

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“Ah! poet, come here, at this lyrical hour, sit yourself down on these stones, still warm, and take in the calm atmosphere of these great things. Come chant the appropriate words, in the divine cadence, with each passing second. Allow your genius to rush forth freely: these dormant waters and all that they reflect, these stones and the heavens of the eternal sleep.”¹

-George Groslier, Director of the School of Cambodian Arts

The first time that Henri Mouhot, the French naturalist who has often (erroneously) been credited with discovering Angkor, mentions the temples in his published journals he has not yet visited the monuments, but is sure that the ruins testify to Cambodia once having been a powerful and populous country.² Before he has laid his eyes upon the ruins he has already decided that Angkor will be evidence of Cambodia’s need for assistance,³ which he quickly asserts should be provided by his own country, France. His words were written in 1861, just two years before France granted his wish by making Cambodia a French protectorate.

Mouhot’s description, one of the earliest published European accounts of Angkor, is an important opening act in the relationship between Cambodia and France that developed over the ninety years of colonial rule. While Mouhot’s was among the earliest such descriptions, it was by no means the last. He would be

¹ George Groslier, *A L'ombre D'angkor* (Paris: Augustin Challamel, 1916), p. 103.

² Henri Mouhot, *Travels in Siam, Cambodia, Laos, and Annam* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2000) pp. 211-3.

³ Ibid. “Formerly, however, it was a powerful and populous country, as it testified by the splendid ruins which are to be met with in the provinces of Battambang and Ongcor, and which I intend visiting; but at present the population is excessively reduced by the incessant wars carried on against neighboring states. I do not think that the country now contains above a million of inhabitants... European conquest, abolition of slavery, wise and protecting laws, and experience, fidelity, and scrupulous rectitude in those who administer them, would alone effect the regeneration of this state...”

followed in the nineteenth century by a number of famous explorers, such as Francis Garnier and the members of the Mekong Exploration Commission. When, in 1907, Angkor was absorbed into Cambodian territory as a result of retrocession treaties signed by the French and Siamese, the trickle of Western publications about Angkor grew to a steady flow. Accounts of journeys, from the perilous to the comic, undertaken by German, British, American, and most of all by French travelers, were published across Europe and North America. Publications detailing travelers' experiences were particularly prevalent in the interwar years of the 1920s and 1930s.

What was each of these reports attempting to achieve? These authors sought to convey to their audiences what they had seen and learned of Cambodia, and their experiences as travelers. Some of these works were the result of official directives, such as the Mekong Exploration Commission, and would be charged with gathering and transmitting specific information, such as maps or information about trading practices; others were the story of a journey, and were ultimately far more often about the traveler than about the place to which he had traveled. All of these narratives can be seen as an act of what Mieke Bal calls "exposure" in her 1996 work *Double Exposures*.⁴ In reading each of these accounts as part of a whole rather than as an individual story I believe it is possible to begin to see the outline of another, larger narrative.

In *Double Exposures* Bal suggests a reading of the Museum of Natural History in New York as a narrative. She begins her study of the museum with the idea that the institution as a whole, as well as each room individually, can be seen as the telling of a story in which "I" (the curator) narrates a tale to "you" (the audience) about "them" (the people and cultures which populate the various

⁴ Mieke Bal, *Double Exposures The Subject of Cultural Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

exhibits). As she scrutinizes each room Bal searches for the story that is being told by reading each object, the objects surrounding it, the explanatory plaques which accompany them, and the order of the objects, cultures, and rooms, as pieces of story. This dissertation is the investigation of such a narrative: the story of the visual and written culture of France's presence in Cambodia, and the French colonial reaction to Cambodia's artistic and architectural history.

