; b. 1970).

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has played an important role over the last decade in promoting and preserving contemporary art in Thailand, while fostering dialogues between established artists and new curatorial perspectives.

It was therefore particularly fitting that the museum hosted *The Bouquet and the Wreath*, an exhibition surveying 45 years of Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's (อารยา ราษฎร์จำเริญสุข; b. 1957) artistic practice, co-curated by Roger Nelson and Kittima Chareeprasit (กิตติมา จารี-ประสิทธิ์). The exhibition was presented across two overlapping venues, each displaying a distinct selection of works: one in Chiang Mai, under review here, and the other in Dubai.[2] This review focuses exclusively on the exhibition at MAIIAM Contemporary Art Museum **[Figure 1]**. Although Chiang Mai might appear an unexpected location for an artist of such international stature, the city is deeply intertwined with Araya's trajectory. She lived, worked, and taught for almost four decades there and, as Eric Bunnag Booth notes, developed a long-standing relationship with Jean Michel Beurdeley, co-founder of MAIIAM, who "has been supporting Araya's practice and collecting her work for over three decades" (Nelson & Kittima 2026: 19).

As the exhibition catalog was not published until March 2026, the museum provided short explanatory texts in Thai and English beneath the title of each work throughout the exhibition period. Developed through discussions between the curators and the artist, these texts provided essential interpretive guidance and, together with the subsequently published catalog (Nelson & Kittima 2026), constitute the principal textual references for this review. Their direct accessibility within the gallery space, rather than through the QR codes increasingly common in contemporary exhibitions, was particularly commendable.

Framing the viewer's expectations, the introductory wall text explains that the exhibition deliberately avoids a chronological structure, instead juxtaposing works from different periods across Araya's 45-year-long practice. This approach encourages a dynamic engagement with the artist's recurring concerns and thematic continuities. As the catalog further emphasizes, neither section of the exhibition seeks to provide a complete or definitive account of Araya's œuvre; rather, the curators embrace the open-ended, multifaceted, and difficult-to-categorize nature of her work (Nelson & Kittima 2026: 25), thereby rejecting any claim to exhaustiveness or classificatory closure. This approach echoes earlier critical readings of Araya's practice, including that of Australian curator and art historian Clare Veal, who has argued that the artist's work resists straightforward categorization, whether through the lens of feminist art or within the framework of Thai female artistic production (Clark, Veal & Su 2014: 56). Taken together, these perspectives point to a broader refusal of linear and classificatory interpretations, a position that becomes materially legible in the spatial organization of the exhibition.

Upon entering the atrium of MAIIAM, one encounters Araya's large-scale

[2] The Dubai exhibition was presented at the Jameel Arts Centre from 6 November 2025 to 12 April 2026. See: https://jameelartscentre.org/whats-on/araya-rasdjarmrearnsook-the-bouquet-and-the-wreath/ (accessed 20 July 2026).



Figure 2: *Dog's Palatial Castle* (2025) by Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, and *Cold War: The Mysterious* (2019–2022) by Thasnai Sethaseree © Sébastien Tayac

wooden manor house. Titled *Dog's Palatial Castle* (2025), its juxtaposition with *Cold War: The Mysterious* (2019–2022), an artwork by the artist Thasnai Sethaseree (ทัศนัย เศรษฐเสรี; b. 1968) creates friction between an intimate, domestic structure and a work charged with broader historical and political resonance **[Figure 2]**.

Considered in isolation, the building evokes architectural forms reminiscent of Edward Hopper's *House by the Railroad* (1925), Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), or The Addams Family mansion. Yet this familiarity is destabilized by two walls covered in portraits of dogs. In fact, the structure transposes Araya's *Castle* (1989), an intaglio print, into architectural scale, extending its logic into space. Inside, it contains *Three Female Scapes* (2002), a three-channel video showing a deceased woman in gilded frames, alongside *Sweet Naïve Buoyancy: Tata* (2025), a resin sculpture of an aged dog. As curators Nelson & Kittima note in the caption, Araya evokes a "close meeting" between the three works—newly born, ageing, and deceased—thus articulating a subtle thread through time.

The dialogue between these works exemplifies the exhibition's non-chronological structure, allowing past and newly developed pieces to coexist within a shared interpretative field. Rather than merely illustrating this principle, it gives it concrete form, bringing different temporalities into co-presence instead of presenting them sequentially. This produces a sense of temporal disorientation, perceptible as the visitor moves through the exhibition, where chronological markers are continually reconfigured in favor of a relational mode of reading. This experience is also reflected in the catalogue's own understanding of the exhibition structure, which the curators characterize not as cyclical or linear but as akin to the garden surrounding Araya's home and studio—a space of simultaneous, unpredictable movements where eighteen dogs coexist in a state of constant activity (Nelson & Kittima 2026: 34).

As visitors move through the galleries, two dominant impressions emerge. On the one hand, dog figures seem ubiquitous, appearing not only in the paintings that



Figure 3: Dog in the exhibition space, MAIIAM Contemporary Art Museum © Sébastien Tayac

cover the walls of *Dog's Palatial Castle* but also in the many sculptures dispersed throughout and beyond the exhibition spaces, accompanying visitors throughout their journey **[Figure 3]**. This recurrence also traverses the videos and photographs, to the point that the exhibition could almost be perceived as organized around this animal figure. Progressing through space, the resin sculptures, initially perceived as inert objects, gradually acquire a heightened presence: Despite an awareness of their materiality, one can imagine the sounds and movements associated with these animals and can feel their lively presence lingering in the space.

On the other hand, although silence largely governs the exhibition, it is intermittently punctuated by the artist's voice in her video installations. Soft and almost whisper-like, this voice unfolds with a quiet intensity, lending the exhibition a haunting sonic dimension. This tonal quality is particularly evident in the transition between the two ground-floor galleries: in the first, a dispersed ensemble of video projections drawn from archival materials extends across walls, floors, and ceilings, accompanied by the artist's voice. The following gallery shifts into a more reflective register, marked by a cold stillness and a sense of suspension, perceptible in the installations *Three Narcissuses* (1993) and *Isolated Hands Asking for Help* (1992) **[Figure 4]**.

Within this configuration, the exhibition reveals formal continuities in Araya's practice by establishing a dialogue with the museum's permanent collection. The plaster heads visible in *Three Narcissuses* (1993), presented in the temporary exhibition, later reappear in *Isolated Moral Female Object, In a Relationship with a Male Bird I* (1995) and *II* (1995) **[Figure 5]**, works from the museum's permanent collection. These correspondences foreground a recurring strategy in Araya's early 1990s production, characterized by the reuse of fragmented plaster body parts across different works. More broadly, these processes of repetition and recomposition suggest a form of bodily standardization that evokes the conformity



Figure 4: *Three Narcissuses* (1993), foreground, and *Isolated Hands Asking for Help* (1992), background © Sébastien Tayac



Figure 5: ***Isolated Moral Female Object, In a Relationship with a Male Bird I*** **(1995) and** ***II*** **(1995) © Sébastien Tayac**

historically forced upon women within a deeply patriarchal Thai society.

Araya offers the visitor seemingly opposing perceptual dimensions that, in fact, cultivate resonance: The insistent presence of an animal associated with fidelity, affective proximity, and moments of joy and insouciance is set against an atmosphere marked by suffering, death, and disappearance. This tension is reflected in the exhibition's title, *The Bouquet and the Wreath*, leveraging contrasting floral forms: the bouquet, linked to celebration and offering, and the wreath, associated with mourning and funerary ritual. Within this framework, Araya mobilizes the bed—particularly in *Dinner with Cancer* (*Rebirth*) (1993/2025) **[Figure 6]** and *Has Girl Lost Her Memory?* (1994/2025)—as a condensed figure through which birth, love, and death are articulated. Situated within a broader art historical trajectory, these works can be read in relation to Georges Lacombe's *L'Existence* (ca. 1894–1896), which configures the bed within an allegorical sequence of life and death, and Tracey Emin's *My Bed* (1998), in which it functions as a site of exposure, intimacy, and vulnerability. This articulation can also be situated within the opposition between Eros and Thanatos, which Sayan Daengklom (สายัณห์ แดงกลม) proposes as a key framework for analyzing Araya's work. Rather than representing fixed opposites, these forces operate dialectically, allowing death to be reimagined through life and artistic creation (Nelson & Kittima 2026: 112). The bed thus operates as a site where bodily and existential thresholds converge, consistent with Araya's exploration of spaces in which life and death, presence and absence, are negotiated. In this context, the dog emerges as a liminal figure mediating this passage between the living and the dead. This interpretation is further supported by Araya's own reflections in a conversation with Thai artist Kawita Vatanajyankur (กวิตา วัฒนะชยังกูร; b. 1987), first published in the magazine *a day* in the *Meet the Master* series (issue 240, 2020). In her own words, "The purpose of life is beauty. In reality, death can never be beautiful. If it were to be beautiful, I now think it would be in how we live with animals,



Figure 6: ***Dinner with Cancer (Rebirth)*** **(1993/2025) © Sébastien Tayac**



Figures 7a–b: *Prostitute's Room* (1993/2025), two views documenting the work's evolution, 2 August 2025 (a), and 15 March 2026 (b) © Sébastien Tayac

plants and flowers, with kindness and compassion. But it still feels bland, certainly bland" (cited in Nelson & Kittima 2026: 178). These symbolic thresholds extend into more material configurations of bodily and domestic space, where distinctions between human and non-human, as well as between suffering, illness, and death, are continually reconfigured. This articulation prepares the ground for a more direct engagement with bodily materiality in the subsequent works.

This tension between life, death, and transformation finds one of its most striking expressions in *Prostitute's Room* (1993/2025), presented in immediate proximity to the video *The Nine-Day Pregnancy of a Single Middle-Aged Associate Professor* (2003). In the 1993 installation, Araya placed menstrual blood in three small bowls. Its reactivation in 2025, however, introduced a significant shift. As noted in the exhibition catalogue, Araya playfully observes that the "period" invoked by the work—both as menstruation and as a stage in her life—is now long past (Nelson & Kittima 2026: 121). The blood, deposited on the day of the opening, gradually flowed onto the floor and then dried, without any intervention. The work thus transforms over time, incorporating the very effects of its own degradation. Initially, this evolution was accompanied by the emergence of a particularly acrid and persistent odor, almost unbearable, provoking a physical reaction in the viewer. Over the following weeks, however, this olfactory presence diminished, leaving behind a fixed, desiccated trace **[Figures 7a–b].**

The spatial proximity of this work with *The Nine-Day Pregnancy of a Single Middle-Aged Associate Professor* produces a striking effect. While the video is based on a constructed situation and has a certain lightness—the artist feigning pregnancy and recording the reactions of her colleagues from the Faculty of Fine Arts at Chiang Mai University—its reception is profoundly altered by the material conditions generated by *Prostitute's Room*. At the height of the odor's intensity, it became almost impossible to remain in the space long enough to watch the video in its entirety. This unintended configuration introduces

a conflict between the content of the image and the conditions of its perception, transforming a potentially light-hearted work into an experience marked by discomfort, even repulsion. Taken together, these two works articulate different modes of engaging the body—biological, performative, and sensory—while situating the viewer's experience within a register that oscillates between distance and involvement. In this context, *Prostitute's Room* exceeds the status of a static installation and instead unfolds as a process, whose successive phases fully contribute to its meaning.

Presented in a separate space, *The Class* (16 min. 30s) **[Figure 8]**, *The Class II* (21 min), and *The Class III* (26 min) emerged as one of the exhibition's key works. First presented at the Thai Pavilion of the Venice Biennale in 2005, this widely discussed video triptych belongs to a nine-year-long body of works in which Araya staged encounters between herself and human cadavers, exploring questions of mortality, knowledge, and representation.

Although this triptych has become one of Araya's most recognized works, many viewers have encountered it primarily through widely circulated photographs and the accompanying texts published by the artist herself. The opportunity to experience the work in its complete video form was therefore one of the exhibition's most significant contributions. In the three videos, the artist assumes the role of a teacher in a classroom, alternately writing on a greenboard with chalk and turning to address a group of cadavers covered with white sheets, arranged in



Figure 8: Photograph of the video projection of *The Class* (2005) © Sébastien Tayac

orderly rows as if they were students. She conducts her lesson with complete seriousness, posing questions, developing her ideas, and occasionally pausing as though awaiting a response. Through her questions, explanations, and tone of voice, Araya's delivery creates a striking contrast with the extraordinary circumstances, prompting viewers to find themselves unexpectedly laughing. Yet the awareness that the bodies are real transforms the meaning of that laughter. Beyond what appears on screen, viewers may begin to imagine the physical presence of the room: its silence, its atmosphere, and perhaps even its smell. Through this ironic structure, the triptych reactivates a central concern in Araya's practice: the exploration of mortality, pedagogy, and the ethical questions surrounding the representation of human bodies and death. In doing so, it offers a distinctive approach to mortality, bringing it closer to everyday human experience without ever diminishing its gravity.

The Bouquet and the Wreath concludes with a library section that brings together

a selection of texts by and about the artist and her work. This inclusion foregrounds writing as a continuous dimension of Araya's practice, beyond visual production, resonating with works such as *Writing Has Begun Now* (1992), *Pot Pourri* (2019), and *An Artist Is Trying to Return to Being a Writer* (2017), in which the artist reflects on writing as coextensive with her artistic practice. The installation thus contributes to a discourse on artistic identity understood through its dual visual and literary articulation. More broadly, it underscores a structural principle of Araya's practice: the absence of clear boundaries between activities. Artistic production, writing, and teaching are not discrete domains but intersecting modalities that continually inform one another, producing a practice in which distinctions between social roles and artistic media remain fluid and structurally interconnected.

In this respect, the exhibition ultimately exceeds the framework of a conventional retrospective by bringing into focus the introspective and philosophical dimensions of Araya's work. While many of the works remain deeply connected to social realities, the exhibition demonstrates that poetic, contemplative, and dreamlike modes of experience have long coexisted alongside these concerns. Rather than tracing a linear trajectory from social engagement toward introspection, it reveals the simultaneous presence of these different registers throughout Araya's oeuvre. Instead of resolving the tension between an awareness of the contemporary world and the desire to imagine alternative forms of relating to it, the exhibition allows this ambiguity to remain productive, suggesting that the interplay between external realities and inner experience lies at the heart of Araya's artistic inquiry. Through this openness, the exhibition highlights the continual negotiation between social engagement, reflection, and imagination that defines her work.

Sébastien Tayac
Chiang Mai University
sebastien.t@finearts.cmu.ac.th

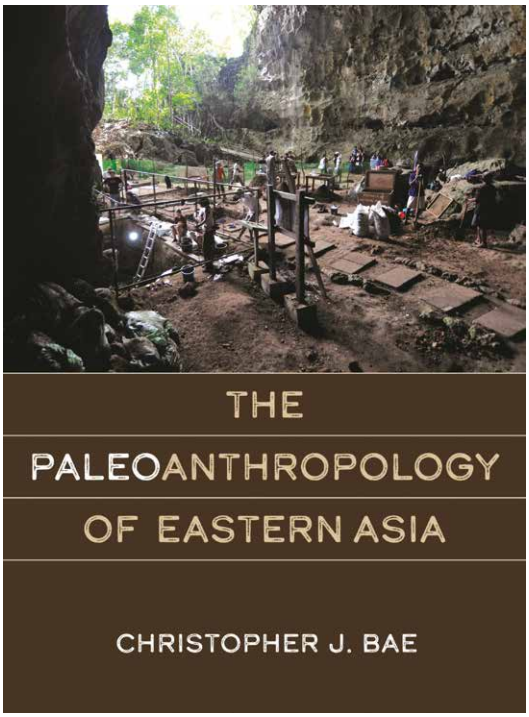
Websites

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Christopher J. Bae, *The Paleoanthropology of Eastern Asia*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2024, 274 pages, US$80, ISBN 978–0824897659 (Paperback)



Southeast Asia has long been recognized as a key region for the study of human evolution. It was home to a remarkable diversity of early hominins and continues to support living great and lesser apes, including orangutans and gibbons. Over the past few decades, numerous fossils and artifacts associated with Middle and Late Pleistocene humans have been discovered throughout Southeast Asia, significantly expanding our knowledge of the region's prehistoric past. These discoveries have further reinforced Southeast Asia's importance for understanding human evolution, cultural development, and the emergence of early human societies within a broader global context. *The Paleoanthropology of Eastern Asia* therefore appears at a particularly opportune moment, offering a timely synthesis of this rapidly growing body of archeological and paleoanthropological evidence. Although the title does not explicitly suggest substantial coverage of Thailand or Southeast Asia, the book frequently refers to Southeast Asia as an integral part of "Eastern Asia". This broad geographic framework is well justified, as Southeast Asia provides an essential foundation for understanding human evolution in East Asia.

The volume is authored by Christopher Bae from the University of Hawai'i, a leading scholar in the field of paleoanthropology—the study of human evolution—who has conducted extensive research in East Asia, particularly in mainland China, in collaboration with local colleagues. It represents the culmination of the author's long-term research in the region, presented from a broad comparative and global perspective.

The book comprises seven chapters: The first two introduce the history of paleoanthropological research in East Asia and its environmental setting. The four subsequent chapters constitute the core of the volume. They present a comprehensive synthesis of the evidence for early humans in East Asia while also incorporating important discoveries from Southeast Asia. These chapters trace the evolutionary record from the earliest hominins, particularly *Homo erectus*, to early *Homo sapiens*, spanning approximately 2.4 million to 15,000 years ago. The final chapter outlines the author's conclusions and offers recommendations and directions for future paleoanthropological research in East and Southeast Asia.

