

HAUNTED SCENES:
PAINTING AND HISTORY IN PHNOM PENH¹

Ingrid Muan

When asked earlier this fall what I would talk about today, I hurriedly produced a somewhat poetic but fairly unrevealing phrase about “the history of painting and the painting of history in Phnom Penh during the 20th century.” I have been thinking about a certain gap that seems to open up in Cambodia today, a gap between contemporary surfaces of glass, metal, skin, paint of various kinds – and life as it was and is experienced by the vast majority of average city dwellers in Phnom Penh. That is to say, the world of certain surfaces seems utterly untouched, overly smooth, completely unruffled by histories of conflict, tragedy, suffering and loss. Is it an aesthetic of amnesia? A symptom of trauma? An expression of repression? Or was visual production always in a separate sphere, in a different relationship to life than that proposed by European modernism? Not expressive as “we” have come to understand the function of “art” in the 20th century West, where I grew up and was educated.

What was painting one hundred years ago, in the area that was just becoming modern and was not yet Cambodia? We know that painting was taught in temple complexes to young men learning to become monks. They used their skills to illustrate palm leaf manuscripts and to paint and repaint narrative sequences of the Life of the Buddha or Jataka tales (stories of the Buddha’s

¹ This paper was given on December 10, 2004 at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies of the University of Wisconsin, Madison. A paper of the same title was given in a seminar of the Vietnam-Cambodia-Laos Study Group (National University of Singapore (Asia Research Institute) and the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore) on June 14, 2004. We were unable to obtain the exact collection of images used for these oral presentations. Illustrations have therefore been selected from Ingrid’s dissertation, from which the paper draws, and with reference to notes in the paper itself. (Ed.)

past lives) on the walls of temples. Painting was also practiced in the workshops of the Royal Palace where the most skilled craftsmen and women of the Kingdom were assembled to produce exclusively for the King. Teams of painters from the Palace worked on paintings in temples sponsored by the Palace, as well as producing, at the turn of the century, the illustrated murals of the *Reamker*, the Khmer version of the Indian epic tale, the *Ramayana*, still found in the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh today. Painting thus served religion and the court, producing representations of religious and epic narratives on demand.

But that is not all that was depicted. In the few examples of temple painting which survive from the early 20th century, the margins of the paintings are filled with details that appear to reference observed everyday life. Birds and cloth merchants, Chinese storefronts and quotes from the equipment and outfits of various nationalities of warriors. These “naturalistic” touches are said to indicate the influence of Thai court painting, with its late 19th-century attraction to Western perspective. Khmer court painters were sent to study in Bangkok while at least one Western painter is recorded to have been employed by the court in Phnom Penh at the turn of the century to teach various styles of painting to a young official. The court in Phnom Penh was thus increasingly hybrid, and artisans in the Palace Workshops – as well as those working independently in urban areas at the turn of the century – were exposed (in the words of one critic) to “cinema, illustrated magazines, and trinkets in the market.” They copied European furniture, studied oil paintings given as gifts to the court, and followed the increasing number of Royal Palace mural commissions given to foreigners during the early 20th century. Curious in and of themselves, these “Khmer style paintings” were produced for the Royal Palace by French painters both in Phnom Penh and Paris. Small wonder that in such an atmosphere, painters in Phnom Penh apparently came to “pass easily” from local styles to “mixed styles of Chinese, Japanese or European forms,” producing “impressionist landscapes” and copies of Greek sculptures.² In doing so, their work seems to have reflected the influx of images and exchanges brought about by the onset of the French Protectorate. Such quotings, mixings, and reflectings could be said to have participated in the process of creating a kind of modernism – a visual cultural reaction to the double force of modernization and the Protectorate. Unfortunately, this work has largely been passed down as descriptions in textual accounts of the times and very few visual records remain for us to study.