In this dissertation I hope to follow Bal's lead by investigating a collection of objects which together present a window on to the interaction of the French colonial traveler with Angkor through the media of art and history. I will be examining objects which contain within them a narration of Cambodia and Angkor, such as the accounts given by the French travelers in their postcard communications, or by the travel writers in their published tales, and piecing them together into a composite whole. In this case the "I" is the traveler, in the form of the author of travelogues, guidebooks, and even postcards, as well as the curators of the colonial expositions; the "you" is comprised of the audience for these works, which included France's reading public, the friends and relatives who received travelers' postcards and letters, and the thousands of people who visited the colonial expositions; each of these objects is designed to speak about "them," in this case the people of Cambodia, their culture, art, and history, both past and present. As in Bal's investigation of the Museum of Natural History, each of these "exposures" reveals as much, and more, about the "I" and the "you" in these exchanges as it does of the "them."

Of these categories of "objects," the colonial expositions bear the closest resemblance to the museum of Bal's *Double Exposures*, but I believe it is possible to conduct a analogous reading of similarly didactic materials, such as the guidebooks to Angkor written during the colonial period. This collection does not come ready-made, and so it also contains the narrative which I have devised from

the objects and materials I found over the course of conducting research. Like Bal's examination of the Museum of Natural History and her subsequent inspection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, this has necessitated the processes of selection and elimination.

Unlike Bal's work, this is not a narrative that has been set in place within the walls of a single building, and was not created intentionally by its "authors" as a single work. However, I believe that these two "narratives" are more analogous than they may first appear. Large museums such as the Museum of Natural History or the Metropolitan Museum of Art are the product of numerous authors, in different departments and over time, each of whom "writes" only a part of the "story" that is told throughout the museum. While each of these "chapters" might have a tone, mood, and style that is specific to the author, in general, each of these components functions as a part of a larger whole. The overarching narrative of Bal's museum is known and understood by each individual "author," and it is this knowledge that allows the museums to function as a singular unit rather than a collection of disparate pieces. In much the same way I am contending that the combined objects that form the basis of this dissertation present a larger story within the colonial administration and in the *métropole* with regards to the colonies in Southeast Asia.

While conducting research in Cambodia for this dissertation I focused my initial efforts primarily on the National Museum in Phnom Penh and the National Archives. I had originally hoped to include a chapter discussing the National Museum in Phnom Penh, which during the colonial era was named the Musée Albert Sarraut.⁵ The museum displays have changed over the decades, however, it appears that the grouping of objects has changed little since the initial opening of

⁵ Albert Sarraut was one of the most famous *gouverneur generals* of French Indochina, and also held the position of Minister of the Colonies.

the museum. This is particularly true of the heavy sculptural pieces.⁶ I had hoped that the retention of the colonial era categorizing would provide a platform from which to investigate the French understanding and construction of Cambodian history and art history. The museum does provide a partial view, in a way, but not in the way I had hoped when I first began investigating the possibility of a study of the collection.

Unlike the extensively explained and narrated plates which accompany each object, diorama, and collection in Bal's investigation of the Museum of Natural History and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Museum in Phnom Penh offers little more than a title for the objects (such as "Vishnu"); a time period, if known; and, less often, the province or district where it was found. Each room grouped together sculptures of "like" time periods so that viewers would understand that even where the object was missing a specific date it belonged to the period represented by the rest of the room, such as the Banteay Srei period or the Bayon period. The stone sculpture rooms have been established in chronological order, beginning with the Pre-Angkorian period, and moving forward with each century as visitors circumambulate the building's courtyard. The stone sculpture suddenly ends with the 13th century and the late Bayon period. The next hall exhibits a collection of religious and regal objects in cloth, brass, and wood, including objects such as a litter for carrying members of the royal family and offering bowls of embossed brass. Most of these objects date from the 18th and 19th centuries. At the end of this hall is a small room housing a collection of standing wooden Buddha figures. This room is labeled the "post-Angkorian" sculpture room and the placement of the sculptures shows a marked difference from the organization of the

⁶ This is certainly in large part a logistical issue.

rest of the museum, and was arranged at a much later time than the main sculpture rooms.

Without the explanatory plates for each object which might have provided a window on to the thinking of the men like George Groslier, and other scholars of the *École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO)*, who put the museum together I began instead to research the documentary material available from the National Archives with the hopes of gaining a more complete view of the decisions behind the layout of the museum. The archival material provided a fascinating view into the world of colonial bureaucracy, along with pictures of the personalities involved, their rivalries and intellectual arguments. But the portrait of the museum collection and organization process created by these documents was often incomplete, and rarely included clarification about the decision-making process.