In Chapter 1 (pp. 1–21), Bae provides an informative, little-recognized overview of the history of paleoanthropo-

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logical research in East and Southeast Asia. Such a detailed historical account is rarely presented in general textbooks on human evolution. The chapter encourages readers to consider Asia—particularly East and Southeast Asia—as with Africa an important center of human evolution. Significantly, the author gives due credit to the pioneering contributions of paleoanthropologists working in Southeast Asia, a theme that recurs throughout the volume.

Chapter 2 (pp. 22–41) examines the region's environmental setting, emphasizing the rich and diverse landscapes that provided favorable conditions for human adaptation and evolution. Although these two introductory chapters are relatively brief—together comprising fewer than 40 pages, including illustrations and tables—they are informative and effective in establishing the broader context for the discussions that follow.

The long and complex story of human evolution in East and Southeast Asia begins in Chapter 3, "Early Arrivals to Eastern Asia: Who, What, Where?" (~2.4 Ma–~0.4 Million Years Ago) (pp. 42–94), providing a detailed and well-illustrated account of early human migration, adaptation, and dispersal. The author presents an excellent reassessment of long-standing theories in light of new fossil and archeological evidence. He focuses on the various species of early hominins within the genus *Homo* that predated the emergence of *Homo sapiens*. Thus he convincingly demonstrates that Southeast Asia was a major center of human evolution and played a crucial role in revealing the remarkable diversity of the genus *Homo*, including several species that have so far been identified nowhere else in the world.

Chapter 4, "The 'Muddle in the Middle'" (pp. 95–131), continues the narrative of human biological evolution by examining the transition from Middle to Late Pleistocene (ca. 400,000–100,000 BP). The discussion focuses on the effects of climatic and environmental change, the extinction of several *Homo* species, and the emergence of archaic *Homo sapiens*. The author presents a substantial body of fossil evidence attributed to anatomically modern humans (AMHs) or closely related members of the genus *Homo*, most of which comes from mainland China, with additional important finds from Vietnam and Laos. Several of these fossils were recovered in well-documented archeological contexts, allowing for more secure interpretations of the biological and cultural developments that occurred during this period. It should be noted, however, that the fossil record consists primarily of fragmentary cranial remains, while the associated cultural evidence—such as stone tools and other material remains—is relatively limited. As a result, reconstructions of the behavior and lifeways of these populations remain tentative. This may simply reflect the nature of the available evidence rather than a shortcoming of the author's analysis, as comparatively little material culture has survived from this period. Consequently, the chapter necessarily engages with a number of ongoing debates and competing interpretations, making it one of the more thought-provoking sections of the book.

Chapter 5, "Modern Human Origins" (pp. 132–182), presents a fuller picture of cultural innovation and human behavior during the Late Pleistocene (ca. 100,000–30,000 BP), when *Homo*

sapiens, or anatomically modern humans, became the predominant human species. This richer narrative is made possible by a more complete fossil record, better-preserved skeletal remains, a wider distribution of archeological sites, more reliable dating techniques, and increasingly diverse lines of archeological and scientific evidence. Of particular interest is the prominence of sites and fossil discoveries from Southeast Asia, including important finds from Vietnam, Laos, the Philippines, and Indonesia. Many of these sites have been investigated through systematic excavations, yielding well-documented evidence that significantly enhances our understanding of early modern humans in the region. The varied environments of Southeast Asia—including inland, coastal, and island settings—also offered abundant natural resources well suited to foraging lifeways throughout the Late Pleistocene. Despite this growing body of evidence, the considerable biological diversity and complexity of early human populations in East and Southeast Asia continue to make definitive conclusions about their evolutionary relationships difficult. As a result, the chapter engages with a number of competing interpretations and ongoing debates. One conclusion, however, is strongly supported by the archeological evidence: the emergence of expressive behavior during this period, as demonstrated by personal ornaments, rock art, and other expressions of symbolic culture.

Chapter 6, "The Appearance of Modern Human Foragers" (pp. 183–207), brings the volume's narrative on human evolution in East and Southeast Asia to its conclusion. It examines the fossil record of Terminal Pleistocene populations (ca. 30,000–15,000 BP), drawing on discoveries from across Asia, from Mongolia to Thailand. Since the publication of this volume, however, additional human remains from this period have been uncovered in Thailand, including a *circa* 30,000 BP skeleton excavated by archeologists from the Thai Fine Arts Department at a cave site in Prachuap Khiri Khan province (Kanniga 2569). Although these discoveries postdate the book and therefore could not have been included, they further underscore the continuing importance of Southeast Asia for paleoanthropological research. The chapter maintains a strong focus on lithic technology, highlighting increasing variation and innovation in stone tool production, particularly the development of blade technologies. However, discussion of the growing evidence for symbolic behavior during the Terminal Pleistocene would have complemented the focus on technological developments. Practices such as rock art production, formal burial, and the manufacture and use of personal ornaments became increasingly widespread during this period.

Bae raises several thought-provoking questions concerning current issues in paleoanthropology in the brief conclusion (Chapter 7, pp. 208–212). These include the taxonomic classification of various hominin species, the relationship between stone tool technologies and specific human groups, and the long-standing debate surrounding the Movius Line. The author acknowledges that these questions remain unresolved and will require further discoveries and research before more definitive conclusions can be reached.

Overall, this is a well-written, well-organized, and thoroughly researched volume. It incorporates the latest scholarship, is supported by an extensive bibliography, and offers abundant material for further reflection. The numerous illustrations—including high-quality color and black-and-white photographs, maps, tables, and charts—greatly enhance the material's presentation and accessibility. Each chapter is supplemented with informative boxed essays that provide additional context on key topics. The book successfully combines the characteristics of a scholarly monograph, a textbook, and a reference work. Although it is primarily intended for graduate students and specialists in paleoanthropology, it will also be of considerable interest to researchers in related disciplines, including archeology, anthropology, history, human biology, and bioarcheology.

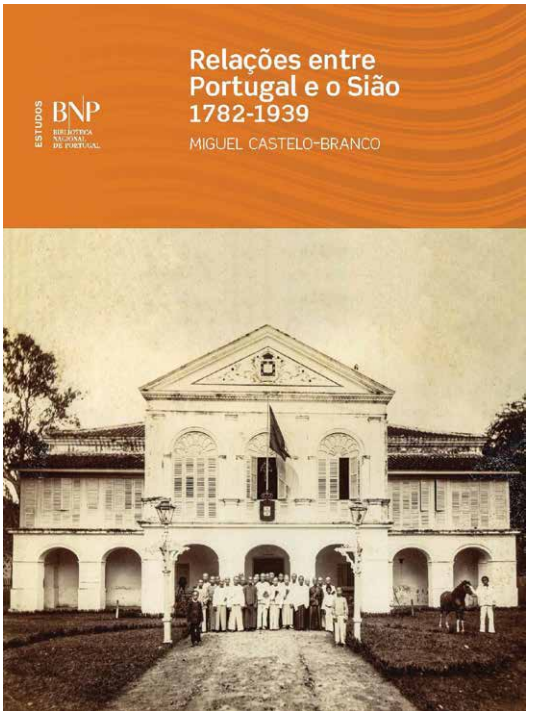
In sum, *The Paleoanthropology of Eastern Asia* is a significant contribution to the study of human evolution in East and Southeast Asia. It provides a comprehensive and up-to-date synthesis of the available evidence and underscores the growing importance of Southeast Asia in paleoanthropological research. This volume will serve as a valuable reference for students and scholars for years to come.

Thanik Lertcharnrit
Silpakorn University
thanik@su.ac.th

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Miguel Castelo-Branco, *Relações entre Portugal e o Sião 1782-1939*, Lisboa : Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal, 2022, 558 pages, €18, ISBN 978–9725657089 (Hardback)



De la prise de Malacca en 1511 à la rétrocession de Macao à la Chine en 1999, le Portugal a durablement marqué de son empreinte l'histoire de l'Asie. C'est à travers une somme encyclopédique rédigée en portugais que Miguel Castelo-Branco nous invite à redécouvrir cette longue présence portugaise et à en reconsidérer les multiples dimensions. Avec le latin, le français, l'anglais et plusieurs langues asiatiques — notamment le malais, le chinois et le thaï — le portugais demeure l'une des langues

essentielles pour tout historien de l'Asie du Sud-Est souhaitant accéder directement aux sources et aux archives.

Le titre de l'ouvrage, *Les relations entre le Portugal et le Siam, 1782–1939* (notre traduction), apparaît quelque peu réducteur au regard de l'ampleur du propos. Si la relation luso–siamoise constitue bien le cœur de l'étude, l'auteur élargit en effet son analyse à l'ensemble de la présence portugaise en Asie, en accordant une attention particulière à l'axe Goa–Malacca (1511–1641) and Macao. Afin de mettre en évidence la singularité de l'expérience portugaise, il la replace constamment dans le contexte plus large de la présence des autres puissances occidentales en Asie : néerlandaise, britannique, française et américaine.

De même, la chronologie dépasse largement les limites suggérées par le titre. L'auteur revient longuement sur la période antérieure d'Ayutthaya (XVIe–XVIIIe siècles) ; ainsi que sur la période de Thonburi (1767–1782), marquée notamment par l'installation du quartier portugais de Santa Cruz sur la rive occidentale du Chao Phraya. Il poursuit également son analyse au-delà de 1939, en abordant la période de la Guerre froide et la place du Portugal dans les recompositions géopolitiques internationales.

Le choix des dates 1782–1939 renvoie à la période allant de la fondation de Rattanakosin/Bangkok comme capitale de la dynastie Chakri (1782) jusqu'au changement de nom du Siam en Thaïlande. Au-delà de 1939, il convient donc de parler de relations luso–thaïlandaises plutôt que de relations luso–siamoises.

Dans son introduction (pp. 13–24), Castelo-Branco présente le réseau de lieux et de personnes-ressources qui a nourri ses recherches, ainsi que la longue relation personnelle qu'il entretient avec son sujet d'étude, notamment à la suite d'un séjour de trois ans (2007–2010) à Bangkok, à l'occasion de l'organisation des commémorations du 500e anniversaire des relations luso–siamoises. Il explique ensuite comment, entre les conférences qu'il a données à la Siam Society de Bangkok et les expositions qu'il a organisées à la Bibliothèque nationale du Portugal à Lisbonne, sa réflexion a évolué et a donné lieu à une dizaine de publications avant d'aboutir au présent ouvrage.

Ce qui frappe d'abord à la lecture, c'est l'ampleur de la documentation réunie. La bibliographie finale recense plus de 500 références en plusieurs langues. À celles-ci s'ajoutent de nombreuses autres références citées dans le corps du texte ou en notes de bas de page, sans être reprises dans la bibliographie finale. Certains chapitres, comme celui consacré aux relations diplomatiques au XVIIe siècle, proposent une synthèse de travaux déjà publiés. D'autres, notamment celui portant sur les relations diplomatiques luso–siamoises au XIXe siècle, s'appuient sur un dépouillement approfondi d'archives diplomatiques et de correspondances. À cela s'ajoute une iconographie de grande qualité : l'ouvrage est illustré de 88 figures, dont un grand nombre étaient jusqu'ici inédites ou très peu accessibles.

L'auteur a choisi de diviser son ouvrage en deux parties. La première,

d'environ 150 pages, adopte une approche institutionnelle et anthropologique. La seconde, qui s'étend sur quelque 330 pages, suit une organisation plus historique et chronologique, centrée sur les relations diplomatiques luso–siamoises. La première partie est conçue comme un prolégomène, destiné à aider le lecteur à mieux appréhender les spécificités culturelles et politiques de l'Asie du Sud-Est.

La première partie (pp. 27–177) est consacrée aux notions de territoire et de frontière. L'auteur rappelle qu'avant l'arrivée des Européens, les guerres avaient rarement pour objectif l'agrandissement territorial ; elles visaient avant tout le contrôle des populations. Il s'agissait de campagnes militaires ou de razzias destinées à s'emparer d'objets de prestige et à capturer le plus grand nombre possible de prisonniers, dont la main-d'œuvre servile était ensuite transférée sur le territoire du vainqueur. Ces conflits avaient également pour fonction de réaffirmer l'autorité du souverain et les liens d'allégeance qui structuraient les rapports politiques.

L'auteur accorde une place importante à la notion de *maṇḍala*, entendue comme une représentation symbolique de l'espace politique organisée autour du souverain. Il propose ensuite un panorama des principaux groupes ethniques de la Péninsule indochinoise et retrace les différentes étapes de la formation des États qui la composent aujourd'hui, un processus qu'il inscrit dans le contexte de l'hégémonie exercée par l'Empire chinois, hégémonie prédominante jusqu'aux guerres de l'Opium.

En reprenant le concept grec de *politeia*, l'auteur s'efforce de définir une « politie siamoise ». Il décrit les fondements de la royauté, qu'il s'agisse du *devarāja*, incarnation de Viṣṇu, du *cakravartin* ou *dhammarāja*, protecteur de la Saṅgha, ou encore de la figure du monarque en tant que souverain absolu. Il met toutefois également en évidence les limites du pouvoir royal, en examinant notamment les mécanismes de succession, le système de la double monarchie et l'organisation des principaux ministères (Kalahom, Mahatthai, Phra Khlang, Phraya Yomarat, Krom Na et Krom Wang) confiés aux grandes familles aristocratiques. Il décrit ensuite les différents statuts sociaux et les possibilités de mobilité dans l'ancien Siam, la place du clergé bouddhique, ainsi que le système de la *sakdina* (ศักดินา), fondé sur une hiérarchie de droits liés à la terre. Il distingue le statut des *phrai* (ไพร่), hommes libres mais astreints à la corvée royale, de celui des esclaves, souvent réduits en servitude pour dettes et attachés à un seigneur, tout en examinant la place particulière accordée aux étrangers.

Un autre sous-chapitre particulièrement intéressant (pp. 111–177) est consacré à « l'Empire invisible » (*o Império invisível*). Sous cette appellation, l'auteur propose une synthèse de plusieurs travaux consacrés à la diaspora portugaise en Asie. Il montre que l'appartenance à cette diaspora pouvait s'exprimer de diverses manières : par la revendication d'un ancêtre *barbudo*, par l'attachement à l'Église catholique, par la résidence dans un *bandel* (quartier portugais), par la pratique du portugais et la connaissance d'autres langues, par l'exercice de fonctions militaires ou d'interprètes au service des États d'accueil, par les alliances matrimoniales entre commu-

nautés portugaises établies dans différents pays, ainsi que par le métissage et une intégration généralement pacifique aux sociétés locales. Il souligne enfin le rôle de la transmission des patronymes portugais, avant de rappeler qu'une loi thaïlandaise de 1939 imposa à tous les enfants nés en Thaïlande l'attribution d'un patronyme thaï.

Cette spécificité du colonialisme portugais, souvent présentée comme reposant sur le métissage et comme plus respectueuse de l'altérité culturelle que les autres formes de colonialisme européen, demeure un sujet de débat parmi les historiens. Les Portugais ne disposaient ni de la puissance militaire ni des ressources économiques et commerciales nécessaires pour s'imposer durablement en Asie du Sud-Est. Tout au long de l'ouvrage, l'auteur met en avant les relations personnelles et équilibrées entretenues entre les familles royales portugaise et siamoise, la revendication par la Couronne portugaise de son autorité sur les communautés catholiques dans le cadre du *Padroado*, ainsi que la bonne intégration des Portugais dans les sociétés d'accueil.

Dans la seconde partie (pp. 183–517), l'auteur adopte une trame chronologique. Il revient d'abord sur l'expansion maritime du Portugal sous la dynastie d'Aviz (1385–1580), lors de laquelle les explorations menées sous l'impulsion de l'Infant Henri le Navigateur, avec le soutien du duc de Bourgogne, aboutit au premier voyage de Vasco de Gama vers l'Inde (1497–1499) et à l'ouverture d'une route maritime vers l'océan Indien et les îles aux épices. Le Portugal fut la première puissance européenne à établir des relations diplomatiques avec Ayutthaya, dès 1511, et à y envoyer en 1566 des missionnaires catholiques dominicains dans le cadre du *Padroado*. Les Hollandais et les Anglais suivirent quelques décennies plus tard.

Les Portugais fondèrent un établissement permanent à Macao en 1557, qui devint leur principal point d'appui en Extrême-Orient. Celui-ci acquit une importance accrue lorsque le Japon limita fortement ses échanges avec l'étranger durant la période du *sakoku* (1639–1854) et après la chute de la dynastie Ming en 1644, qui marqua une profonde recomposition des équilibres politiques en Chine. Contrairement aux Anglais, aux Hollandais, aux Danois, aux Français ou encore aux Suédois, les Portugais ne créèrent jamais de compagnie privilégiée des Indes orientales comparable à celles de leurs rivaux européens.

Pendant la période de l'union des couronnes ibériques (1580–1640), la politique étrangère portugaise est alignée sur les intérêts de la monarchie espagnole, ce qui entraîne notamment la participation du Portugal à l'Invincible Armada en 1588. Les possessions portugaises au Brésil et en Afrique sont alors menacées par les autres puissances européennes, en particulier les Provinces-Unies et l'Angleterre. Les efforts déployés pour préserver les positions portugaises dans l'Atlantique Sud se font progressivement au détriment de la présence portugaise dans l'océan Indien et en Extrême-Orient.