These early reflections on change – these possible representations and expressions of what was happening – this letting-in of the present and the foreign, was radically foreclosed, at

² Cf. G. Groslier 1920.

least in official realms of “art,” by the system which Protectorate officials installed in 1918 in order to “save” the Cambodian Arts. By the values of this new system, created by the painter George Groslier and centered around the newly established School of Cambodian Arts, attempts to echo, incorporate, reflect, or borrow from foreign sources were perceived negatively as “copying” and “decadent,” a “plagiarism” that could only result in “failures.” Instead, a “pure,” “authentic,” untouched sphere of the “Cambodian Arts” was to be reborn and cultivated. “Fixing forms” and establishing “models,” Groslier (who served as the central French administrator of the system) categorically denied that drawing or painting *from life* was Cambodian: “We are neither in France nor in Annam or Cochinchin...,” he explained, “a different people and a different art” necessitated “different methods of teaching” (Groslier 1931: 26-7). Although he strove to recreate a supposedly lost (or imagined) indigenous purity, Groslier did introduce a crucial new component to the curriculum of his newly founded School: all male students studied in a mandatory six month introductory course of drawing prior to their entry into a set of traditional medium-based workshops (Figure 1). In this drawing class, two-dimensional standardized ornaments were displayed through the armature of the grid and transmitted through repetitive copying (Figure 2).³ Once this vocabulary had been imbued, students moved on to workshops of silversmithing, wood carving, lacquer making etc., in which they learned to make the model objects, developed and sold under the highly successful network of guilds and sales outlets which Groslier established to economically sustain his pure Cambodian Arts (Figure 3). Silver bracelets and silk weavings, rings and belt buckles, coffee sets and serving spoons, these objects were all marked – dare I say branded – with the characteristic ornaments that specified their often “modern” forms as Cambodian (Figures 4a and b).⁴ By the late 1930s, this version of the “Cambodian Arts” was threaded through an early global marketing system which saw them sold as far away as Egypt, Algeria, Tahiti, the United States and Singapore.

³ For more on these ornaments integral to Khmer artistic production, see Chan and Preap 2005. Ingrid was completing editorial work and translation of the original Khmer text of this book at the time of the composition of the present article (Ed.).

⁴ Explain “international” or modern usage. (IM note, in text.) At numerous points in her thesis, Ingrid discusses her use of the term “modern” with regards to early 20th-century Cambodian art, along with usage of the term by 20th-century Cambodian artists. Though we can not be certain what exactly this note was intended to prompt in the oral presentation, the following passage from her dissertation introduction is helpful in situating her use of “modern” in scare quotes here:

...as John Clark has explained, there are many ways to define ‘modern art’. If – borrowing from the experience of Western modernism – we define ‘modern art’ as the objects generated from a particular attitude, the ‘deliberate putting behind of the past by distancing of the artwork from an earlier set of artistic tastes’, then this rupture of rejection only occurs in Cambodia in the 1950s (Clark 1998). But if we instead decide, as I have done, that modernity comes with colonialism (1863) and that cultural responses to modernization are what constitute modern art, then the objects made during the first four decades of the 20th-century in Cambodia must also be ‘modern art’ despite their seemingly ‘traditional’ forms (Muan 2001: 5-6). (Ed.)



Figure 1: A drawing class in the School of Cambodian Arts, 1920? (Groslier 1931b)



Figure 2: A contemporary emanation of Groslier's grid-based teaching: drawing lesson on "kbach" (ornament), Department of Plastic Arts, Royal University of Fine Arts, 1999. (Ingrid Muan)