Eventually I came to realize that the taciturn museum labels were telling a story of their own. How could anyone who was not already familiar with Hinduism and Buddhism be expected to know what a sculpture depicting “Krishna Govardhana” might have meant or been used for in pre-Angkorian Cambodia? Or even what a “Kirshna Govardhana” was? With museum labels in French and not in Khmer the museum was clearly aimed at the French residents and tourists who found themselves in Phnom Penh rather than the Cambodians who populated the city. But how could French visitors to the museum be expected to know anything about the legends, history, or religious contexts of these pieces?

What the objects meant within the context of Cambodia was not part of the narrative constructed by the museum’s curators for its French audience. Yet, these objects were still meant to be telling a story about “them”: about Angkor, the Khmer Empire, and the colony, *Cambodge*. Whatever that narrative would turn out to be, according to the exhibition labels in the museum, it was not necessary to

know more than a brief, often opaque, title; a general time period; and to understand the evolutionary progress of the history and culture of the Khmer Empire and its fall that had been pieced together by the scholars of the *EFEO*.

The lack of explanatory texts for an audience that was unlikely to possess specialized knowledge about the subjects would have left visitors to interact with the sculpture on an almost purely aesthetic level. Rather than objects possessing meaning—religious, cultural, or historical—viewers encountered the works only as appealing to their tastes, as beautiful or not beautiful. The only additional frame placed on the museum floor for visitors was that of chronology: because of the inclusion of loose dates on most of the sculptures, as well as the chronological grouping of objects, visitors might not have known the story behind any of the objects, but they would have known what order they were believed by French scholars to have been created. The evolution of Cambodia’s history, as well as the hierarchy of the time periods within that evolution, are both laid out in the floor plan of the museum, with the Angkorian period consuming half of the building’s interior floor space and nearly all of the covered areas which ring the courtyard. During the colonial period the post-Angkorian sculpture room was a gift shop where tourists could purchase original architectural sculpture and pieces of “lesser archaeological or artistic interest”⁷ from Angkor; post-Angkorian Cambodia was almost entirely encapsulated in the royal regalia, weavings, and offering bowls of recent history, in no small part because scholars generally found post-Angkorian sculpture aesthetically lacking.

The story told by the museum floor plan is echoed by the narratives which appear in the archival materials; in the travelogues, guidebooks, postcards, and in

⁷ Henri Marchal, *Guide to Angkor; Angkor Vat-Angkor Thom and Monuments of "Great Circuit" and "Little Circuit" by H. Marchal*. (Saigon, Société des éditions d'extrême-Asie, 1930) [Original printing 1928] p. 231.

the colonial expositions which took place in France during the first three decades of the 20th century. In each of these instances the act of creating a narrative—the overt narratives found in the travelogues; the potential narratives of the guidebooks; the mini-narratives of postcards; or the epic narratives built into the exposition halls—was also an act of “exposing,” as Bal has defined it:

Something is made public in exposition, and that event involves bringing out into the public domain the deepest held views and beliefs of a subject. Exposition is always also an argument. Therefore, in publicizing these views the subject objectifies, exposes himself as much as the object; this makes the exposition an exposure of the self. Such exposure is an act of producing meaning, a performance.⁸

Reading these objects and accounts together as a narrative prompted me to ask the question: what are these acts of exposure exposing? I began to find an answer to this question in the clarification provided by another question, one asked by Mary Louise Pratt in her 1992 book on travel writing in South and Central America and in Africa during the colonial eras, *Imperial Eyes Travel Writing and Transculturation*.⁹ In her introduction Pratt lists a series of questions which are at the heart of her inquiry into colonial travel writing. While each of the questions in her list provided a fruitful line of inquiry as I embarked on my own investigation of travel writing, the one which has the most direct relevance to this examination is: “How has travel and exploration writing *produced* “the rest of the world” for European readerships at particular points in Europe’s expansionist trajectory?”¹⁰

By bringing together Mieke Bal’s narrative reading and Pratt’s inquiry into travel writing I found a series of related, but more specified to the Cambodian context, questions which lie at the heart of this dissertation. How has travel writing

⁸ Bal, 1996, p. 2.