La restauration de la monarchie portugaise avec la dynastie des Bragance en 1640 inaugure un changement majeur d'orientation diplomatique, marqué par un rapprochement avec l'Angleterre.

Le mariage en 1662 de Catherine de Bragance, fille du roi Jean IV de Portugal, avec Charles II d'Angleterre marque le début de cette alliance, tandis que plusieurs possessions portugaises passent sous contrôle anglais, notamment Bombay, cédée à la Couronne britannique à l'occasion de ce mariage.

Sous le règne de Louis XIV (1643–1715), les rivalités entre puissances catholiques européennes se manifestent également dans le domaine missionnaire. Les Missions étrangères de Paris (MEP), fondées en 1663, cherchent à imposer leur influence en Asie et à obtenir la nomination d'un évêque français indépendant de la hiérarchie portugaise, au détriment notamment des Jésuites relevant du *Padroado*. Le roi Narai et son ministre Constantin Phaulkon jouent de ces rivalités entre Européens pour servir les intérêts diplomatiques du Siam. La première ambassade siamoise envoyée en Europe en 1684, qui fit naufrage au large du Cap de Bonne-Espérance, avait auparavant fait escale à Goa et devait poursuivre son voyage jusqu'à Lisbonne avant de rejoindre Versailles. Lors de l'expulsion des Français du Siam en 1688–1689, les missionnaires portugais demeurèrent en place ; il en fut de même après l'expulsion de l'évêque français sous le règne de Taksin.

Au XVIIIe siècle, la suppression de la Compagnie de Jésus, décrétée au Portugal en 1759 par le marquis de Pombal, eut d'importantes conséquences sur les réseaux missionnaires portugais en Asie et contribua au déclin progressif du *Padroado*. Au milieu du XIXe siècle, l'influence catholique au Siam fut également concurrencée par l'arrivée de missionnaires protestants, britanniques et américains.

Le Portugal demeure l'allié de l'Angleterre pendant la guerre de Sept Ans (1756–1763). Durant les guerres napoléoniennes (1803–1815), la monarchie portugaise, transférée au Brésil en 1807, reste également étroitement associée aux intérêts britanniques. Les Britanniques occupent alors plusieurs possessions ultramarines françaises et hollandaises, tandis que la marine portugaise continue d'assurer une présence maritime dans l'océan Indien et en Asie du Sud-Est. Sous les règnes du roi Taksin et du roi Rama I, des négociations sont engagées en vue d'un traité commercial entre le Siam et le Portugal. Les Siamois recherchent principalement un approvisionnement en armes, tandis que les Portugais souhaitent obtenir du sucre et réorienter vers Macao une partie du commerce maritime entre Bangkok et Canton.

Lors de la restauration monarchique portugaise, Carlos Manuel de Silveira, consul du Portugal à Macao, et le luso-descendant Pascoal Ribeiro de Albergaria, conseiller de Rama II, élaborent un projet de traité. Signé en 1820, celui-ci ne sera toutefois jamais ratifié ; selon l'auteur, en raison des troubles politiques et de la guerre civile portugaise (1828–1834). L'auteur considère néanmoins ce texte comme une étape préparatoire importante, voire comme une matrice du traité Bowring conclu en 1855 entre le Siam et la Grande-Bretagne. Un comptoir commercial portugais (*feitoria*) mis en place à Bangkok en 1820 n'arrivera jamais à se développer.

Comme les autres traités dits « inégaux », les accords conclus avec les puissances occidentales comportent une clause particulièrement sensible pour la souveraineté siamoise : l'extra-territorialité judiciaire accordée aux ressortissants étrangers. À l'exception du consul portugais Eduardo Pereira Leite, accusé de corruption et d'avoir vendu des certificats de résidence, le Portugal fit un usage relativement modéré de ce privilège, en ne reconnaissant que quelques centaines de ressortissants, principalement des Chinois macanais, alors que les représentations diplomatiques britannique et française pouvaient en recenser chacune, plusieurs milliers.

À la fin du XIXe siècle, le Portugal, après la perte du Brésil en 1825, cherche avant tout à renforcer et à développer ses possessions africaines. Il joue dès lors un rôle relativement limité en Asie. L'auteur rapporte, à travers les observations des consuls portugais, les profondes transformations à l'œuvre au Siam : l'affirmation de l'autorité du roi Chulalongkorn face au Vice-Roi en 1874, les trois principaux courants politiques, dont celui, particulièrement favorable à l'ouverture internationale, incarné par le prince Prisdang, la modernisation administrative du royaume, les projets de coopération européenne coordonnés par le juriste belge Gustave Rolin-Jaequemyns, la réforme du *thesaphiban* (เทศาภิบาล), c'est-à-dire la création d'un système provincial centralisé fondé sur les *monthon* (มณฑล; Skt, *maṇḍala*), et l'abolition progressive de l'esclavage. Aucun conseiller portugais venu de l'extérieur ne semble avoir participé à ces réformes, mais l'auteur souligne la permanence du recrutement de luso-descendants dans l'administration siamoise.

L'auteur fait le portrait de nombreux acteurs portugais comme le consul António Feliciano Marques Pereira qui devint un familier du roi Rama V ; ou des descendants de Portugais, par exemple Francisco Chit, Sino–portugais du quartier de Santa Cruz, qui devint le photographe officiel du roi Rama IV.

La période coloniale est marquée par la rivalité franco–britannique en Asie du Sud-Est. Les Français s'implantent au Laos dans le contexte de leur lutte contre les Pavillons Noirs, groupes armés issus des régions méridionales de la Chine. De son côté, le roi Chulalongkorn mène une politique diplomatique active visant à établir des relations avec l'ensemble des monarchies européennes et il cherche à négocier directement avec Londres, sans passer par l'intermédiaire du Vice-Roi des Indes.

Les seuls points de friction entre le Portugal et le Siam concernent les droits de propriété sur les terrains occupés par les églises portugaises à Bangkok : Santa Cruz à Thonburi, Rosario et la *feitoria* à proximité de l'ambassade, sur la Rive orientale du Chao Phraya, et Conceição à Sam Sen. Par ailleurs, le Portugal, traditionnellement allié de la Grande-Bretagne, se trouve progressivement malmené par son puissant partenaire, non seulement sur le plan économique, mais également en Afrique, notamment lors de l'ultimatum britannique de 1890 qui impose l'abandon des ambitions portugaises reliant l'Angola au Mozambique. Cela amène à une convergence

de vues entre le Portugal et le Siam, deux États dont les ambitions sont limitées par la domination des grandes puissances : le premier face aux intérêts britanniques, le second réduit au rôle d'État tampon entre les empires britannique et français.

En 1908, le roi Don Carlos de Portugal est assassiné. En 1910, c'est le renversement de la monarchie portugaise et c'est aussi l'année de la mort du roi Chulalongkorn. L'auteur juge la période de la Première République portugaise (1910–1926) comme une phase d'affaiblissement des relations bilatérales, en raison notamment de la disparition du lien personnel entretenu entre les deux familles royales et de l'instabilité politique au Portugal. Le Siam ne reconnaît le nouveau régime républicain portugais qu'après que celui-ci a été reconnu par la majorité des autres États. Le rapprochement intervient en 1917, lorsque les deux pays entrent en guerre aux côtés des Alliés : le Portugal en mars et le Siam en juillet. À l'issue du conflit mondial, un catholique siamois, Bornavantula Dias, est nommé ambassadeur du Siam auprès du Saint-Siège à Rome (1919–1932).

Au début du XXe siècle, le Siam est progressivement reconnu comme un État pleinement souverain sur la scène internationale et il entreprend de recouvrer son indépendance juridique. En 1925, le Portugal est le dernier pays européen à renoncer au privilège de l'extraterritorialité accordé à ses ressortissants au Siam.

De 1932 jusqu'à la fin de la Guerre froide, le Siam — devenu la Thaïlande en 1939 — est principalement dirigé par des régimes militaires autoritaires. De son côté, le Portugal est également soumis à un régime autoritaire entre 1933 et 1974, celui de l'*Estado Novo* instauré par António de Oliveira Salazar. Un nouveau traité luso–siamois est signé en 1938. Pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale, les persécutions visant les catholiques touchent également les communautés luso-descendantes, soupçonnées de constituer une « cinquième colonne » au service de la France. En 1940, les deux fils de Plaek Phibunsongkhram, alors étudiants à Paris, trouvent refuge au Portugal dans l'attente d'une évacuation vers les États-Unis.

La Seconde Guerre mondiale interrompt temporairement les relations luso–thaïlandaises. Après 1945, toutefois, le Portugal et la Thaïlande se retrouvent dans le même camp géopolitique durant la Guerre froide, en tant qu'alliés du bloc occidental et opposants au communisme. En 1960, la tournée diplomatique du roi Rama IX comprend une étape au Portugal. En 2011, les deux pays commémorent le 500e anniversaire de l'établissement de leurs relations diplomatiques.

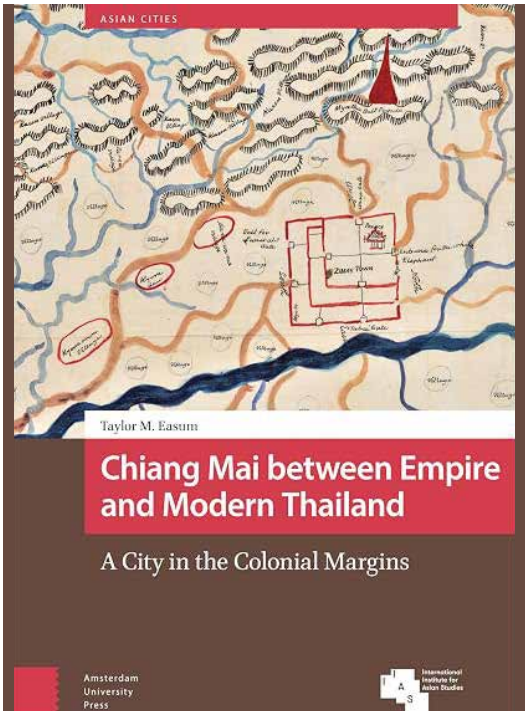
Pour conclure la recension de cet ouvrage, on peut dire que l'historiographie des relations entre les puissances occidentales et le Siam a longtemps été dominée par l'étude de la rivalité franco–britannique. Cet ouvrage propose un autre regard, marqué par une perspective nationale portugaise, voire par une certaine nostalgie des anciens empires et des liens entretenus entre familles royales. L'auteur met particulièrement l'accent sur la rivalité franco–portugaise autour de l'autorité épiscopale exercée sur les communautés catholiques d'Asie, ainsi que sur la spécificité culturelle

des Portugais, qui aurait favorisé leur intégration au Siam.

L'intérêt majeur de ce livre réside dans son érudition et dans ce changement de perspective. Il pourra devenir un ouvrage de référence pour les étudiants lusophones intéressés par l'histoire de l'Asie du Sud-Est. En raison de l'abondance des sources et de la masse d'informations mobilisées, les spécialistes du domaine y trouveront également de nombreux éléments nouveaux ou peu connus. Toutefois, une traduction intégrale en anglais ou en français semble peu probable en raison de la taille de l'ouvrage. Une diffusion internationale pourrait davantage passer par une traduction partielle de certains chapitres thématiques — notamment ceux consacrés à la diaspora portugaise en Asie — ou par une version remaniée, considérablement abrégée et réorganisée autour d'une structure plus strictement chronologique.

Frédéric Carral
Thammasat University (Retired)
frederic@tu.ac.th

Taylor M. Easum, *Chiang Mai Between Empire and Modern Thailand: A City in the Colonial Margins*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2024, 288 pages, £116.79, ISBN 978–9463726467 (Hardback)



Taylor M. Easum's *Chiang Mai Between Empire and Modern Thailand* is an ambitious and stimulating contribution to the urban history of mainland Southeast Asia. By focusing on Chiang Mai—a city long treated as marginal in national historiography—the book challenges Bangkok-centered narratives, thus reconsidering Thai modernity through the intertwined histories of urban space, state formation, and imperial influence. While the study convincingly demonstrates the value of examining a secondary city, its conceptual framing and evidentiary base at times raise questions about scale, balance, and the role accorded to local agency.

At the heart of the book is the claim that Chiang Mai's urban space offers a valuable perspective on the overlapping dynamics of Siamese state formation and informal empire. Moving beyond familiar narratives of Thai exceptionalism, long grounded in the claim that Siam escaped formal colonization, Easum proposes instead a more complex semi-

colonial condition in which external and internal forces jointly reshape urban form and governance. This is a timely intervention, one that places Chiang Mai within broader efforts to provincialize national history and to situate mainland Southeast Asia within wider imperial formations.

Read in this way, Chiang Mai emerges not only as an object of imperial pressure, but also as a site through which Siam extended and consolidated its own power in the north. The book is at its strongest when it traces the reconfiguration of sacred, administrative, and commercial spaces under the intertwined pressures of Siamese centralization, British commercial expansion, and missionary activity. The book's main limitation lies in the gap between the author's regional ambitions and the more uneven source base on which he relies. Even so, this is an important book for the historiography of Lan Na, Thailand, and inland mainland Southeast Asia. It is best read not as narrowly municipal history, but as a broader historiographical intervention from the vantage point of a secondary city. Easum shows persuasively that urban space makes visible the layered and negotiated incorporation of Chiang Mai into modern Siam and, later, into Thailand. In doing so, he moves beyond the longstanding tendency to treat northern history either as an appendix to Bangkok or as a self-contained regional narrative. Instead, Chiang Mai is restored to a wider set of inland networks extending across Burma, Laos, southwest China, and the broader Tai world, even as its 19th-century transformation is shown to have been shaped by growing subordination to Bangkok and deepening entanglement with imperial capitalism.

The Introduction (pp. 11–27) clearly frames this broader historiographical ambition. By proposing Chiang Mai as part of the "urban middle", Easum makes analytical room for cities that were neither colonial capitals nor simple peripheries, but which occupied a more ambiguous position within regional and imperial formations. The category is useful, particularly by allowing the author to position Chiang Mai within overlapping regional, Siamese, and imperial formations. Yet this emphasis remains more suggestive than fully theorized and the question of how far the concept travels beyond this case is left unresolved.

Chapter 1 (pp. 29–60) situates Chiang Mai within a *longue durée* perspective, emphasizing its formation through layered interactions among Mon, Lawa, Tai, and broader mainland traditions. By rejecting rigid typologies of urban formation, Easum proposes the city as a "multi-layered urban palimpsest". This framework captures the composite nature of Chiang Mai's spatial history while opening a broader regional reading of urban networks and political transformation. While this metaphor is effective in conveying historical depth, it leaves open questions about how uneven power relations and hierarchies were negotiated across different phases of urban change. In this respect, the chapter can usefully be read alongside work on Lan Na state formation and regional incorporation (e.g., Grabowsky 2005) and on *mueang* (เมือง) spatial hierarchies and ritual territorial organization in northern Thailand (Bruneau

1978), thereby situating Chiang Mai's deep urban history within debates on hierarchy, incorporation, and regional political ordering.

Chapter 2 (pp. 61–111) places Chiang Mai's 19th-century restoration under King Kawila and his successors within a broad reconfiguration of political authority, urban form, and sacred geography. One of its main strengths lies in showing that the city should not be understood only as a continuation of King Mangrai's foundation, in the 13th century, but as a partly reimagined and rebuilt polity-space, making restoration itself central to the historical trajectory of Lan Na. By tracing the interplay between walls, waterways, markets, ritual sites, and cosmological ordering, Easum shows how sacred and cosmological forms of spatial ordering remained materially embedded in urban space even as new political arrangements emerged. This is a valuable counterpoint to linear modernization narratives, since it prevents Chiang Mai's 19th-century history from reduction to a straightforward story of administrative consolidation or external encounter. If the analysis occasionally privileges royal-sacred structures over lived spatial practices, it leaves less room for issues explored in earlier studies of northern Thailand, particularly the articulation between *mueang* and *ban* (บ้าน) hierarchies and the ritual centrality of the *lak mueang* (หลักเมือง; Bruneau 1978). These themes also resonate with Condominas's broad analysis of Thai political systems and hierarchical *mueang* structures (1980). Even so, the author offers a compelling account of restoration as both spatial reconstruction and political refoundation.

Chapter 3 (pp. 113–164) shifts from urban form to regional political economy, tracing how the teak trade, foreign interests, and Siamese expansion reoriented Chiang Mai away from older inland networks toward the colonial economies of the late 19th century. Easum is particularly effective in showing that teak was not only a commercial resource, but a medium through which questions of territorial control, political authority, and access to forested hinterlands were redefined. His emphasis on cooperation as much as tension between British commercial interests and Siamese state expansion complicates older depictions of Siam as a passive buffer resisting imperial pressure. In this respect, the chapter also qualifies the idea of a merely "silent revolution", showing that northern integration involved friction, uneven negotiation, and forms of coercive restructuring that would prove decisive for Chiang Mai's subsequent transformation. This also resonates with recent work that rethinks narratives of nationalist rupture in Siamese forestry history, emphasizing instead continuity with earlier regimes and the persistence of colonial entanglements (Tinakrit 2025).