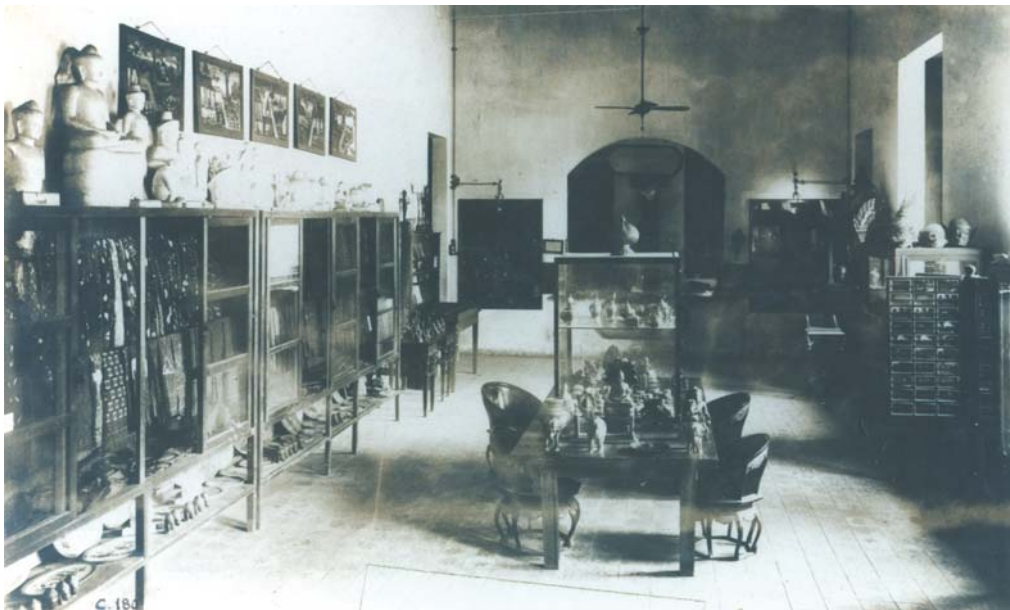
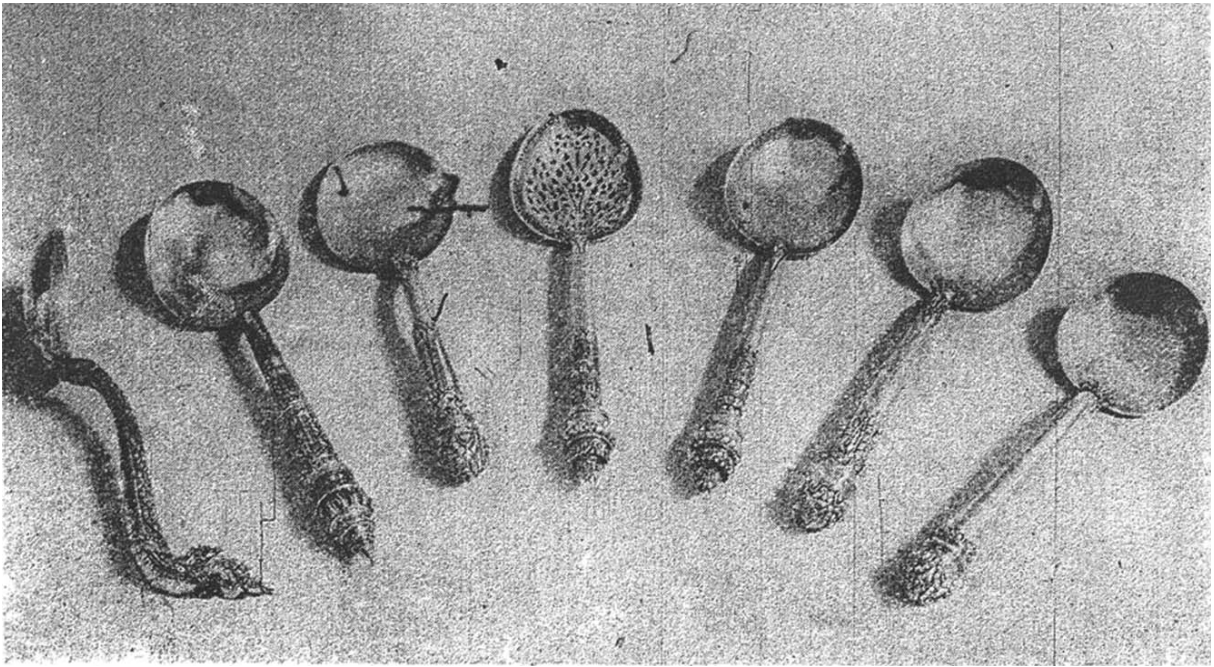
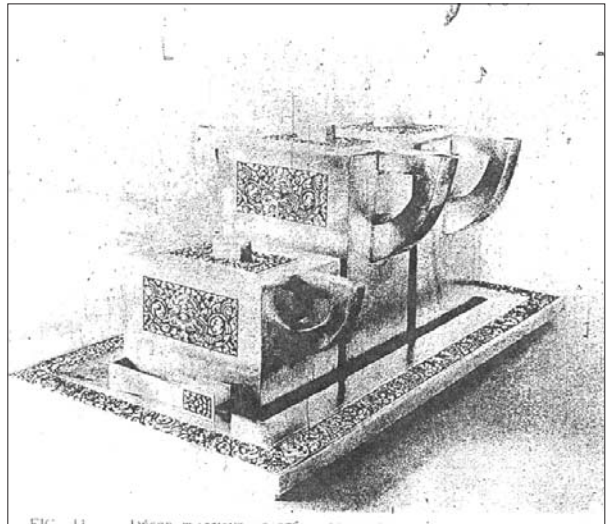
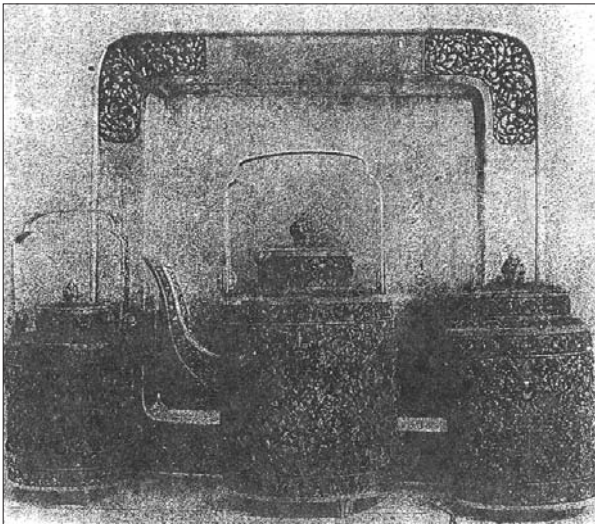