⁹ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 5. Italics in original.

about Angkor produced a narrative which became “Cambodia” for Western—particularly French—readerships during Cambodia’s colonial period?¹¹ What are the components of that narrative? What do these components, and the narrative as a whole, “expose” about its creators? These questions are the starting point of an investigation of what I will be calling throughout this dissertation the *product-narrative*, bringing together the “narrative” of Bal’s examination, and Pratt’s “produced” locales. At each site where a “chapter” of this product-narrative is created is also a point where an “exposure,” where the underlying argument for the situation to be or to remain as it is within the narrative, may be read.

In her 1999 doctoral thesis Penny Edwards notes that each of Cambodia’s post-colonial regimes has “sought legitimacy in imagery of the twelfth-century temple complex of Angkor Vat,” with the likeness appearing on the national flags and in the national anthems.¹² Edwards goes on to state that “this emblem of antiquity has come to signify Cambodian sovereignty.”¹³ This has been true of each of the post-colonial regimes to varying degrees, however, the use of the temples at Angkor as a symbol of legitimacy did not begin with the political rule of Prince Sihanouk (1955-1970), and it was certainly an important symbol to kings prior to, and even during, French rule.¹⁴ During the colonial era the French also used the symbolism of Angkor Wat as a way of legitimizing their rule of the country. But for the French colonial government the temples conveyed a very different message from that of either King Sisowath or Prince Sihanouk.

¹¹ Cambodia’s colonial period lasted from 1863 to 1953.

¹² Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation 1860-1945*, unpublished doctoral thesis (Clayton: Monash University, 1999) p. 1.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ During his reign King Sisowath made it clear on numerous occasions that the monuments were of great personal and symbolic importance to him, and to the country. In addition, his royal chronicles note the widespread joy at the return of Angkor province in 1907, and describe a *tang tok* celebration themed to “thank the angels” for Angkor’s return. David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, Second Edition (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1996a) p. 161.

The kind of legitimacy that the French hoped the temples at Angkor would lend to their rule is the argument contained within their act of “exposure.” That argument was made in part to the Cambodians under their rule, but in the main it was an argument directed towards the *métropole*. As in Bal’s description of the act of exposure, making this argument brought to light France’s deeply held views of their place in the world, of Cambodia’s place, and of France’s relationship to her colonies and the people who resided in those colonies. The process of self-exposure by the French colonial presence in Cambodia occurred through the performance of that argument.

One of the most important arguments utilized by the French to claim legitimacy in their rule of Cambodia focused on the temples at Angkor, and it is this argument which will form the locus and connective narrative of this dissertation. This argument contained several components, beginning with the French “re-discovery” of the temples by the explorer Henri Mouhot. In the product-narrative this “rediscovery” involved not only locating the physical temples, but also “rediscovering” the importance of the temples within Cambodian history. A second component of this argument for legitimacy was the success of the French government in having the temples and their surrounding territory “returned” to Cambodia by the Siamese, thus re-locating Angkor within the boundaries of the country. Finally, the French colonial government dedicated significant resources, both in economic and human capital, towards the cleaning, repairing, and rebuilding of the temples. Angkor Wat thus became symbolic of the authority the French hoped to gain through the acts of locating the temples physically and historically, re-locating Angkor within Cambodian boundaries, and then reclaiming and rebuilding the structures.

