

THE FIRST AUTOMOBILES TO REACH BANTEAY CHHMAR: 1924

Darryl Collins
Independent Scholar

In early March 1924, an automobile entourage had already passed through Battambang, Mongkol Borei and Sisophon before arriving at Banteay Chhmar. Photographs - possibly taken by George Groslier¹ (1881-1945) himself, of governors' residences, schools, a post office² and court witness their passage en route to Banteay Chhmar (Figures 1-6).

However, it is most likely the photograph of the arrival of the motorcade on the 9 March 1924 was restaged for posterity (Figure 7) as a wooden glass-plate camera and tripod would almost certainly have travelled as part of the on-board luggage. Presumably the camera was positioned, and either a mechanical timer used, or someone on hand recorded this event. Parts of a glass-plate camera (possibly equipment used by Groslier), remain in the collection of the National Museum of Cambodia (Figure 8).

A hand-written caption under the image states 'Arrivée à Banteai Chhmar des premières automobiles parvenues au temple': stamped and dated 'Mars 1924', is further registered as 'H181; Dim (Sunday) 9-3-1924'.

The cars display numbered licence plates: P.P.466 (rear vehicle) and P.P.72 (front vehicle).³ A car expert has suggested that "the PP466 car looks to be very similar to an early 1900-29 Renault (French-made); the identifying feature being the unusual engine bonnet, which had the radiator behind the engine on the firewall, rather than up front behind the grill. However, I have found other French manufacturers La Buire and Clement-Bayard also used this design around this time." Further, "on a second look at these cars I noticed that the car nearest to the camera has solid steel wheels which dates this car closer to 1924, the other with wire spokes, probably a little earlier."⁴ (See Figures 7, 9 & 10)

¹ In 1924, Groslier was in charge of the then Musée Albert Sarraut (now the National Museum of Cambodia) that was officially inaugurated in April 1920.

² The post office at Svay Sisophon was originally among a number of telegraphic and postal services handed over by Siam to the French colonial administration at the time of retrocession of the provinces of Battambang, Sisophon and Siem Reap in 1907.

³ P.P. presumably standing for Phnom Penh; these vehicles were most likely rented for the occasion; automobile taxi services commence operations slightly later in Phnom Penh on 1 May 1925.

⁴ Quotes courtesy Gordon McPherson, vintage car enthusiast, Adelaide, South Australia.

Advertisements for auto-cars (1928 & 1930) include maps depicting routes ex Phnom Penh via Sisophon across the Siamese border to the rail-head at Aranyaprathet. The trip in 1924 would have been a hot and arduous one, as the temple lies some 60km from Sisophon, and even today can only be reached by an uneven dirt road.

Personages in the photograph remain a mystery; of the eight figures in the two cars, five are almost certainly Cambodians (interpreters, guides and drivers); only three appear to be Caucasian - one in the rear car and two seated in the front car, turning to face the camera. Assuming the cars departed from Phnom Penh, together with the photographic evidence and museum interests at heart, one of the foreigners in the picture must be George Groslier.

A fourth foreign figure leaning on a walking stick, stands poised as if to welcome the group (was he resident and already working at the temple)? The sturdy wooden thatched pavilion in front of the vehicles surrounded by a fence with a decorative gate certainly lends an air of permanence to the site. Set in the dry, freshly levelled earth are three sandstone heads (deva) with newly planted native vegetation to provide a suggestion of a garden path approach to the sala. The stone heads would have originated from the figures of gods and demons grasping the serpent Vasuki that originally flanked one of the causeways to the temple compound.

The only other witnesses to this event are three shadowy figures of curious local Khmer (to the left of the vehicles) and one solitary figure under a small thatch hut to the right, viewing the arrival of the motorcade. The comparatively short shadows under the cars suggest an early afternoon arrival.