Chapter 4 (pp. 165–213) is one of the book's strongest and most substantial chapters. Here Easum traces the spatial reconfiguration of Chiang Mai through what he calls "micro-colonial" transformation, focusing on the changing geography of power in and around the old city. The chapter shows how Chiang Mai developed into a kind of "dual city", though not in the classic colonial sense of a rigidly divided "black town" and "white town". Rather, the author demonstrates how Siamese administrative

expansion, British commercial interests, missionary institutions, and Chinese mercantile activity produced a more uneven and internally differentiated urban order alongside the older royal-sacral core. His main contribution lies in showing that colonial modernity in Chiang Mai did not generate a neatly segregated urban form, but a complex spatial arrangement shaped by overlapping and cooperative, though unequal, centers of power.

Chapter 5 (pp. 215–242) turns to sacred space as a terrain of contestation. Easum convincingly argues that, while administrative and commercial spaces were gradually incorporated into the Siamese state, sacred space proved less easily subordinated and therefore remained available for local mobilization. The chapter is at its strongest when it shows how the interventions of Khruba Siwichai (ครูบาศรีวิชัย; 1878–1939), especially through the restoration of religious sites and the reactivation of northern sacred geographies, gave renewed force to Lan Na's sacro-spatial order at the moment of its growing subordination to Bangkok. In this respect, the author makes a persuasive case for reading religion, urban space, and political incorporation as closely intertwined processes rather than separate domains. Yet the chapter tends to draw Siwichai rather firmly into a narrative of resistance to Siamese domination. Easum is more nuanced than this emphasis might imply, since he also situates Siwichai's authority in the moral and charismatic register of the *ton bun* (ต๋นบุญ), that is, a charismatic figure understood as possessing exceptional merit. This wider framing is important, for it shows that the political force of Siwichai's interventions cannot be separated from the religious idioms through which his authority was constituted and understood in northern society.

The Conclusion (pp. 243–255) brings the book's main arguments together by returning to the question of scale and its role in shaping historical interpretation. Easum's juxtaposition of Bangkok and Chiang Mai shows clearly how narratives of sovereignty, incorporation, and resistance look rather different when viewed from the perspective of a secondary city rather than from the capital. This sensitivity to scale is one of the book's most valuable strengths and is central to the broader historiographical contribution the study makes.

Methodologically, the book rests on a careful reading of archival sources, supplemented by close attention to maps and urban description, which allows Easum to reconstruct Chiang Mai's transformation with considerable clarity. Yet the strengths of this approach also mark some of its limits. The study is more persuasive at the level of political, administrative, and sacro-spatial reconfiguration than at the lived urban practices of ordinary inhabitants. This may partly reflect the constraints of the available sources, but it also means that some of the finer social textures through which northern urban life was inhabited and reproduced remain less fully developed.

From the perspective of scholars working on Lan Na and northern Thailand, the book nevertheless offers an important, if not exhaustive, framework for understanding the transformation of urban space. Its attention to continuity within change is especially suggestive. The same reservation, however, applies

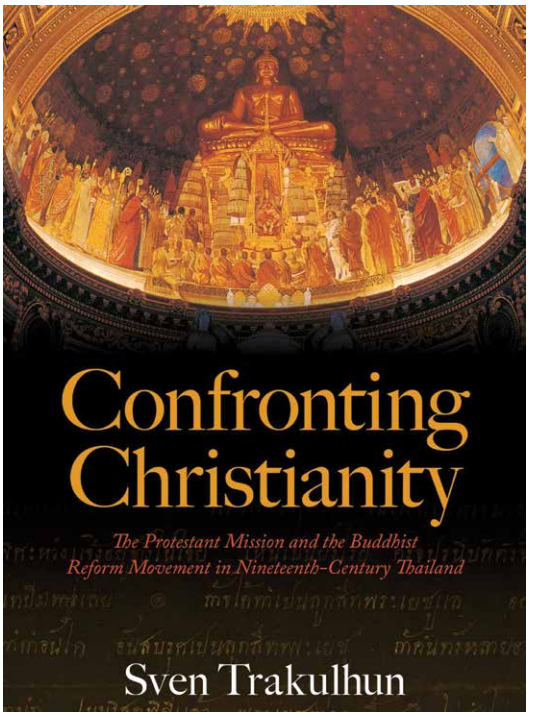
to the comparative dimension of the study. Although Chiang Mai is convincingly restored to a wider set of regional connections, the argument might have been strengthened by a more explicit comparison with other secondary cities in mainland Southeast Asia. Such a comparison would have helped clarify whether Chiang Mai is presented chiefly as a distinctive case or as an instance of a broader urban condition. At the same time, the book demonstrates convincingly that Chiang Mai cannot be understood either as a mere provincial extension of Bangkok or as a self-contained regional exception. Rather, it appears as a city shaped through successive reconfigurations of sacred authority, political incorporation, imperial pressure, and regional exchange. One of the book's chief accomplishments is its demonstration that urban space is not only the setting in which these transformations occurred, but also one of their most revealing historical archives. Some of the book's most suggestive conceptual moves, especially the "urban middle", are highly stimulating but remain only partially worked out. Even so, the study makes an important contribution to ongoing debates on scale, urban transformation, and the place of secondary cities in the historical making of modern Southeast Asia. It enriches the historiography of Chiang Mai while inviting a broader reconsideration of how secondary cities reshape larger narratives of empire, state formation, and modernity. In that respect, Easum's study deserves to be read well beyond the field of northern Thai history.

Pijika Pumketkao-Lecourt
École nationale supérieure
d'architecture de Paris–Belleville
pijika.pumketkao@paris-belleville.archi.fr

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Sven Trakulhun, *Confronting Christianity: The Protestant Mission and the Buddhist Reform Movement in Nineteenth-Century Thailand*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2024, 247 pages, US$70, ISBN 978–0824895747 (Hardback)



Modernist Buddhist reform in 19th and 20th century Siam, then Thailand, is a well-covered topic in academic scholarship. Dozens of scholars have documented, analyzed, and debated this issue over the past sixty to seventy years. Sven Trakulhun's *Confronting Christianity: The Protestant Mission and the Buddhist Reform Movement in Nineteenth-Century Thailand* seeks to add a new focus and perspective to these arguments. Trakulhun's study highlights the role of Christian–Buddhist debates, voices, and actors, as well as the larger conflict between "rival regimes of knowledge" (p. 6) in this modernist reformation. His goal is to foreground the agency and creativity of Siamese intellectuals as they sought not only to counter Christian missionary critiques, but also to simultaneously situate Buddhism as emblematic of modernity, rationality, progress, and civilization. In the end, Trakulhun argues that 19th-century Siamese Buddhist reform emerges out of a process of cross-cultural innovation and reinterpretation, of "intercultural mimesis" (p. 13), rather than simply imitation, appropriation, or subordination.

A short introduction (pp. 1–13) establishes the broad parameters of Trakulhun's approach, locating the 19th-century Siamese Christian–Buddhist encounter within scholarship interrogating Western (and non-Western) modernity, bourgeois culture, civilization, and modernist reform. Chapter 1, "The Origins of Buddhist Reformation" (pp. 14–32), briefly traces the history of Siamese Buddhist reformism back to its beginnings in the reigns of King Taksin (1767–1782) and King Rama I (1782–1809). Existing scholarship covers this ground well: How the restoration of the Pali canon, the monastic order, and Buddhist ritual culture by early Chakri kings under the logic of purification and orthodoxy, especially the scripturalism of King Mongkut (Rama IV; 1851–1868) and his founding of a reformist Thammayut order, took place. The author ably summarizes this material and usefully highlights the wider contemporary regional context of Buddhist reformism in Ceylon, Burma, Cambodia, and Laos.

Chapter 2, "Christianity in Siam" (pp. 33–81), is the longest at almost 50 pages. It provides a detailed and comprehensive history of Siamese Christianity, beginning in the Ayutthaya of King Narai in the mid-17th-century through King Mongkut's reign in the mid-19th

century. While earlier Catholic missionaries are briefly discussed, Trakulhun pays more attention to the Protestant missionaries beginning to arrive in the 1820s. In addition to documenting the social backgrounds, sectarian affiliations, and missionary successes and failures of a wide range of Protestant missionaries, he also discusses the public roles they played in Siam, their alliances with court elites, and how they responded to the initially inclusive and tolerant pluralistic attitude displayed towards them by Siamese Buddhists and institutions. As ambassadors of Western science and education, despite their evangelical fervor, Protestant missionaries appealed to a variety of Siamese elites. Trakulhun unpacks why—nonetheless—their number of converts remained disappointingly low.

Chapters 3 and 4 constitute a paired argument: first, exploring the process of translating Christianity for the Siamese and, second, the Siamese response to these evangelical arguments and provocations. Perhaps the most novel contribution of *Confronting Christianity* lies in the detailed attention to the work of translation that Trakulhun displays in Chapter 3, "Translating Christianity" (pp. 82–112). The chapter documents translations undertaken by missionaries, how missionaries struggled with linguistic and intellectual challenges, how these translations fueled a subtle cross-cultural dialogue, and the consequences that resulted from rendering Christian scripture and homilies into the Siamese vernacular language. Sources in the missionary archives enabled the author to highlight the important role that Siamese and non-Siamese assistants played in the translations of Karl Gützlaff (1803–1851), John Taylor Jones (1802–1851), and Dan Beach Bradley (1804–1873), among others. He also emphasizes how shifting choices between Siamese semantic terms and linguistic registers produced an ambiguous, unsettled language of translation that subtly fueled an emergent, localized discourse of comparative religion among Protestant missionaries in Siam. This discourse had widening impact as polemical Christian translations from Siam and their assumptions fed into the growing print industry and literary public sphere that the missionaries helped foster in contentious alliance with Siamese court and mercantile and literary elites.

The Siamese reply to Protestant evangelical challenges, documented in Chapter 4, "The Siamese Response" (pp. 113–138), relied on the transformative impact of print technology and culture on Siamese public communication, literary culture, education, and even governance. Trakulhun focuses on King Mongkut's critical response to the missionaries in the *Bangkok Recorder* newspaper in 1865, expanded upon in 1867 in Chaophraya Thiphakorawong's *Nangsue sadaeng kitchanukit* (หนังสือแสดงกิจจานุกิจ; *Book of Various Things*). These unflattering portraits of Christianity and defenses of Buddhism as a rational, moral philosophy compatible with Western science and cosmology established a Siamese benchmark in the refutation of Western (and Christian) claims to modernist and civilizational superiority. King Mongkut's famous prediction of a solar eclipse in 1868 provides a case study in how this discourse of progressive modernist Siamese Buddhist reform could claim an empirical mastery rival-

ling that of European scientists, was superior to court Brahmins and local superstition, and relegated Christian theology to the realm of nonsense. Trakulhun concludes the chapter highlighting the interactions, influences, and parallels between this confident Siamese Buddhist reformation and analogous movements elsewhere in Asia, particularly in Ceylon and Japan.

The final chapter, Chapter 5, "The Making of Modern Buddhism in Siam and the West" (pp. 139–173), examines the Siamese contribution to the Orientalist reimagining of Buddhism by sympathetic Western scholars who favorably contrasted Buddhism vis-à-vis Christianity. To this end, the author provides a detailed unpacking of Henry Alabaster's *The Wheel of the Law* (1871) and its portrayal of a humanistic, demythologized Buddhism. Trakulhun also examines scholarly debates over divine kingship and Oriental despotism that brought Western Orientalist scholars and Siamese court officials into conversation and disagreement during King Chulalongkorn's reign (Rama V; 1868–1910). He closes the chapter and book by documenting the ways that King Chulalongkorn and King Vajiravudh (Rama VI; 1910–1925) deepened and expanded upon the public image of Siamese Buddhism as a rational, moral, scriptural orthodoxy superior to Christianity. From an earlier awkward and contentious reliance upon Christian missionaries, by the end of the 19th century Siamese Buddhist reformers had cultivated an often-unstated alliance with Western Orientalist scholars who were similarly critical of Christianity.

The greatest contribution of *Confronting Christianity* lies in its careful, detailed documentation and reconstruction of, first, Christian Protestant missionary voices, perspectives, and arguments in 19th-century Siam and, second, the Siamese Buddhist voices, perspectives, and counterarguments that responded to these evangelizing challenges. Literary provocations and counterattacks volleyed back and forth in public print culture between these groups in the middle of the 19th century as Protestant missionaries provoked, fueled, and in many ways subtly framed and reoriented elite Siamese Buddhist intellectuals who were increasingly rethinking Buddhist orthodoxy under the encroaching discursive horizons of colonialism, civilization, modernity, science, and "progress". Trakulhun carefully documents the shifting motives, activities, and publications of these two groups, as well as the contentious substance and rhetoric of their intellectual jousting. He also tracks the shifting fortunes and consequences of their successes and failures among wider Siamese social circles. When the details and nuances of this ecumenical encounter and debate slip off center stage in the book's argument, such as in Chapter 2 and Chapter 5, the author must by necessity rely primarily on summaries and interpretations based on the secondary scholarship of others. Not surprisingly, the book's central argument falters and loses some steam at these moments.

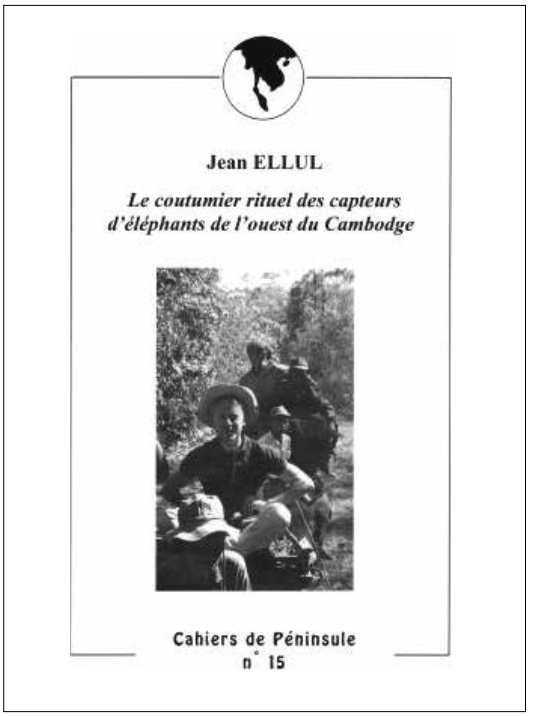
Confronting Christianity, therefore, enriches the historiography of the 19th-century Siamese Christian-Buddhist ecumenical encounter, an encounter that helped to reorient and intensify the Buddhist reform that preceded it. It allows readers to better understand one

crucial dynamic that profoundly shaped the unfolding trajectory of modernist religious reform in Siamese history. However, it is important to point out that there were other intellectual, cultural, social, political and institutional dynamics at play that similarly shaped and fueled the magnifying scope, character, and directions of Siamese Buddhist reform across the 19th and 20th centuries. At the same time, the book suffers from limitations shared by prior scholarship constrained by an inability to access or document the character and dynamics of religious debate and Buddhist reimagining beyond the limited boundaries of social elites and literary archives. The missionary journals and archival resources Trakulhun examines do provide a new window onto religious motivations, actions, and interactions on the ground in 19th-century Siam that would otherwise be cloaked from the historiographic record; but the perspective is still ultimately constrained and limited. Of course, *Confronting Christianity* should not be overly criticized in this regard. Unless and until expansive new archival sources are uncovered, historians of Thai Buddhism are forced to return over and over to the same premodern and early modern elite literary and archival sources, employing new strategies of critical reading in an effort to uncover the character, dynamics, and consequences of modernist Buddhist reform among the masses and in the registers of not only thought but also ritual and practice.

Ultimately, *Confronting Christianity* does not fundamentally alter or revise the current scholarly consensus on the overarching narrative arc, empirical scope, analytic dynamics, or argumentative conclusions regarding modernist Buddhist reform in Siamese and Thai history. Instead, it substantively enriches the empirical details of a previously recognized, but for the most part unexamined, element in that story. Nor does it fundamentally challenge the theoretical framing for making sense of modernist Buddhist reform. Postcolonial historiographic and sociological approaches highlighting and prioritizing the creativity of local, indigenous voices and perspectives in encounters between Asian Buddhism and Western modernity are broadly ascendent in current scholarship. Therefore, Trakulhun's argument that 19th-century Siamese Buddhist reform constitutes a moment of "intercultural mimesis" rooted in creative, innovative, contentious acts of agency and reinterpretation by religious elites reinforces and provides further evidence for a growing scholarly understanding of the cross-cultural dynamics underlying modern Asian Buddhist history.

Erick White
Independent Scholar
white.erick.d@gmail.com

Jean Ellul, *Le coutumier rituel des capteurs d'éléphants de l'ouest du Cambodge*, Paris: Association Péninsule [*Cahiers de Péninsule* 15], 2024, 330 pages, €32.50, ISBN 978–2353214754 (Paperback)



This 2024 publication of *Le coutumier rituel des capteurs d'éléphants de l'ouest du Cambodge* (in French) marks a significant event in the anthropology of mainland Southeast Asia. Originally defended as a doctoral dissertation in 1983 at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS, Paris) and long accessible only in a small number of specialized libraries in France, the manuscript remained largely unavailable to a wider readership. Although Jean Ellul had begun revising the dissertation, the *Péninsule* editors have ultimately published here the original 1983 text, with only minor corrections to transcription, transliteration, notes, and references. Its publication therefore brings into circulation a major ethnographic study substantially enriching the corpus of scholarship on forest societies, ritual specialists, and vernacular cosmologies on the Indochinese Peninsula. The significance of this posthumous book extends well beyond its focus on the ritual capture of wild elephants. It develops a sophisticated analytical framework that situates this practice within a multifaceted social configuration.