Figure 3: Sales Office of the Corporations established by Groslier in the Albert Sarraut Museum, 1933? (National Museum of Cambodia Photography Collection G180)



*Figure 4a-b: Models used for Corporation production.
a/ "Classical and modern examples of the Cambodian rice spoon which could be adapted for Western use."
(Groslier 1937)*



b/ Left, a tea service with "traditional forms." Right, a coffee service using "classical decoration adapted to forms of universal use." (Groslier 1931b)

Under the Protectorate then, visual production came to be concentrated around and determined by the aesthetic philosophy of the School of Cambodian Arts and its Corporations; French administrators encouraged and economically supported a form of handmade mass production based on models of purportedly resurrected indigenous objects which were often as not newly designed but coated with ornamental signs deemed to be purely traditional. In this system, to make meant to repeat what had already been sanctioned and sold as authentically Khmer.

By the late 1930s however, a current of discontent began to run through the School of Cambodian Arts and the larger system of production which it fostered. A letter from the artisans graduated from the School and published in *Nagaravatta* magazine complained that the School in Phnom Penh “only taught students to know how to make pure Khmer art objects,” and had not “taught the making of other kinds of art objects” appropriate to “the new era of today.”⁵ Work produced by graduates of the School, the letter observed, was exhibited at sales outlets primarily geared to object makers; the work of graduates of the School was never “exhibited at those big gatherings” (by which the letter writer meant the Beaux-Arts exhibitions) where one only saw the work of Vietnamese, Chinese, and I might add, Europeans. A curious geography of forms of representation emerges during the Protectorate. At a 1927 fair, for example, the “arts du Cambodge” were represented by a pavilion filled with silk weavings and silver boxes. In a separate pavilion, with no qualifying national adjective, the “Fine Arts” were on display. No work by Cambodians hung in this pavilion. Instead, the paintings which depict life in Cambodia – *The Dancer*, *The Bridge of Chruoi Changvar*, *Boats on the Mekong* – are by the first and second French directors of the School of Cambodian Arts. “For a different people, a different art,” Groslier had explained. Thus it seems that the view during the Protectorate was reserved for certain nations and spaces, and was not to be allowed to seep into the realm of “Cambodian Arts.” Already in 1912-13, Groslier had sketched the royal dancers (Figure 5), and each of the three Protectorate era French directors of the School of Cambodian Arts were painters who practiced a kind of Impressionistic Realism based on representation from life (Figure 6). An early engraving from a Delaporte drawing perhaps captures the available positions of this geography: the European sits drawing the view of the temple while the native is relegated to an ornamental appendage (Figure 7).