George Groslier prophetically wrote in 1924, “The collection of photographs owned by the Musée Albert Sarraut is of inestimable value. Fortunate acquisitions allowed us to gather documentation over the last 30 years or so. Most of the images are purely documentary. The conditions under which some of them were taken and the difficulties associated with their conservation in Indochina, has resulted in some low contrast prints, however, they are of sufficient quality for study.”⁵

Although photographs of the Banteay Chhmar complex were taken as early as 1914,⁶ ten years later in 1924,⁷ and again in 1932,⁸ Groslier was not to write of the temple until some four years after in his 1936 article “Troisième recherche sur les Cambodgiens”⁹, followed the next year by “Banteai Chhmar, ville ancienne du Cambodge.”¹⁰

His son, Bernard Philippe Groslier, writing of his father, headed the tribute: ‘George Groslier, French painter, writer and archaeologist: 4 February 1887-18 June 1945 (Phnom Penh, Cambodge).’¹¹ In addition, could be added the terms ‘museologist’ and ‘photographer,’ for as the founding director of what

⁵ Groslier 1924.

⁶ *ibid.*, nos. 670-716.

⁷ Anon., undated catalogue, National Museum of Cambodia, L43-55; P57-63; R99-102.

⁸ *ibid.*, L86-133.

⁹ Groslier 1936.

¹⁰ Groslier 1937: 352-357.

¹¹ Various contributors 1992: 59.

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is now the National Museum of Cambodia, the cataloguing and documenting of his milieu and the growing collection of masterpieces of Khmer art for public display, is arguably his greatest legacy.