In the first part (pp. 39–161), Ellul examines the institution across several interrelated levels of analysis—technical, organizational, political, and cosmological—demonstrating how elephant capture operates simultaneously within each of these registers. Rather than treating capture as a merely technical procedure, the author reveals it as a dynamic interplay of specialized operations embedded in a network of moral imperatives, hierarchical forms of expertise, and invisible agencies. This complex social matrix is further illuminated by culturally specific conceptions of the elephant's symbolic status and its profound relational significance within the Khmer system of kingship and royal authority, thereby underscoring the ritual's broader cosmological and political dimensions.

Beyond its ritual and technical dimensions, the volume is structured around a central analytical insight: the elephant captors' organization mirrors, in its own scale, the political architecture of the Khmer monarchy. Ellul distinguishes two interrelated levels: (1) the internal hierarchy of the captors themselves and (2) their external relationship to royal authority. The corporation

of captors does not exist in isolation; rather, it symbolically reproduces a segment of the royal polity within its own social structure. This structural homology constitutes one of the book's most original contributions, situating elephant capture within the broader political cosmology.

In this respect, Ellul's study invites comparison with Thomas R. Trautmann's *Elephants and Kings* (2015), which traces the long historical entanglement between war elephants and the formation of kingship in South Asia. Both works examine the political life of elephants, yet they proceed from strikingly different vantage points. Trautmann offers a history centered on courts, armies, and imperial institutions—a narrative unfolding at the scale of the state. Ellul, himself trained as a historian, writes a different kind of political history. He approaches the nexus between elephants and sovereignty from the forest margins, focusing not on royal administrations but on the corporate specialists whose customary order made elephant capture both materially possible and ritually legitimate. In doing so, he shifts the center of gravity from the palace to the corporation, from the apparatus of power to the structured practices that sustained it.

At the same time, Ellul does not overlook questions of circulation and transmission. As with Trautmann, he is attentive to the movement of techniques, ritual forms, and institutional models across regions and political formations. Yet, for Ellul, diffusion is conceived not as imperial expansion, but as the gradual embedding of royal demands within localized customary orders. What circulates are not merely techniques of capture, but normative frameworks continually reworked at the margins. This is especially evident in his discussion of lasso capture, whose practice is inseparable from ritual authorization and graded forms of expertise. Comparable configurations of ritualized elephant capture have been documented elsewhere in mainland Southeast Asia (e.g., Giles 1930; Lainé 2018), but Ellul's distinctive contribution lies in demonstrating their structural homology with the organization of royal authority.

In the second part of the book (pp. 163–220), Ellul devotes sustained attention to the *coutumier*, a customary corpus that is neither a codified legal system nor a loose collection of beliefs. Rather, *coutumier* brings together structured prohibitions (*tranam*; ត្រណាម), prescriptions, ritual formulae, embodied dispositions, and procedures of correction. All of these elements collectively render a hazardous activity both socially and cosmologically viable. Ellul insists on an important point: beyond the stated rules, the *hma* (ហ្មា; master captors) actively test, refine, and evaluate the efficacy of ritual formulae and techniques. The *coutumier*, in other words, is not fixed. It accommodates controlled adjustment and interpretive flexibility while remaining anchored in a shared normative framework. Recognized as mediators capable of engaging both natural and supernatural forces, the *hma* operate simultaneously on practical, social, and sacred levels. Their authority lies in maintaining equilibrium across these domains. In this sense, the *coutumier* functions as a stabilizing structure within an inherently uncertain environment.

This discussion of *coutumier* as a form of operative knowledge constitutes one of Ellul's most enduring contributions. What gradually emerges from the author's reconstruction is the pivotal role of locally grounded knowledge in the entire enterprise. The success of elephant capture depends not solely on royal injunctions or formal prescriptions, but on the accumulated experience of specialists—knowledge acquired through apprenticeship, refined through practice, and shaped by sustained familiarity with elephants and forest life. Viewed in this light, the *coutumier* is more than a normative framework: it preserves and organizes a body of lived expertise, a practical intelligence transmitted across generations and enacted in everyday relations between humans, animals, and the forest itself.

Ellul then turns to a detailed exposition of the *tranam* (prohibitions), which constitute the normative architecture of elephant capture. One enters the domain of the *tranam*, observes their prescriptions, risks transgressing them, and must eventually undergo a ritual process of release. Transgression is framed not primarily in juridical terms, but through its "natural" consequences, which may be severe or even fatal. The forest, its resident spirits, the captor's lassos, and the *tranam* themselves all emerge as fundamentally ambivalent forces—simultaneously protective and dangerous. Particularly striking is the existence of a rite of exit following the completion of a capture. Elephant capture is therefore conceived not as a discrete event but as a ritual process extending through preparatory, operative, and reintegrative phases. The normative system encompasses this entire cycle. Read this way, the *tranam* appear not merely as ritual prohibitions but as a missing link between oral normative traditions and written royal law. Ellul suggests that royal legal codification frequently drew upon such customary frameworks, at times incorporating them, and, at others, transforming them. The *coutumier* of the elephant captors thus provides a valuable point of entry for understanding how norms circulated between the forest margins and the royal center.

The volume also offers a careful analysis of initiation and transmission, challenging the assumption that elephant capture constituted hereditary specialization. The son of a *hma* does not automatically become one. Mastery requires initiation, discipline, and the capacity to assume the progressively greater obligations associated with each successful capture. The absence of straightforward hereditary succession highlights the elective and cumulative character of ritual authority: expertise must be acquired, demonstrated, and continually reaffirmed rather than simply inherited. Equally important is the tripartite organization of social roles, comprising the *hma*, the *ganval* (គង្វាល; assistants), and women. The *coutumier* therefore extends well beyond the community of forest specialists. It encompasses domestic space—thresholds, cooking practices, bodily comportment, and marital relations—revealing that elephant capture is embedded within a broader social field linking forest and village.

In the third part of the book (pp. 221–293), devoted to the analysis of the rules governing the *coutumier*, Ellul makes

explicit the structural logic of the normative system. It is here that the homology between customary order and royal organization becomes fully articulated. If the corporation of elephant captors reproduces, on its own scale, a segment of the royal polity, it nevertheless remains situated at the forest margins, a space marked by structural ambivalence. The captors are indispensable to royal power, yet they operate in zones associated with danger, uncertainty, and powerful non-human agencies. They are respected for their expertise while simultaneously linked to forces that must be ritually contained. The forest is never merely an ecological backdrop. Rather, it is a densely relational environment inhabited by both visible and invisible beings. Elephant capture unfolds as a process of negotiation within this layered world, where political authority, ritual obligation, and interspecies encounters converge. In a regional literature often dominated by studies of rice villages, court hierarchies, and centralized religious institutions, Ellul's work re-centers forest-based specialists and high-risk practices as analytically indispensable to understanding the relationship between political margins and royal centers.

Although completed well before the emergence of multispecies scholarship, Ellul's study speaks directly to contemporary debates on human–elephant relations. His portrayal of the elephant as a reactive, intentional, and consequential actor resonates with later ethnographic research on mahout–elephant relations in South and Southeast Asia (Lainé 2020). The *coutumier* encodes practical knowledge derived from sustained interspecies engagement. In this respect, Ellul anticipates later analyses of interspecies coordination and co-domestication without relying on the conceptual vocabulary that now frames such discussions. The volume acquires additional significance in light of the profound transformations that have affected elephant management and training systems across Asia. As Jennifer Crawley (2023) has shown, specialized knowledge once embedded in ritual practice, apprenticeship, and long-term experience has become increasingly fragile in many contemporary contexts. Ellul's ethnography therefore does more than document a customary order: it preserves an exceptionally detailed account of forms of knowledge that have since declined, disappeared, or been reconfigured under changing political, economic, and conservation regimes.

Publications on this subject in Southeast Asia have become increasingly numerous, reflecting growing scholarly interest in indigenous knowledge and human–elephant relations. Among the most recent is Alisa Santikarn (2025), which offers a complementary perspective on elephant capture practices in Thailand. Seen in this broader context, Ellul's book stands both as a landmark regional ethnography and as a record of a particular historical configuration of human–elephant relations, in which technical expertise, ritual normativity, and forest-based practice were tightly interwoven.

The text unfolds through careful differentiation rather than compressed synthesis. As a result, its original analytical architecture is preserved,

allowing readers to follow the progression of Ellul's argument without retrospective simplification. Although written within the structuralist horizon of its time, the volume ultimately transcends a strictly structural reading. While attentive to homologies and formal correspondences, Ellul never loses sight of practice, uncertainty, and situated expertise. The editors' decision to preserve the manuscript in its original form ensures that Ellul's analytical construction remains accessible without retrospective reshaping, making this edition a valuable contribution not only to the study of elephant capture but also to the historiography of Southeast Asian anthropology.

The social and ecological world documented in this study has since undergone profound transformation, if not near-complete disappearance, in the wake of political upheavals, changing regimes of forest governance, and rapid economic change. These processes have altered the environmental and social conditions that once sustained such ritual practices, fundamentally reconfiguring the relational order that framed human–elephant interactions. Read from this perspective, the volume offers not only a richly detailed ethnographic account of a vanished way of life but also a vital documentary archive preserving the memory of a forest-based relational configuration that has since been irrevocably transformed.

In summary, *Le Coutumier rituel des capteurs d'éléphants de l'ouest du Cambodge* stands as a major contribution to the anthropology of mainland Southeast Asia, illuminating forest-based specialization, ritual normativity, and human–elephant relations within a specific historical and regional context. It also reminds us that the political history of elephants cannot be reconstructed solely from royal archives but must also attend to the situated expertise of those who worked at the forest margins. More broadly, the work demonstrates the enduring value of regionally grounded ethnography, reminding us that a *coutumier* is more than a set of rules: it is a structured way of inhabiting and negotiating a shared world.

Nicolas Lainé
Institut de Recherche
pour le Développement (IRD)
nicolas.laine@ird.fr

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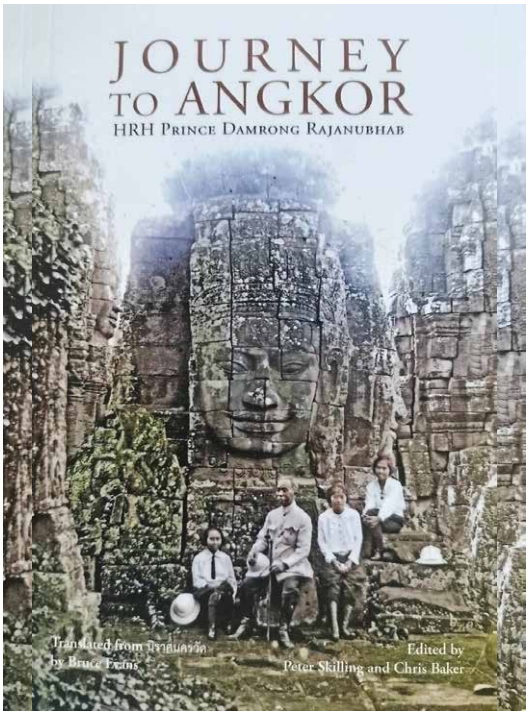
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HRH Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, *Journey to Angkor*, trans. from นิราศนครวัด by Bruce Evans, ed. by Peter Skilling & Chris Baker, Bangkok: River Books Press, 2024, 182 pages, ฿595, ISBN 978–6164510890 (Paperback)



In a recent issue of the *Journal of the Siam Society*, Alexandra Denes (2022) examined in English *Nirat Nakhon Wat* (นิราศนครวัด; *Journey to Angkor*), HRH Prince Damrong Rajanubhab's account of his 1924 visit to Cambodia, using a later Thai edition. After reading her article, my first impulse was to return to the original work, in my case the 1983 edition. This edition includes additional notes by HSH Prince Subhadradis Diskul, the youngest son of Prince Damrong and President of The Siam Society from 1979 to 1981. As I reread the text, I found myself wishing that this important work could be made available in English, allowing non-Thai readers to appreciate for themselves Prince Damrong's reflections on his journey to Angkor in 1924.

A hundred years after Prince Damrong's visit, in 2024, my wish came true. That year, River Books published Bruce Evans's English translation of *Nirat Nakhon Wat*, edited by Peter Skilling & Chris Baker. The volume's Introduction states that "this translation is based on the third edition" (p. 10), which it identifies as having been published by the Ministry of Education in 1938. However, the volume's own bibliography (p. 180) dates this same edition to 2469 BE (1926 CE). By contrast, the first two editions were published in 1925 and 1926 by Sophon Phiphatthanakon Press, one of Siam's most prestigious printing houses between the two World Wars. Its owner was my maternal great-grandfather, Phra Sophon Aksonkit (Lek), whose family bore the surname Smitasiri. Unfortunately, footnote 4 on page 11 misspells the family name as Samitsiri.

The introduction further explains: "The first round of this translation was done by Bruce Evans and edited by Peter Skilling. This was revised and completed (including the prefatory verse) by Chris Baker" (p. 10). Readers may

therefore expect the translation to have undergone careful scrutiny. Likewise, as with any work associated with Peter Skilling and Chris Baker, one can anticipate excellent footnotes, appendices, maps, and a carefully compiled bibliography that greatly enhance the value of the volume.

Footnote 5 of the Introduction (p. 11) directs the reader to Prince Damrong's address, "Angkor from a Siamese Point of View", delivered before The Siam Society on 28 July 1925. In that lecture, the Society's then Vice-Patron declared that he:

> shall, with your leave, treat the subject entirely from the point of view of an Oriental and especially that of a Siamese who professes the same religion and follows the same manners and customs as the Cambodians (Damrong Rajanubhab 1925: 141).

He described the ruins as "Khmer monuments" built by this "famous race", whom he referred to as the "Khmer or Khom" (Ibid., 142). During the lecture, he also showed photographs taken by his party, which had been converted into "lantern slides" and projected onto a screen by Mr R. Wening for the audience. It must have been a memorable evening.

Prince Damrong was no ordinary "Oriental". A son of King Mongkut (Rama IV), he served his elder half-brother, King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), as Minister of the Interior from 1892. Widely regarded as the most successful of King Chulalongkorn's ministers, he transformed the kingdom's provincial administration into a system whose foundations remain in place today. He left the Ministry of the Interior in 1915, during the reign of his nephew, King Vajiravudh (Rama VI).

By the time of his journey to Angkor in 1924, Prince Damrong had been in semi-retirement for nine years. During this period, he remained active in public life, notably through his role in developing the National Library, while also embarking on an extraordinarily prolific writing career. His semi-retirement came to an end in 1925, following the death of King Vajiravudh, when he returned to government service as one of the *aphirathamontri* (อภิรัฐมนตรี; "super-minister") under King Prajadhipok (Rama VII). Even so, he never abandoned his scholarly pursuits.

After the 1932 "change of administration", Prince Damrong went into self-imposed exile in Penang, where he maintained a celebrated correspondence with his half-brother, Prince Naris. These letters were later published as *San Somdet* (สาส์นสมเด็จ; *Royal Letters*), a work that remains an invaluable repository of historical and cultural knowledge for Thai studies. Prince Damrong continued writing until the final days of his life in 1943.

Journey to Angkor consists of nine chapters, ranging from "Leaving Bangkok" to "Returning from Phnom Penh to Bangkok". As this is a review of the translation, I shall begin with a minor point. On the eighth line of the first chapter (p. 15), we read that "ambassadors" saw the party off at the East Asiatic Company landing in Bangkok on 16 November 1924. Although this is a fair translation of the Thai word *thut* (ทูต), it should be borne in mind that, at the time, nations were represented abroad by ministers resident in diplomatic

legations rather than embassies. This is, however, a minor quibble, as "ambassadors" adequately conveys the sense that members of the diplomatic corps were present to bid the Prince farewell. From that point onward, the translation is engaging and highly readable.

In 1924, reaching Phnom Penh and Angkor required several days of travel by sea and land; the return journey was even longer, as Prince Damrong returned via Saigon. The Prince was accompanied by three of his daughters, a senior palace official, a physician who also served as interpreter, a clerk, and a page. Professor George Cœdès, Chief Librarian of the National Library, acted as the party's guide. Cœdès had first visited Cambodia and Angkor in 1912. He later wrote an account of that journey for his family in France (Thissana 2025). By comparison, his journey with Prince Damrong twelve years later must have been considerably more comfortable.

Today, a journey by air from Bangkok to Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, or Saigon takes barely an hour. From Prince Damrong's account, the roads he encountered in Cambodia and Vietnam under French colonial rule in 1924 appear to have been considerably better than those found there today. In Phnom Penh, Prince Damrong paid a courtesy call on King Sisowath of Cambodia, who "came out to receive us and shook hands" (สมเด็จพระศรีสวัสดิ์เสด็จลุกออกมาต้อนรับจับมือ; p. 35). This must have been an unexpected gesture, although Prince Damrong himself made no comment on it. In the same paragraph Prince Damrong devoted a substantial passage to the historical relationship between the Thai and Cambodian royal families. I quote this passage in full:

> As for me, once he had invited us to be seated, His Majesty said he was very pleased to meet me, and that he did not regard me as a stranger since, as a son of His Majesty King Mongkut, I was a son of a king and master. He then gave a blessing as the senior person, which we received in respectful *añjali*. He seemed to be saying to the officials present that "This is the son of my master. I once served under King Mongkut". But to us he said that he was happy that we had come all the way to Phnom Penh to give him the chance to meet us many times, that he felt as if he was meeting a relative, and not to regard him as a stranger. I answered that the sons and daughters of King Mongkut all felt that the royal family of Cambodia were relatives because they knew that King Mongkut had been on close terms with them in the past (pp. 35–36).