In whose eyes were these acts meant to foster an understanding of legitimate rule? In part these acts were meant to exhibit the validity of their rule to the citizens

of Cambodia. Prior to France's arrival the country was being consumed one piece at a time by Vietnam to the east and Thailand to the west, and French negotiation for the return of the territory where Angkor is located answered demands made by King Sisowath, among others.¹⁵ I am contending that much of the argument behind the symbolism of the French "resurrection" of Angkor was, however, closely connected to the larger legitimizing rhetoric of France's colonial project around the world: the *mission civilisatrice*, or civilizing mission. While this rhetoric was, in small part, directed towards the colonial peoples who were supposedly being "civilized," this argument was also, in large part, designed to justify the costly practice of imperialism to audiences at home. In this dissertation I will be arguing that the reclamation—from Siam, from ruin, and from what the French perceived as Cambodian "forgetfulness"—of Angkor was used by the French colonial government as a powerful symbol of the "civilizing mission."

An important effect of the attempts by French colonial administrations and the *EFEO* to "reclaim" Angkor was the aestheticization of the temples. These processes located (the idea of) Cambodia within, or behind, the temples. This action carried with it a concomitant process of aestheticization, both of Angkor and of Cambodia: the country was compressed for metropolitan audiences into the space of the Angkor Historical Park, which was then objectified. Reading audiences, and viewing audiences at the colonial expositions, were invited, like the visitors to the Musée Albert Sarraut in Phnom Penh, to encounter the monuments as an aesthetic object rather than as religious structures or as objects infused with meaning for Cambodians.

¹⁵ Sisowath is quoted as having demanded during Franco-Siamese talks on the provinces of Angkor, Battambang, and Sisophon that he be give back his Alsace-Lorraine. John Tully, *Cambodia Under the Tricolour King Sisowath and the 'Mission Civilisatrice' 1904-1927* (Clayton: Monash University Asia Institute, 1996) p. 9.

Anna Janowitz discusses this process of aestheticizing in her 1990 study on the connections between ruins, poetry, and landscape. In this work she elucidates the transformation of Italy, a country which was the locus of a similar fixation on ruin by visitors, into an “aesthetic object.” Quoting Canto II of Byron’s *Childe Harold*, she states that “...Italy is “a land/ which *was* the mightiest in its old command,/ And *is* the loveliest”... The substance of Venice’s value is translated from its history as a republic to its present as an aesthetic object...”¹⁶ This aestheticizing process neither began nor ended with Byron: the evolution of Rome as a “living museum, the site of aesthetic attention” was in progress between the Renaissance and the eighteenth century.¹⁷ It is during this period that nature begins to intertwine with ruins, even urban ruins, making it possible to view these relics of the past as “vehicle[s] of aesthetic meaning... invok[ing] the past as aesthetic and so deny[ing their] historical power...”¹⁸

The reactions of Romantic English poets (and Renaissance Italians) to Roman ruins may appear remote from the process of clearing vegetation from Cambodian ruins in the early twentieth century. However, an investigation of the body of materials about Cambodia created during the French colonial period shows a similar process of objectification and nostalgic invocation of the past through aesthetic interaction.

More specifically, the multi-layered meanings placed upon the ruins perpetuate and solidify initial European perceptions about Angkor, and about Cambodia as a whole. The body of creative and scholarly work from Western, and particularly French, actors in Cambodia throughout the colonial period, covers a wide range of media and fulfils a broad array of purposes. The number of

¹⁶ Anna F. Janowitz, *England’s Ruins: Poetic Purpose and the National Landscape* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1990) p. 43. Italics original.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 34.

monographs that were produced about Cambodia during the colonial period is in the hundreds. These works include scholarly treatises on topics such as ancient Khmer epigraphy; guide books describing the temples at Angkor for the curious tourist; collections of photographs and postcards conveying images of the ruins around the world; and novels of adventure, romance, or intrigue set among Cambodia's banyan trees, among others. These media are varied, and the scholars, writers, photographers, and artists who created them approached their topics from a variety of backgrounds, experiences, and depth of interaction with the protectorate. However, each of these works played a role in educating and informing their audiences in France, Cambodia, Indochina, and the rest of the world. Furthermore, each of these works played a role in the process of aestheticizing the temples and other symbols of Cambodian culture, both in the global imaginary, and in the physically manipulated state of the temples themselves.