Figure 1

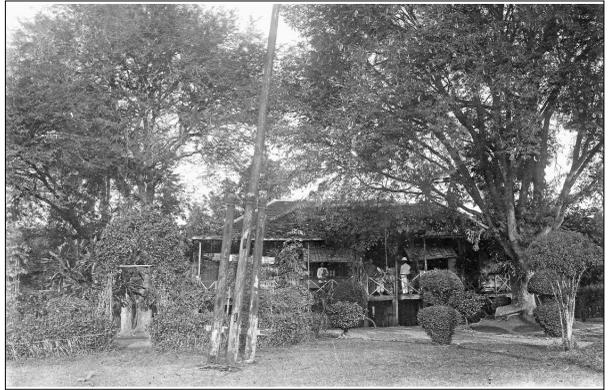


Figure 2

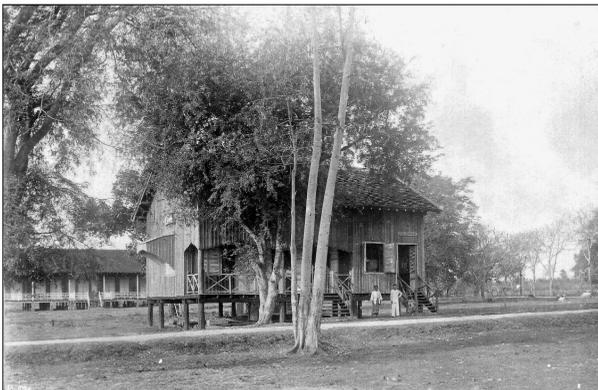


Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

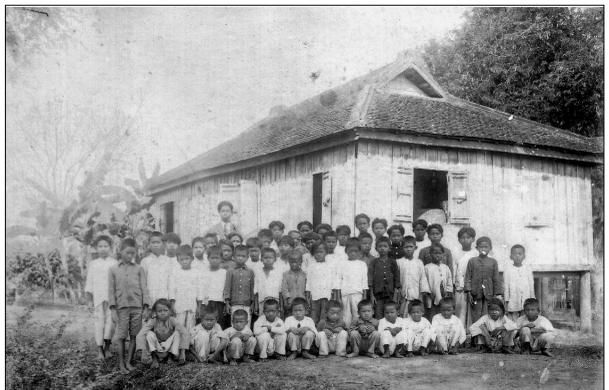


Figure 6



Figure 7

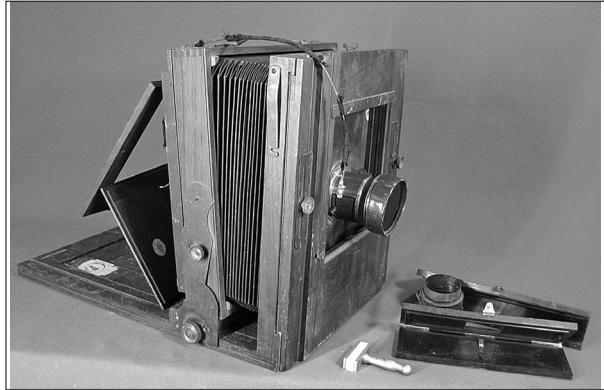


Figure 8

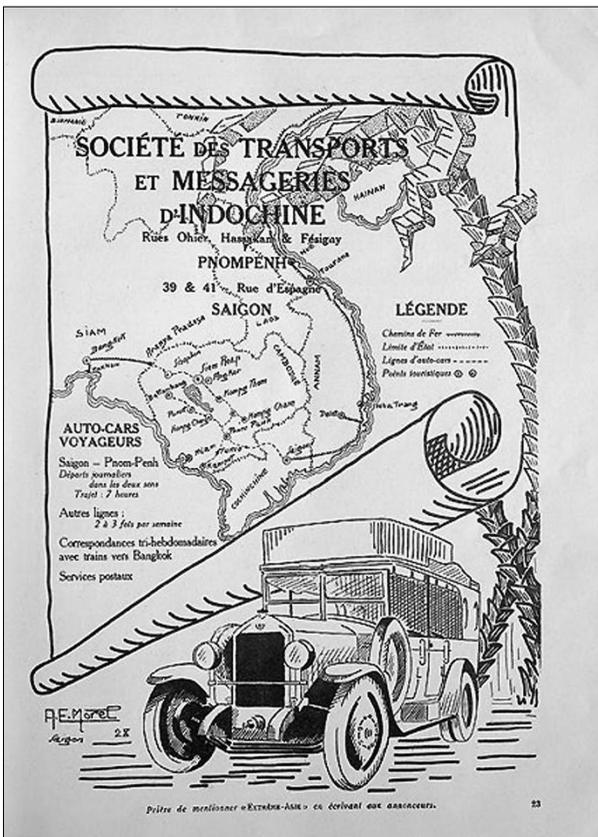


Figure 9



Figure 10

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សង្ខេប

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កំណត់ហេតុលើឯកសាររូបភាពពារាំងស្តីពីបន្ទាយច្បារ ដែលស្ថិតនៅភាគពាយព្យនៃប្រទេសកម្ពុជានេះ ធ្វើឡើងក្នុងបរិយាកាសទូទៅមួយនាបច្ចុប្បន្ន ដែលស្ថាប័នផ្សេងៗកំពុងខិតខំលើកតម្លៃប្រាសាទព្រមទាំងតំបន់ដែលពាក់ព័ន្ធ។ រូបថតទាំងប៉ុន្មានបង្ហាញថា បញ្ហាប្រឈមមុខសព្វថ្ងៃសុទ្ធសឹងមានកំរិតខ្ពស់ពីបុរាណកាលមក ពោលគឺប្រាសាទបន្ទាយច្បារសាងឡើងនៅទីកន្លែងដែលជាប់សង្វែង ហើយក្រៀមក្រោះ ត្បិតខ្សែភ្នំទឹក។

Abstract

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This note on early French documentation of Banteay Chhmar temple in northwest Cambodia has been written in the context of recent drives to promote and consolidate research, conservation and development work in and around the temple. The photographic documentation examined here confirms that many of the issues facing authorities in this contemporary work have long characterised the region: Banteay Chhmar appears here, like today, relatively isolated and extremely arid.

Résumé

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Cette note sur de vieux documents photographiques français relatifs à Bantéay Chhmar, situé au nord-ouest du Cambodge, est rédigée dans la foulée des récents efforts en vue de la conservation et de la recherche sur le temple et son environnement. Les photos montrées ici confirment les caractéristiques de la région qui ont prévalu depuis toujours, à savoir que la région où le temple a été bâti était, tout comme aujourd'hui, marquée par un grand isolement et une extrême aridité.