The Thai original is as follows:

> ส่วนตัวเราเมื่อตรัสชวนให้นั่งแล้ว ตรัสว่ายินดีมากที่ได้พบปะ ไม่ได้นึกว่าเป็นคนอื่น ด้วยเป็นพระราชบุตรพระบาทสมเด็จพระจอมเกล้าเจ้าอยู่หัว เป็นลูกของเจ้าของนาย แล้วประทานพรโดยฐานที่เป็นวุฒบุคคล ฝ่ายเราก็ประนมมือรับพรด้วยความเคารพ สังเกตดูเหมือนจะโปรดตรัสประกาศแก่ข้าราชการที่เฝ้าอยู่นั้นว่า "นี่ลูกเจ้านายของข้า ข้าเป็นข้าพระบาทสมเด็จ ฯ พระจอมเกล้ามาแต่ก่อน" ดังนี้ แต่ตรัสแก่เราว่ายินดีที่เราออกไปถึงเมืองพนมเพ็ญให้ได้ทรงพบซ้ำอยู่หลายครั้ง และตรัสต่อไปว่ายินดีเหมือนได้พบญาติ

> อย่าให้เรานึกว่าเป็นคนอื่นเลยทูล ตอบว่า เจ้านายซึ่งเป็นพระราชโอรส-ธิดาของพระบาทสมเด็จฯ พระจอม-เกล้าเจ้าอยู่หัว ก็ดูเหมือนจะรู้สึกอยู่ด้วยกันทุกพระองค์ว่าราชวงศ์กรุงกัมพูชาเหมือนกับเป็นพระญาติด้วยทรงทราบอยู่ว่า พระบาทสมเด็จฯ พระจอมเกล้าเจ้าอยู่หัวทรงพระเมตตากรุณาสนิทสนมมาแต่ก่อน

As the reader can see, this is a good translation. I have only one minor question regarding the rendering of "แล้วประทานพรโดยฐานที่เป็นวุฒบุคคล ฝ่ายเราก็ประนมมือรับพรด้วยความเคารพ" as "He then gave a blessing as the senior person, which we received in respectful *añjali*". *Añjali* is a Pali–Sanskrit term requiring translation back into Thai and, in contemporary usage, tends to evoke a formal or elevated religious connotation. The ordinary Thai gesture of respect is defined as *pranom*; ประนม (*pranom*) means "to make a gesture of respect by pressing the palms of the hands together at the chest" (Domnern & Sathienpong 2549: 310, 609). This is surely the gesture Prince Damrong made on this occasion. I therefore wonder why *añjali* was chosen as the translation.

Another significant passage appears in the penultimate Chapter 8. It concerns the Thai dance teachers invited to the Cambodian court during the reigns of Kings Rama III and Rama IV. The passage concludes with the following:

> The upper cloths of the main female characters were draped over one shoulder (said to be the style of King Hariraks) and did not look good as one shoulder was left bare revealing the armpit. The ogre was dressed in a waist sash with hanging end, like a sculpture (pp. 149–150).

The Thai original reads as follows:

> ผ้าห่มนางตัวดีห่มสไบเฉียง (ว่าเป็นแบบของสมเด็จพระหริรักษ์) ก็ไม่น่าดูด้วยปล่อยแขนเปล่าให้แลเห็นรักแร้อยู่ข้างหนึ่ง เครื่องแต่งตัวยักษ์นั้นเจียระบาดทำเป็นชายไหวอย่างรูปปั้น

This is a difficult passage and the translator shows considerable resourcefulness in rendering นางตัวดี (*nang tua di*) as "main female characters". The translation of the final sentence is particularly brilliant. Bruce Evans deserves congratulations for a job well done, especially given the difficulties of the original Thai text. While no translation can fully convey the flavor of the original, Prince Damrong wrote in a relaxed, conversational style that Evans successfully captured. The result is an easy and enjoyable read, as fellow readers and researchers will surely appreciate. More of Prince Damrong's works deserve to be translated and I was pleased to learn recently that three more translations are already in the pipeline.

Although I was asked to focus primarily on the translation, I cannot refrain from commenting briefly on the substance of the book itself. As noted above, in 1925 Prince Damrong told The Siam Society that his work approached Angkor and, by extension, Cambodia, entirely from a Siamese point of view. This is perhaps the book's greatest contribution to Thai–Cambodian studies.

From the moment of his arrival, the Prince did what I myself did more than fifty years later on my first visit: he went to pay his respects at the temple on the hill, Phnom Penh—the eponymous site of the capital—and provided a detailed description of its historical significance. The millennium or so of Thai–Cambodian relations is presented

throughout in an objective and dispassionate manner. Prince Damrong was deeply curious about Cambodian developments since it had become a French Protectorate more than half a century earlier. He described in detail the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh, modelled on the Grand Palace in Bangkok, and recorded his astonishment at Angkor's grandeur. His interpretation of the decline of the Khmer Empire remains broadly consistent with the views generally accepted today.

He was equally attentive to the Cambodian Buddhist Sangha and, perhaps unsurprisingly given his experience as a former Minister of the Interior, to the workings of Cambodian administration under French rule. He noted that many Cambodians of his time were still fluent in Thai. Much has changed in the century since his visit and the loss of that shared linguistic and cultural familiarity is deeply regrettable.

We owe a debt of gratitude to River Books and its publisher, MR Narisa Chakrabongse, as well as to the editors, Peter Skilling and Chris Baker, and their colleagues, for bringing this important volume to publication. Prince Damrong's view of Angkor remains a supremely valuable source for the study of Thai–Cambodian history and historiography.

Tej Bunnag
Thai Red Cross Society
tej@redcross.or.th

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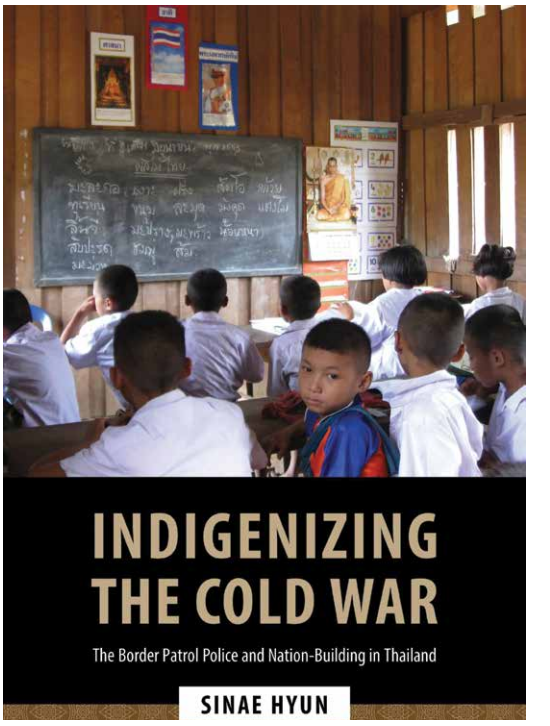
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Sinae Hyun, *Indigenizing the Cold War: The Border Patrol Police and Nation Building in Thailand*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2023, 248 pages, US$68, ISBN 978–0824894085 (Hardback)



On the first page of *Indigenizing the Cold War*, Sinae Hyun asks one of those deceptively profound historical questions that makes the reader wonder why it had not been asked before: What kind of border was the Thai Border Patrol Police (BPP) policing in Bangkok, far from the country's territorial frontiers, when it notoriously massacred student protestors on 6 October 1976?

In approaching this puzzle sincerely, as one whose solution is not obvious or preordained, Hyun's study takes the reader well beyond the institutional evolution of the BPP and its role at Thammasat University in October 1976. Though she does address these matters, Hyun's ambitious approach produces a theoretical model for understanding the Cold War in Thailand that can usefully be applied elsewhere.

Hyun's key contribution to Thai and Cold War studies is the concept of "indigenization". Drawing from missiology, she defines this as "adaptation and transformation of the foreign/external cause to achieve one's own goal" (p. 2). In the case of Cold War Thailand, the local ruling elite indigenized the "global Cold War system" to secure a conservative model of royalist nation-building—and ultimately enduring political dominance—over progressive alternatives, including those of student and civilian protestors and communists, "in a way that in Thailand and elsewhere in Southeast Asia became inevitably hot" (Ibid.).

In the first of five chapters, "From CIA Brainchild to Civic Action Agent, 1947–1962" (pp. 17–48), Hyun demonstrates the key role of the American CIA in forming the BPP as part of U.S. counterinsurgency efforts. Since American policy dictated that such initiatives be directed through civil policing forces, these efforts worked to the benefit of the Thai National Police Department, specifically Police Lieutenant General Phao Siyanon (พล.ต.อ. เผ่า ศรียานนท์; 1910–1960). The 1957 coup led by General Sarit Thanarat (พล.อ. สฤษดิ์ ธนะรัชต์; 1908–1963, later Field Marshal) precipitated a "life-or-death" crisis for the BPP. It would survive and later thrive by shifting its focus to civic actions and embracing two more influential patrons, the Thai monarchy and the United States Operations Mission (USOM).

Chapter 2, "Building a Human Border, 1962–1980" (pp. 49–82), takes up the monarchy's function as the BPP's key backer. BPP civic actions, informed by modernization theory and performed in collaboration with USOM, aimed to create a "human border". Hyun's evocative phrase explains the condescending and homogenizing aims of the civic action programs: to defuse the threat of subversion among susceptible ethnic "others" in Thailand's border areas—notably highland minorities—by inculcating "Thainess". The monarchy became the face of these programs—to the benefit of both it and the BPP.

The following two chapters focus on institutions integrated under the BPP—Police Aerial Reconnaissance Units (PARU) and the Village Scouts—that perpetrated violence at Thammasat in October 1976. Like the BPP, PARU (Chapter 3, "The Saga of the Black Panther, 1950–1976", pp. 83–109) was a child of the CIA. Unlike the BPP, PARU remained tied to the CIA after Sarit's coup and was

deployed to Laos to fight its "secret war" against Lao communism. Demoralized by its role in this failed effort to indigenize the Cold War, PARU returned to Thailand an "orphan" of America's Cold War and was duly adopted by its "foster parent" the monarchy. PARU thus became "its own agent of indigenization and an acting missionary arm of royalist nationalism" (p. 109).

Hyun's chapter on the Village Scouts, "Crusade from the Borders to Bangkok, 1969–1976" (Chapter 4, pp. 110–136), begins with the creation of a mass movement of "village vigilante groups" as a popular base of the BPP and monarchy's "anticommunist nation-building projects" (p. 111). It culminates in a forensic—and chilling—analysis of the brutal massacre of October 1976, including how the BPP, PARU, and Village Scouts instigated and subsequently narrated these events. The PARU unit was called to Bangkok due to its proximity in Hua Hin, its rapid mobilizability, and, above all, because it "was the only unit of the BPP that was straightforwardly assigned to provide protection to the royal family" (p. 127). The Village Scouts were similarly brought to Bangkok by a vague and agentless opportunity to "protect" the monarchy from the "threat" posed by protesters, the persons or agencies issuing the instruction remaining studiously elusive.

Afterwards, the BPP, PARU, and Village Scouts presented a perverse contradiction: they did not resile from the "success" of the massacre but could not broach their role in it. Not only was Bangkok far from the "border" the BPP was tasked with protecting; the BPP, PARU, and Village Scouts' close association with the monarchy could raise unanswerable questions about its "direct and indirect involvement" in these events (p. 133). Nevertheless, Hyun finds ample evidence of BPP, PARU, and Village Scout perpetration in her interviews and confidential reports. Their aims, she finds conclusively, were to defeat communism and thus protect and demonstrate their loyalty to the monarchy, encapsulating the BPP's effectiveness in indigenizing the Cold War.

With the end of the Cold War, the BPP's transformation from a missionary of American anticommunism to an agent of royalist nationalism and Thai-style democracy was confirmed. Nevertheless, its mission to uphold these ideologies was never complete. On more familiar ground, Chapter 5, "Mission Incomplete" (pp. 137–162), explores how the mission of the BPP, pursued through its alliance with the monarchy, especially the Princess Mother Srinagarindra or "Mae Fah Luang" (1900–1995), became the promotion of "Thai-style democracy with the king as a head of state". This system permitted repeated anti-democratic interventions by the military and other institutions acting putatively on the monarchy's behalf. The chapter reinforces the BPP's "integration of military, police, and civilian functions" (p. 162), a key to its capacity to indigenize the Cold War.

Although Hyun refers periodically to the non-territorial border invoked at the outset, her conclusion returns explicitly to this guiding question. The border policed by the BPP was a "psychological border of Thainess set against the supposed enemy of the Thai nation at the physical boundary of Thailand"

(p. 163). Although communism was the enemy of Thainess during the counterinsurgency era, it evolved into any threat—real, imagined, or pretextual—to royalist nationalism and the nation-building vision of military-monarchical elites.

Indigenizing the Cold War reveals how the triumph of anticommunism in Thailand, achieved through America's Cold War alliance with the Thai security services and monarchy, produced elitist conservative political structures that have long outlasted the Cold War—including the U.S. presence in Thailand—and persist to the present day.

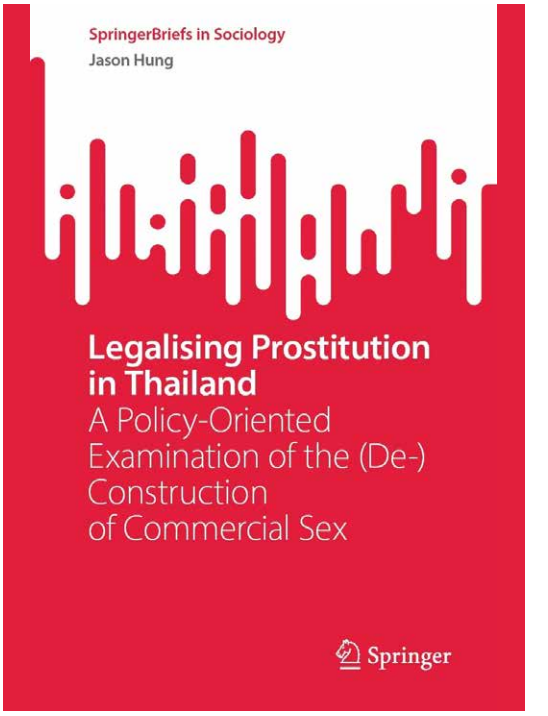
Hyun is not the first author to propose connections between the Cold War alliance of military, monarchy, and America and to link these to the evolution of Thai politics through the long reign of King Bhumibol (Rama IX; r. 1946–2016). But her book stands as a highly original, comprehensive, and conceptually sophisticated addition to this historiography, which brings it into conversation with other Cold War contexts and historiographies in Asia and beyond.

Hyun's research for *Indigenizing the Cold War* merits special mention. The author spent around two years conducting fieldwork in Bangkok and Chiang Mai. She gained formal research permission from the BPP, which granted her access to BPP sources and interviews. Although the book is not sympathetic to the BPP—quite the opposite—and relies only sporadically on her interviews, Hyun's approach shines through in an ethnographic sensibility that forces the reader to contemplate the BPP and similar institutions not as anomalous but as part of the world we inhabit.

Distinguished scholars of Thai history and politics are among those to have contemplated the structures and events leading to 6 October 1976. Hyun comfortably joins them in this indispensable account. *Indigenizing the Cold War* is a must read not only for scholars of postwar Thailand, but for those seeking new models to conceptualize the links between domestic, regional, and global political struggles in Cold War Asia and beyond.

Simon Creak
Nanyang Technological University
simon.creak@nie.edu.sg

Jason Hung, *Legalising Prostitution in Thailand. A Policy-Oriented Examination of the (De-)Construction of Commercial Sex*, Singapore: Springer, 2024, 84 pages, SG$54.50, ISBN 978–9819984473 (Hardback)



Jason Hung is a young and highly productive researcher with a PhD in sociology from the University of Cambridge and an affiliation with the National University of Singapore. His impressive academic trajectory and broad range of publications testify to considerable ambition and intellectual energy. At the same time, the speed with which he has moved across multiple degrees, research projects, and fields—from education and gender studies to social inequality, artificial intelligence, and health sciences—also raises questions about the depth and coherence of his research agenda. This combination of evident talent, confidence, and intellectual breadth is reflected in the present volume, whose ambitious scope is undermined by a superficial treatment of the subject, a lack of sustained empirical demonstration, and a tendency to substitute repeated assertions for rigorous analysis.

More than a measured, detailed, unbiased analysis of Thai prostitution and government policies concerning it, the brief is presented as a propaganda—possibly lobbying—document in favor of the legalization of Thailand prostitution. What are the interests behind it? Who are the people and institutions that would defend such interests and policies for Thailand? All this legitimately leads to the question of the real depth and validity of Hung's analyses, which are hastily conducted and repetitive, more a kind of mantra than convincing; in short, these analyses are in no way demonstrated.