How was this act of exposure performed? It transpired by means of a number of methods and media, from newspapers to novels, and from edicts to etchings. The preconceptions carried to colonies such as Cambodia by Westerners informed the way in which they witnessed, understood, and ultimately described the colonial space. These descriptions, in verbal accounts, in letters written home, in the images sent on postcards, and, more broadly, in articles and books written by those who had seen the country for themselves, informed the Western, metropolitan public about these locations. These descriptions also influenced the way in which metropolitan institutions and citizens viewed both colonial subjects and themselves, and, furthermore, the way in which populations and public offices acted in response to the perceived realities and needs of places like Cambodia. Finally, it informed the way people perceived colonial locations when they arrived within those colonial spaces.

The ruins take center stage early in Franco-Khmer interactions, and are rarely displaced throughout the colonial period. Even before the retrocession of Angkor the temples were consistently discussed as being “Khmer,” and were already beginning to be thought of as symbolic of the country and its culture. Over the ninety year course of the colonial project in Cambodia numerous detailed studies were implemented by both scholars and interested amateurs on a wide variety of topics related to the temples, including epigraphy, archaeology, architecture, and art history. Each of these instances began with an act of “translation,” in which the author or creator of each piece of the product-narrative would make “readable” the unfamiliar objects, stories, places, and culture for their audience.

Yet, many of these “translations” fail, as product-narratives often do, to complete one of the most elemental tasks of translation, which, as Walter Benjamin points out, “consists in finding that intended effect [*Intention*] upon the language... which produces in it the echo of the original.”¹⁹ While many of the intentional and unintentional “authors” discussed in this dissertation may have planned not only to share their experience—as a traveler, as a witness, as an explorer—but also to explain, and in this way to translate, Angkor and Cambodia to their audience, the works that are produced not only do not “echo...the original,” they often deny it. Rather than “translating” (or transmitting) Angkor and Cambodia as they might have intended, these “authors” ultimately created an entirely new entity: the Cambodia and Angkor of the product-narrative.

In this dissertation I will be exploring these exposures: the views and arguments found in the products of exposure and the authors’ self-exposure, or performance. I will begin this exploration in Chapter Two by introducing Angkor

¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” *Illuminations Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) p. 76.

and the historical background of the monuments and Cambodia. In the following chapter I will discuss the early European travel narratives that brought Angkor to a broad, Western audience. In Chapter Four I discuss the guidebooks written by *EFEO* scholars to help visitors acquaint themselves with the temples. Visual reproductions of the monuments, from etchings to postcards, are the focus of the following chapter. In Chapter Six I discuss the travel narratives and novels created after Angkor was retroceded to Cambodia in 1907. In Chapter Seven I examine Angkor on French soil at the colonial and international expositions. Finally, I draw my conclusion in Chapter Eight.

Of importance to this examination is the recognition that the official scholarly view of Cambodia and its monuments often not only diverged from the more public and widely consumed view, it was in opposition to that view. The picture of Cambodia painted by the postcards and expositions was not necessarily the picture painted by the scholarly articles of George Coedès, et al. And yet, the pressure of that public view appears to have exerted so much effect on men like Coedès that the descriptions in publications such as guidebooks sometimes appear to ignore or even contradict what they have written elsewhere. It is this contradiction that caught my attention.

Also inherent in this dissertation is my own act of exposure: my own views and beliefs; my own argument; and my own performance. This act of exposure begins with the preface of this dissertation, in which I explain the circuitous route that led me to the topic I have written about here. What underlies this product is the complicated journey which began with an interest in ancient Cham sculpture and has ended with a dissertation about colonial era Cambodia.

While the research I conducted for this dissertation was aimed towards collecting information about the colonial era in Cambodia, the product-narrative that is delineated here has implications beyond Cambodian independence in 1953.

While the trajectory of that product-narrative since independence is not within the scope of this dissertation, I will close in the final chapter with some observations on the ways in which that narrative is being manipulated, changed, and redeployed today. I hope that this final chapter will suggest ways in which the study of such a narrative might be examined within contemporary Cambodian society as the profile of Angkor seems only to grow within the world imagination.