Independence brought a turn to the new and a questioning of essences inscribed by the institutions of the Protectorate. Today, some elderly painters remember that it was the young King Sihanouk himself who encouraged a Japanese painter called Suzuki to begin teaching drawing and

⁵ Artisans graduated from the School of Cambodian Arts 1937. (Ed.)

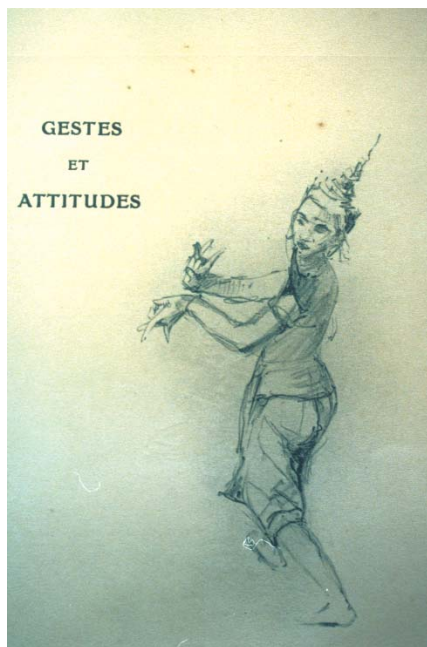


Figure 5: Sketches of Cambodian dancers by G. Groslier in his 1913 volume Danseuses cambodgiennes.



Figure 6: Paintings by Louis Rollet, the last French director of the School of Cambodian Arts. On the right: signed and dated 1943; on the left, unsigned but presumed Rollet, 1940s. (Ingrid Muan: Palais du Commissariat (today the Council for the Development of Cambodia, Phnom Penh)).

Figure 7: Engraving after a sketch by Louis Delaporte, reproduced in his Voyage au Cambodge, 1880.

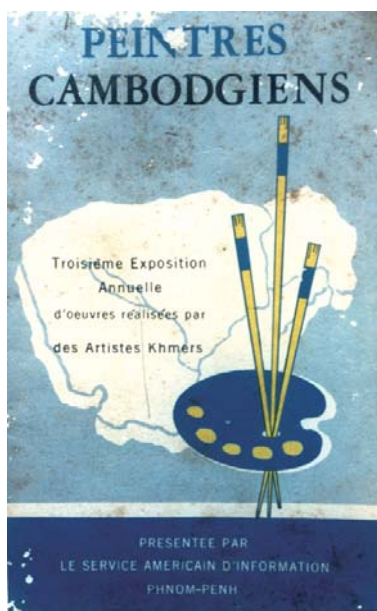
painting from life at the School of Cambodian Arts just as the second World War was ending (Figure 8). According to these sources, the young King found Suzuki to be “Asian like us” but with “modern knowledge” from France. Indeed, trained at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Tokyo by Japanese painters who had studied Impressionism in France, Suzuki brought with him an insistence on direct observation from life as the foundation for all visual production. Students were no longer to copy a received ornamental tradition through the means of a standard grid. Instead, they were to observe and render what they saw around themselves, focusing on the transitory qualities of light and shade, and the immediacy of individual perception. After a lengthy apprenticeship with nature, students would recognize and develop their own vision and thus eventually perhaps create a signature style similar to the great “artists” – Cézanne, Monet, Picasso – to whom Suzuki introduced them. Rather than skillfully repeating time honored formulas and established ornamental languages, this new “modern Khmer painter” – as they were called locally – was an individual perceiving life around himself with all the particularities of a singular vision.⁶

⁶ *Vichetekar*, beauty. (IM note, in text) A passage from a note in Ingrid’s dissertation serves to clarify this reference: *Vichetekar* “...is a ‘modern’ term coined to describe the kind of painting Suzuki introduced to Cambodia. It can also however mean more generally ‘artist’ or the ‘maker of beautiful things’ (Muan 2001: 230, n. 100). (Ed.)