As a reminder, there are practically only three possible policies in the world relating to prostitution and pimping: (1) prohibition, (2) abolition, and (3) legalization (Dialma 2010). The first consists in prohibiting both prostitution and pimping (i.e., 0-0, in relation to an algebraic notation), a prohibition most often circumvented in many countries by governmental and social hypocrisy, frequently exhibiting corruption, allowing pimps to be relatively well-protected. This policy puts the prostituted woman in a difficult situation, leaving her with no rights before the police at any time, whether the police be corrupt or not in their application of the law, with pimps benefitting from this situation. The second policy, abolition, consists in authorizing or at least tolerating prostitution and in combating or prohibiting pimping (1-0). This is probably the most proactive policy for the defence of prostitutes (if it is really applied, which is almost never the case). The third policy consists of authorizing prostitution, considering the prostituted person as a sex worker with the practical result of the police registration of these persons (this is not the case with abolition) and authorizing pimping by considering the pimps as business leaders (i.e., 1-1).

The last policy is the worst possible for prostitutes under the influence of pimps because, under the pretext of fighting for the defence of trafficked persons, it does not fight pimping but authorizes it. This has been the case since the signing of the Palermo Protocol at the United Nations in December 2000. This Protocol is a cut and paste copy of the U.S. TVPA (The United States' Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act) against human trafficking passed in January 2000. This Act makes possible

the listing of countries seen as good while others are denoted as dubious and therefore liable to various sanctions.

The main consequence of the TVPA law and the UN Protocol of Palermo was to effectively cease the fight against pimping launched by the Société des Nations (SDN, Geneva) at the instigation of France before World War II, reinforced in 1948 by the nascent United Nations. This abandonment against pimping that began in 2000 was done under the pretext of reducing human trafficking. However, the real goal was the fight against terrorism, seen in a rather vague way because terrorism was defined according to shifting criteria subject to the interests of various governments, allowing indirect but effective intrusions into the policies of other states on a politically acceptable pretext.

This policy of legalization, defended by feminist movements, can be found in various Western countries as well as in India. India is an interesting case because it is dominated by a patrilineal kinship system leaving, in the context of independent economic activity, little space for a single, divorced, or widowed woman. In other words, it forces single women to consider renting their bodies as an opportunity to earn a living on their own. In India, as elsewhere, prostitution completely independent of pimping is rare: pimps are as often women as men and, moreover parents and relatives of prostitutes. As a result, defending a policy of legalization consists de facto in authorizing and facilitating pimping, or worse, in recognizing it socially, rather than facilitating the lives of prostitutes claiming to be independent sex workers.

The policy of legalizing prostitution is the world's rarest, however, and is often associated with the gambling industry. It is found, for example, in the United States in the state of Nevada (Las Vegas), and, in Australia, in the Capital Territory, in the Northern Territory, and in New South Wales, Queensland, and Victoria, under the pretext of decriminalization. In Cambodia and France, especially since the so-called Sarkozy laws of 2008 which repressed clients more than pimps and prostitutes, the official policy was abolition. However, in practice, since prostitutes are registered and controlled or even repressed by the police, abolition amounts to a policy of prohibition, except that in both cases, pimps are largely tolerated, which ultimately amounts to a policy of legalization in favor of pimps and against prostitutes.

Most countries in the world defend a policy of prohibition, especially in East and Southeast Asia, notably in monarchies, Muslim countries, and countries officially under military, communist, or socialist regimes. Everywhere it is applied with great hypocrisy; in reality abolition favors pimps and traffickers, often out of pragmatic tolerance, relating the application of the official policy to the legalization of prostitution and pimping, possibly by sparing and authorizing prostitutes. This could amount to a policy of abolition, except that the prostitutes are under orders and dependent on the possible whims of the local police, without real rights. This is especially the case for prostitutes of foreign origin, often the most numerous, often without a visa, or with expired visas, most often with their passports confiscated by pimps. It is true that the

situation of prostitutes is often worse in Thailand's neighboring countries, communist or Muslim, than in Thailand itself, where the police and social services regulate the situation relatively well and show a certain tolerance for prostitutes, which partly refers to a policy of abolition. The Thai government even went so far as to provide prostitutes who applied for it with a minimum income during the time of COVID and the two years that followed, when Thailand did not accept any entry of foreigners into its territory; a gesture that is as socially generous as it is realistic, that is to say, with a full knowledge of social realities. This reviewer is well acquainted with these subjects, having created in 2004 and directed for several years in Cambodia the first scientific research unit devoted to studying prostitution, pimping, and human trafficking across mainland and insular Southeast Asia (Le Roux et al. 2010). The unit conducted research on behalf of several organizations, including a French–Khmer NGO, United Nations agencies such as UNIAP and UNODC, the Spanish ANESVAD Foundation, the French Embassy, and the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Le Roux 2011). I can say that in Southeast Asia, particularly in Thailand, the best solution would probably be a policy of abolition: proposing a status relative to prostituted persons and therefore a kind of social recognition and some human rights, offering them more decent sanitary conditions, while fighting against pimping and human trafficking, which are the main problems.

Hung seems to only want to defend the legalization of prostitution in Thailand. He does this without considering the situations and policies in Thailand's neighboring countries, despite the fact that many prostitutes in Thailand may not be of Thai nationality. He appears not to have conducted any specific field research—at least none is mentioned—on prostitution in Thailand, even though it takes different forms depending on the province and city, with the exception of Bangkok. His study consists of a simple bibliographical approach and includes only titles in English. My own research has shown that a substantial body of serious scholarship exists in other languages, particularly in Thai and French.

The author considers his subject only in the present without taking account of a distant or more recent past, erasing historical and cultural aspects that may explain part of the current situation. For example, he does not mention at any time the idea of social seniority on which almost all Southeast Asian societies are based, as well as the importance of sacrifice in the symbolic function of these areas. These ideas and practices can be found in all societies in Southeast Asia and East Asia, not only in Thailand. One should also mention the persistence of external slavery, state slavery in particular, abolished in Siam by HM Rama V Chulalongkorn in 1905, and the still widespread appearance to this day, directly or indirectly, of internal slavery, i.e., for debt. Curiously, the author focuses his remarks on economic aspects conceptualized in the Western way, which, according to him, are induced by or lead to prostitution. At no time does Hung propose an operational definition of the concepts of wealth and poverty. Nor does he propose a clear and appropriate definition for the Thai case of what is called sex tourism,

prostitution, child prostitution, child pornography, and human trafficking. All these terms have complicated definitions regarding the persons involved—prostitutes, pimps, and clients—as well as the religions and nationalities concerned. There are complex questions of the legal or even socially acceptable age separating a "child" from an "adult" which vary depending on the country and other criteria: civil majority with the right to vote, sexual majority with or without parental consent, majority valid for marriage only, minimum age considered for an adult, etc.

Hung's discourse seems to be based implicitly on the neoliberal acceptance of purely Anglo-Saxon obedience concerning these concepts. This stance therefore forces Hung to be indirectly biased by placing an original sociological reality, that of contemporary Thailand, into an exogenous analytical grid. This grid does not consider the complex historical and multicultural reality of the kingdom and does not propose linking sociological facts together to obtain the solid framework necessary to a detailed demonstration fed by tangible facts. Moreover, Hung's Introduction states, "Here the Thai sex industry exploits vulnerable and poor individuals desperate for monetary gains to work as prostitutes" (p. 2), reflecting the same assumptions found in much American writing on the sex industry. The author only mentions "individuals" even while speaking of members of a society that is not "individualistic" but collectivist (i.e., "holistic" as defined by the French anthropologist Louis Dumont, 1991 and 2008). A holistic society, such as the Thai, is one in which people do not see themselves as independent individuals but primarily as members of various communities, redefined on each occasion, having rights and duties towards these communities.

Indeed, the author's announced demonstration in the Introduction of the beneficial effects of legalization never materializes in the subsequent chapters, which merely repeat—without substantive arguments beyond appeals to authority—a kind of mantra, as though it were a magic formula, without producing convincing evidence. Above all, what is likely to strike readers is the author's markedly arrogant tone, tempered only by a certain degree of naivety. This "brief" does not provide a detailed or convincing analysis of the reality it seeks to describe, nor does it convincingly demonstrate that its proposed solution is the most appropriate. Instead, it repeatedly asserts a personal opinion in favor of the legalization of prostitution and, by implication, of the legalization of procuring. Such a position ultimately does little to serve the interests of prostituted people.

Moreover, Hung repeatedly admonishes Thai authorities, government officials, and political elites as though he possessed an inherent authority to do so. This approach is all the more unconvincing because the work offers no sustained or credible demonstration of its central claims, relying instead on repeated assertions and appeals to authority. Yet the author addresses the institutions of a sovereign kingdom with a long-established constitutional and democratic tradition.

Who is better placed than the Thai authorities themselves to develop viable policies that serve the interests of victims of prostitution, civil society, and

the international community? These authorities are supported by the practical experience of the Royal Thai Police in addressing prostitution, procuring, and human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation. These authorities also draw on scholarly research that proposes evidence-based explanations and workable solutions, rather than relying on strongly asserted personal opinions or perspectives that may not fully reflect Thailand's own social and historical context.

Pierre Le Roux
Université de Strasbourg
p.le.roux@unistra.fr

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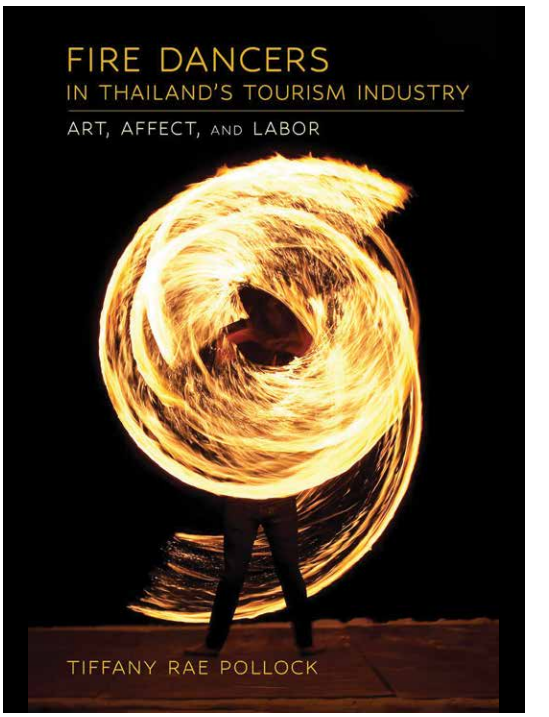
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Tiffany Rae Pollock, *Fire Dancers in Thailand's Tourism Industry: Art, Affect, and Labor*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2024, 186 pages, USD$27.95, ISBN: 978-1501774935 (Paperback)



This engaging ethnography is a spirited addition to the anthropology of Thai tourism. Tiffany Rae Pollock conducted her research on Thai island beaches in the south that cater to foreign tourists. Emphasizing how the "the explosion of Thai fire dance shows" (p. 9) coincided with intensified tourism on these beaches, she addresses the phenomenon of nighttime "tourist beach parties" hosted by bars. In these shows, fire dancers provide breathtaking performances, creating eroticized zones of encounter. She focuses on the performers who fill the night with spectacular fire displays, activated through tight choreographies of dance and "fuel cans, batons, hoops, and chains" (p. 1). She argues that fire dancers are agentive actors rather

than laborers constrained by, and catering to, an exoticist tourist industry. The second generation of fire dancers with whom Pollock spent time during 2015, 2016, and 2019 were largely young Thai and Burmese male migrant laborers. Pollock's ideas and questions are drawn from critical dance studies, performance studies, and anthropology; her book will appeal to readers from all these areas.

At fewer than two hundred pages, the volume features seven chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion, as well as compelling section headers, a minimal number of endnotes, an informed bibliography, and a good index. Pollock's writing is entirely engaging. While she focuses on the beach party scenes, she positions fire dancing within the broader global phenomenon of "flow art", movement practices that combine dance and props to draw both performers and audiences into flow states.

Chapter 1, "Transforming Fire Dance Surfaces" (pp. 23–36), addresses how young men talk about eroticized encounters with foreign tourists. Chapter 2, "The Energy of Artists" (pp. 37–56) takes a deep dive into how dancers talk about *phalang* (พลัง), energy and the affective and erotic connections cultivated on the beach that can result in a sense of "a collective self" (p. 55). In Chapter 3, "Feeling Art and the Labor of Sharing" (pp. 57–79), Pollock joins fire dancers who have created a fire dance center on Ko Samui that offers a space where they can reflect on the social aesthetics of competition, sharing, and art as work. In Chapter 4, "The Affinitive Labor of Freedom" (pp. 80–99), she considers how young Burmese dancers entering the scene are viewed by some Thai fire dancers as less professional and driven by economic need rather than artistic standards, even as young migrant men from Myanmar create communities of care for themselves that Pollock deems "sites of belonging" (p. 98). Chapter 5, "The Everyday Comfort of Practice" (pp. 100–119), addresses contradictions between tourist perceptions of island life as *sabai sabai* (สบายๆ; easy, relaxed, contented) and the everyday struggle of earning a living as a fire dancer. Chapter 6, "Striving on Koh Phi Phi" (pp. 111–125), reflects on how the international success of the film *The Beach* and then the 2004 tsunami drove extensive and sweeping new development on that island, effectively rewriting its local history. Chapter 7, "Fire Dance Femininities" (pp. 126–149), focuses on the experiences of a few women. Throughout, Pollock stays close to the many conversations she had with the fire dancers she knew, giving the book a sustained sense of immediacy as she centers individuals' lives and experiences.

This was originally a doctoral thesis, now revised and polished; the author has published related work sparingly (e.g., Pollock 2019). It directly relates to broader areas of inquiry: anthropologists of tourism in Thailand have mostly focused on the north, where Erik Cohen's work looms large (e.g., 2000, 2008). Tourism in southern Thailand has received comparatively scant attention, except for Malam's study of "the beach scene" (2004) and Cohen's attention to "bungalow tourism" in the southern islands and a Chinese festival in Phuket (e.g., 2001). Mary Conran's focus on intimacy and tourist encounters with Karen trekking guides is adjacent to some of Pollock's interests (Conran 2006). However, her focus on southern Thailand and her theoretical interests drawing

labor, class, performance, and affect into a timely set of questions connects to existing areas of scholarship while giving the book originality.

Pollock's ethnographic research sites were primarily in Ko Phi Phi and Ko Samui; she also spent time on Ko Phangan and Ko Lanta and in several public parks in Bangkok where fire dancers meet to teach and practice. The author provides detailed profiles of several individual fire dancers. She shows how fire dancing is a profoundly masculine form, practiced by Thai and Burmese dancers. However in Chapter 7, she broadens the lens and explores the minimized role of women in two ways, first through her interviews with two of the remaining Thai women fire dancers, a single French woman dancer, and then by interrogating her own participatory experiences as a foreign woman fire dancer. One of the Thai women describes fire dancing as a "protected genre" (p. 130), i.e., policed by Thai men, and Pollock explores at some length the respectability politics that position Thai women outside fire dancing.

But one of Pollock's questions surrounds the erotics of male fire dancing in relation to the dancers' sustained assertions that they are not motivated by any aim to enter intimate relationships with foreign Western tourists (ฝรั่ง; *farang*). In Chapter 7, she offers a nicely complicated analysis of how gendered and Thai/*farang* bodily praxis intersect quite intentionally in one Thai woman's style, in what Pollock terms "a cosmopolitanism" (p. 136). The author links these dancers' experiences to global capitalism and changing social constructions of gender rather quickly and in passing (pp. 148–149). In all, this chapter complicates the rest of the book in useful ways, as it positions Pollock's personal experiences as a participant with theorized care and honesty.

The author notes from the outset that "Many of my interactions with fire dancers were in the English language (or a mix of Thai and English), as many are fluent speakers" (p. vii), so her ethnographic work took place in a border zone where languages, workers' expectations, and global imaginations meet. That is, indeed, the book's point. Pollock asserts that "identities are made changeable", i.e., performers and tourists co-inhabit spaces and feelings, and this "complicates binaries" (p. 152). Pollock argues repeatedly that fire dancers are far more than exploited laborers. An underlying romanticism drives the study—the hope that difference can be overwritten through performance and shared experiences. As she writes, "Affect undoes the borders of bodies and invites connections and solidarities based on feeling" (Ibid.).

Pollock uses "alliances" to posit new relationships (between people and between objects and people) that undercut or refuse asymmetrical power relationships. She borrows the idea of alliances from ethnomusicologist Beverley Diamond (2007), whose research with North American Indigenous cultural workers never steps away from power relationships. In many ways, this approach challenges poststructural ethnography. Now that we acknowledge power is everywhere, how can we position our interlocutors as more than puppets or victims of powerful ideologies? Performers of many kinds in many places imagine otherwise and thus envision better

futures, as discussed by Kandice Chuh (2003).

Overall, I am a bit uneasy with the author's determined critical effort to see how fire dancers agentively set affect and feeling into motion to cross boundaries. She writes, "People activate the force of affect" (p. 153) and, while I am sure that is true, the extent to which it overwrites the powerful distinctions between tourists and performers, Thai and Burmese, is, to me, an open question. Pollock argues that "feeling together" generates the possibility of "political agency" (pp. 153–154); the "affective economy" created by fire dancers for tourists is situated within a "neoliberal capitalist industry", but also invites "a reworking of the political through the body" (p. 154). She almost entirely sidesteps any discussion of how this is or is not related to broad political movements in Thailand. She ends simply by asserting that performance and affect are messy, dissonant, and inexact. I do not disagree. Pollock leaves open the difficult work of parsing where or how actual social change results, but she is hardly alone in that critical limitation.

Attention to affect is a critical development sweeping through the Anglophone humanities and social sciences. Sometimes its critical payoffs barely land. How do affective formations become ideologies that then become the social structures of lived experience? I was provoked by Pollock's book in all the right ways, but I also uneasily noticed that she tended to assert more than she unpacked or interpreted. This sentence from page 2 thrilled me, but I kept encountering iterations of it through the rest of the book: "Affect is also a nexus through which dancers wrestle with the entanglement of their art form with neoliberal capitalist tourist economies and social narratives that position them as deviant beach boys rather than artists". Pollock claims that she "builds a theory of affect" across the arc of the book (p. 2). I am not convinced that happens, but her ethnography is rich and compelling. By focusing on (mostly) young Thai men whose artistic practice is embedded in foreign tourism, Pollock adds to the anthropology of Asian nightlife and tourism; she accomplishes this with sustained attention to gender, labor, and corporeal experience.

Fire Dancers in Thailand's Tourism Industry is available through JSTOR as an open access book and through Oxford Academic as an eBook. It contains three maps and 15 black and white photographs, mostly taken at night, with a few photos of bucket bar ambience but mostly depicting fire dancers in action to beautiful effect, unattributed but presumably taken by the author.

Deborah Wong
University of California,
Riverside (*Emerita*)
dwong@ucr.edu

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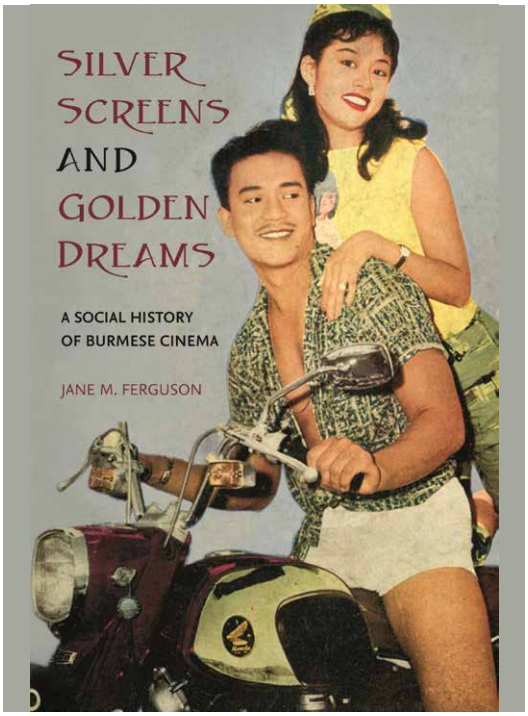
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Jane M. Ferguson, *Silver Screens and Golden Dreams: A Social History of Burmese Cinema*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2024, 284 pages, US$70, ISBN 978-0824895679 (Hardback)



As the first book-length social history of Burmese cinema in any Western language, Jane M. Ferguson's *Silver Screens and Golden Dreams* becomes a landmark contribution to the study of modern Myanmar. Challenging a historiography long dominated by what Ferguson calls "soldiers or monks" (p. 9)—political studies of conflict and authoritarianism on the one hand and scholarship on Theravada Buddhism on the other—the book brings popular culture to the center of historical inquiry. Cinema, she argues, is far more than entertainment: it provides a shared cultural language through which Burmese society imagines itself. This particularly significant intervention is important because, despite having one of the most active film industries in Southeast Asia during the 20th century, Burma's cinematic heritage remains largely unknown outside the country.

Ferguson, an anthropologist at the Australian National University, came to the subject through her fieldwork among ethnic Shan military veterans on the Thai–Myanmar border. She discovered that many of her interlocutors, despite opposition to the Burmese state, remained deeply attached to Burmese films, songs, and novels. One veteran's remark that "we're not against them, we're against the government" (p. 6) captures the paradox at the heart of the book: popular culture simultaneously embodies shared identities as well as

reflects political divisions. Drawing on this borderland perspective, Ferguson explored cinema as a "consensus narrative" connecting theatrical, musical, and literary traditions while asking whose dreams were represented and whose were excluded.

Writing a history of Burmese cinema is a formidable challenge, since most films have been lost. Film reels were often recycled, archives were destroyed, and the limited number of surviving prints contributed to the disappearance of many works. The author reconstructs this lost cinematic world through two decades of interviews with filmmakers and audiences, extensive collections of Burmese film magazines, and engagement with a rich but largely overlooked Burmese-language literature on cinema. Her decision to organize the history around changing political economies—colonial, parliamentary, and socialist—rather than governmental commemorative labels such as "Silver", "Golden", and "Diamond" eras (p. 16), allows her to move beyond nostalgia and examine cinema as a dynamic social institution shaped by politics, economy, and popular aspirations.

Chapter 1, "Exposure and Development: The Making of a Burmese Dream Factory" (pp. 19–38), traces the arrival of the bioscope in colonial Burma through itinerant showmen and transregional circuits linking Rangoon (Yangon) with the Straits Settlements, Java, and Thailand. Ferguson shows that the emergence of Burmese cinema was shaped by diverse actors and networks: her central argument is that "the birth of Burmese cinema depended on multiple midwives" (p. 38); despite later nationalist narratives of an authentically Burmese industry, its foundations relied heavily on South Asian capital, technology, and distribution networks. The first Burmese filmmaker, Ohn Maung (အုန်းမောင်; 1898–1945), developed his craft in the photographic studios of colonial Rangoon and launched the first Burmese feature, *Metta Hnint Thura* (မေတ္တာနှင့်သူရာ; *Love and Liquor*), in 1920. Her reading of this movie is equally insightful, showing how its temperance theme reflected wider anxieties about colonial rule, particularly the British monopoly over alcohol sales.

Chapter 2, "Gender Theater and the Silver Screen: Women and the Motion Picture Industry" (pp. 39–57), challenges the masculine bias of Burmese film historiography, the so-called fathers of Burmese cinema. Ferguson rejects the superficial solution of simply adding a few prominent women to an existing narrative—the "add women and stir" approach (p. 40)—and instead reconstructs women's contributions across the entire industry. She examines female screenwriters such as Dagon Khin Khin Lay (ဒဂုန် ခင်ခင်လေး; 1904–1981), early actresses drawn from theatre and respectable families, and, more broadly, women as a powerful force within the expanding cinema audience and consumer market. Her discussion of *Mya Ga Naing* (မြဂနိုင်; *The Emerald Jungle*, 1934), featuring the young actress Myint Myint (မြင့်မြင့်) as a rifle-wielding heroine, illustrates how women shaped both the production and reception of Burmese cinema. Although male directors and stars inevitably regain prominence in later chapters, a limitation partly explained by the surviving sources, Ferguson returns to

questions of gender in the book's concluding discussion (p. 217).

Chapter 3, "Sound Waves: Music for the Movies and the Advent of the Talkie" (pp. 58–77), restores sound to the supposedly "silent" era and is among the book's strongest ethnographic chapters. Burmese silent films were accompanied not by a lone pianist, but by adapted *hsaing* (ဆိုင်း) ensembles; the cinema hall emerged as a vibrant social space: drummers commented on the actions of on-screen heroes to the delight of audiences; lyric sheets enabled collective sing-alongs; and, in 1938, the audience's enthusiastic singing of the title song of the nationalist film *Thakin Myo* (သခင်မျိုး) alarmed colonial authorities, leading to a temporary ban on its screening. The second half of the chapter follows the A1 brothers to Tokyo, where their remarkable 1935 coproduction with the Photo Chemical Laboratory studio, *Japan Yin Thwe* (ဂျပန်ရင်သွေး; *Japanese Daughter*), combined a doomed transnational romance with a message of aviation-based techno-nationalism. Ferguson's observation that "the film experience is [...] a relationship between the viewers through the interface of the motion picture" (p. 77) could serve as the book's guiding principle.

Chapter 4, "Peacocks and Parrots: Anticolonial Nationalism Gets Its Wings" (pp. 78–94), examines anticolonial nationalism through the larger-than-life figure of "Parrot" Hsan Ni (ဟံနီ), a taxi-firm bookkeeper who transformed his fleet into a film company and repeatedly challenged the colonial censoring board during the 1930s. His debut film, *36 Kaung* (၃၆ ကောင်; *36 Animals*), depicting police complicity in illegal gambling, was never shown; his peacock films mobilized royal symbolism against the colonial order while *Alantaung* (အလံတောင်) commemorated the martyrs of the Hsaya San rebellion. Particularly significant for political historians is the 1937 strike film *Bwaing Kaut Ta* (ဗိုင်းကောက်သား; *Boycotter*), which starred future national leaders U Nu (ဦးနု; 1907–1995) and Aung San (အောင်ဆန်း; 1915–1947), and whose song by Saya Tin (ဆရာတင်; 1894–1950) was later adapted into the national anthem. Ferguson is careful, however, not simply to reproduce the patriotic narratives found in Burmese film histories, which often portray filmmakers as nationalist visionaries while overlooking their role as commercial entrepreneurs. Controversy, she argues, could also serve as effective publicity: Hsan Ni himself calculated that while newspapers reached around one million readers, a film could reach three million (p. 94).

Chapter 5, "Tender Celluloid among the Cactus? Burma's Cinematic Cold War" (pp. 95–113), offers a lively contribution to the literature on the cultural Cold War. Independent Burma's film industry benefited from state support through tax incentives, screen quotas, and an annual Academy Award ceremony, while competing ideological powers sought to influence the country's cinematic culture. The chapter's central case study is *Ludu Aung Than* (လူထုအောင်သံ; *The People Win Through*, 1953), an adaptation of U Nu's own play produced with support from the CIA-funded Asia Foundation. Conceived as an anti-communist prestige project costing the considerable sum of US$203,039, the film was a commercial failure, reportedly provoking some frustrated viewers to set fire to a cinema.

Soviet and Chinese cultural initiatives similarly struggled to resonate with Burmese audiences; Ferguson's account of director Shwedone B. Aung (ရွှေဒုံးဘဒေအောင်) candidly telling his Shanghai hosts that Burmese viewers would fall asleep during revolutionary epics (p. 108) captures the limits of ideological filmmaking. The chapter concludes with the soldier-star Kyaw Swe (ကျော်ဆွေ; 1915–1982), whose *Pule Myit Ye* (ပုလဲမျက်ရည်; *Pearl Tears*) adapted Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* to the Shan hills, transformed wartime sacrifice into an expression of postcolonial martial masculinity.

Chapters 6 and 9 form a particularly valuable pair focusing on the "ethnic film" (*taingyintha yokshin*; တိုင်းရင်းသားရုပ်ရှင်) genre and will be of special interest to readers of Southeast Asian history. Chapter 6, "The Primitive and the Beautiful: The Ethnic Film Genre" (pp. 114–131), introduces the colonial-era pioneer of the genre, director Hsaya Myint (ဆရာမြင့်) and the Shan starlet "Miss Shanghai" Mary Myint (မေရီမြင့်), whose ethnicity was marketed as exotic, charming, and modern even as Shan political autonomy was progressively eroded. The author also highlights the continued practice of Bamar actors portraying people from minority populations and the tendency of films to reduce frontier regions to picturesque landscapes rather than complex social worlds.

Chapter 9, "Ethnic Conflict on the Cutting Room Floor: Socialism, Chauvinism, and Tracking Hidden Histories in a Banned Film" (pp. 173–194), is perhaps the book's methodologically most innovative chapter. Ferguson reconstructs the troubled history of *Shwesayan* (ရွှေစံရုံ; 1962), a royal-history film centered on the legendary Shan princess Saw Mon Hla (စောမွန်လှ) and King Anawrahta (အနော်ရထာ; ca. 1014–1077). Released shortly before Ne Win's (နေဝင်း; 1910–2002) March 1962 military coup, the film was subjected to renewed censorship by the new regime and eventually withdrawn after protests. Ferguson openly acknowledges that she has never seen the film, reconstructing its history instead through interviews and a censored magazine article. Her analysis contrasts the Bamar-centered royal narrative with Shan-language chronicles that present the Mao polity as an equal, or even superior, counterpart to Pagan. Rather than attempting to resolve the historical debate concerning the 11th century, she demonstrates how the past became politically explosive in the present: the story of a Shan princess captured, accused of witchcraft, and dying of grief acquired new significance precisely when Shan autonomy was suppressed. This multilingual, multiperspectival approach to contested historical memory represents one of the book's most original contributions and deserves close attention from historians of mainland Southeast Asia.

Intermediate chapters 7 and 8 form the conceptual core of the book, examining the Burmese remake as a form of cultural translation rather than mere imitation. Chapter 7, "Last Tango in Rangoon: Burmese Borrowings and Reinventions of International Films" (pp. 132–149), demonstrates how deeply "transmutation" shaped the parliamentary-era film industry. Ferguson discusses the Burmese Academy Award–winning *Daukta Aung Kyaw Oo* (ဒေါက်တာအောင်ကျော်ဦး;

1957), a Burmese reworking of Hollywood and Bollywood sources; she argues that such adaptations should not be dismissed as derivative. Drawing on Madhavi Sunder's critique of the cultural assumptions embedded in copyright discourse, she instead asks what changes introduced by Burmese filmmakers—such as Buddhist merit-making resolutions and locally meaningful courtship conventions—reveal about audience expectations and social values.

Chapter 8, "The Burmese Way to Socialist Realism: Remaking Hollywood in the Ne Win Years" (pp. 150–172), follows the remaking of films in the socialist period after the 1962 military coup. Under Ne Win's government, the film industry was nationalized, censorship expanded, and cultural production redirected toward a state-defined "Burmese-style socialist realism". Yet remakes continued to flourish. Ferguson's discussion of *Hnit Hmwa Athe* (နှစ်မွာအသည်း; *Twin Hearts*, 1968), which transformed the Hollywood Disney film, *The Parent Trap* (1961), into a socialist-era Burmese adventure, illustrates her broader argument that censorship was not only restrictive, but also shaped new forms of creativity. Her analysis of filmmakers' strategies—working within constraints, inserting "decoy" scenes, and avoiding politically sensitive subjects—is one of the book's most insightful discussions of cultural production under authoritarian rule.

Chapter 10, "Socialism in Stereo: A Musical Bridge to Myanmar Culture" (pp. 195–210), returns to traditional theatre, examining socialist-era films centered on *zat pwe* (ဇာတ်ပွဲ) troupes, including Maung Wunna's (မောင်ဝဏ္ဏ; 1947–2011) acclaimed *Che Hpawa Taw Nu Nu* (ခြေဖဝါးတော်နုနု; *Tender Are the Feet*, 1971). Here Ferguson revisits questions of gender and artistic authority, showing how claims of cultural authenticity could reinforce patriarchal hierarchies.

The Conclusion, "The Muse in the Prison Celluloid" (pp. 211–222), brings these themes together through the life of Ferguson's friend, filmmaker and festival organizer Min Htin Ko Ko Gyi (မင်းထင်ကိုကိုကြီး; b. 1967), whose imprisonment under successive regimes frames her reflection on cinema and incarceration as parallel "dream factories" of modern Burma. Although the comparison might initially appear unexpected, Ferguson develops it into a powerful meditation on creativity, repression, and the enduring human need for imagination.

Criticisms of *Silver Screens and Golden Dreams* are few and mostly amount to wanting more. For a book presented as a social history, the voices of ordinary audiences are sometimes less visible than those of filmmakers, critics, and industry figures, filtered as they are through memoirs and surviving print sources. The vivid ethnographic moments Ferguson provides—such as Shan villagers fleeing army press-gangs or a tailor's son recalling the popularity of "Kyaw Swe collar" shirts—make one wish there were more, since the book is often, inevitably, a history of the film industry and its discourses rather than of its audiences.

Given that most Burmese films discussed here have disappeared and that surviving digital copies are rarely subtitled, Ferguson's careful reconstructions provide an essential foundation for future film scholarship. Her translations

of Burmese film magazines and ephemera likewise preserve a fragile and largely inaccessible print culture. The decision to end the main narrative in 1980, justified by the arrival of television and color film, leaves the later decades—the 1988 uprising, the video era, and the digital revival—largely compressed into the conclusion; one can hope a sequel will follow.

The volume is handsomely produced, with well-chosen, if scarce, reproductions of magazine covers, cartoons, and promotional materials. The inclusion of Burmese script alongside transliteration throughout will be particularly appreciated by specialists. Given the central role of individual films in Ferguson's argument, a consolidated chronological filmography would have been a valuable addition. The generous plot summaries, however, are among the volume's greatest strengths.

For readers in Thailand, the book has an additional significance: it reveals numerous connections between Burmese and Siamese/Thai cultural histories, from the itineraries of theatrical troupes and travelling cinemas linking Bangkok and Rangoon to shared traditions of shadow theatre, literary adaptation, and contemporary archival collaboration. In doing so, it lays important groundwork for a comparative history of mainland Southeast Asian cinemas.

Silver Screens and Golden Dreams is a learned, compassionate, and often remarkably witty account of popular culture under authoritarianism. It demonstrates how cinema provided ordinary people with spaces for imagination, negotiation, and collective memory, while reminding us that "there can never be a monopoly of meaning" (p. 221). At a time when Myanmar's artists continue to face repression, Ferguson's study offers not only a history of Burmese cinema but also a powerful reflection on the enduring relationship between creativity and freedom.

Lalita Hanwong
Kasetsart University
Lalita.ha@ku.ac.th

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