Figure 8: Srah Srang, oil painting by Suzuki, approximately eight-feet-wide, which today hangs in the royal residence on Phnom Penh's Palace grounds. (Ingrid Muan)

By mid-century then, the anchor of traditional ornament and model objects was dispensed of and painters in Cambodia began to think about observing and rendering contemporary life (Figure 9). For local thinkers, there was one problem with the turn to Suzuki's style. By embracing what the Japanese painter considered an "international" form of representation, and producing what could seem like generic realist or impressionistic scenes, his students worried that they were losing what was specifically "Khmer." Given the fierce nationalism of post-independence, as well as the Protectorate legacy of an art always qualified by the adjective "Cambodian," young painters struggled to articulate what would make their new painting both specifically modern and particularly "Cambodian." It was in their subject matter, as well as in the colors and light of Cambodia, that they claimed to secure their ethno-national vision, while modernity was defined as the view of contemporary life which the Protectorate had banned as inauthentic. A tension quickly emerged among Suzuki's students, however, over what version of local life to depict. There seem to have been at least two camps. For one group of artists, centered around the most famous painter of the times, Nhek Dim (Figure 10), temples of Angkor, idyllic rural landscapes (Figure 11), and half-dressed women (Figure 12) were thought to be the appropriate subject matter for painting. The point of painting was to be beautiful (to male viewers) and thus, life was to be viewed but also smoothed and improved. A second group of artists, centered around Sam Yuan (Figure 13) and associated with clandestine urban cells of what became the Khmer Rouge, insisted that life was



GAGNANTS		
PEINTURES A L'HUILE		
1. M. OUK Yin	La vie du cultivateur	(71)
2. M. HUY Kong	Fête du Sillon Sacré	(13-1)
3. M. NHEK Dim	Les parents	(85-5)
AQUARELLES		
1. M. SOUM Sokhon	Village des pêcheurs	(38-4)
2. M. CHHAY Kim Loun	La vie des pêcheurs du Mekong	(61)
3. M. NHEK Dim	Deux vedettes du Ballet Royal	(85-3)
MENTION HONORABLE		
PEINTURES A L'HUILE		
M. CHHIM Bun Vath	Vendeuse de poissons	(49-1)
M. SOUM Sokhon	Une tissasse	(38-5)
M. ING Chheng	Paysage rustique	(80-1)
AQUARELLES		
Mlle YOK Sophat	Le Bakong	(37-4)
M. TAN Hor Yi	Saison des pluies	(75)
M. IEK Hay	Scène de Srok Kong Pisay (Kg. Spen)	(26-1)
1. VONG Oenn		
1-1 Danseuse Royale		3.000 J
1-2 Le labour		3.000 J
1-3 La toilette des boeufs		4.500 J
2. OUL Saman		
2-1 Dans le champ		3.000 J
2-2 Fête de Kathentseu		3.000 J
2-3 Avant l'orage		3.000 J
3. KUCH Dun dit Baly		
3-1 Art Cambodgien		4.500 J



Figure 9: Cover and opening page of the third and final United States Information Service-sponsored painting exhibition, American Library, Phnom Penh 1962 (NAC #11122 (RSC). This is one of the rare documents attesting to the painting of this period, little of which has survived.

Figure 10: Nhek Dim. Photograph taken on the day he departed for a United States Information Service training course in publishing held in the Philippines, 1957. (US National Archives at College Park, Maryland (RG286 CAM-57-250))



Figure 11: Nhek Dim, Landscape. Oil on Canvas, approximately three-feet-wide. (Courtesy of Asasax)



Figure 12: Advertising poster paintings attributed to Nhek Dim. (Ingrid Muan, photographed in a “worker” painter’s workshop, 1998)



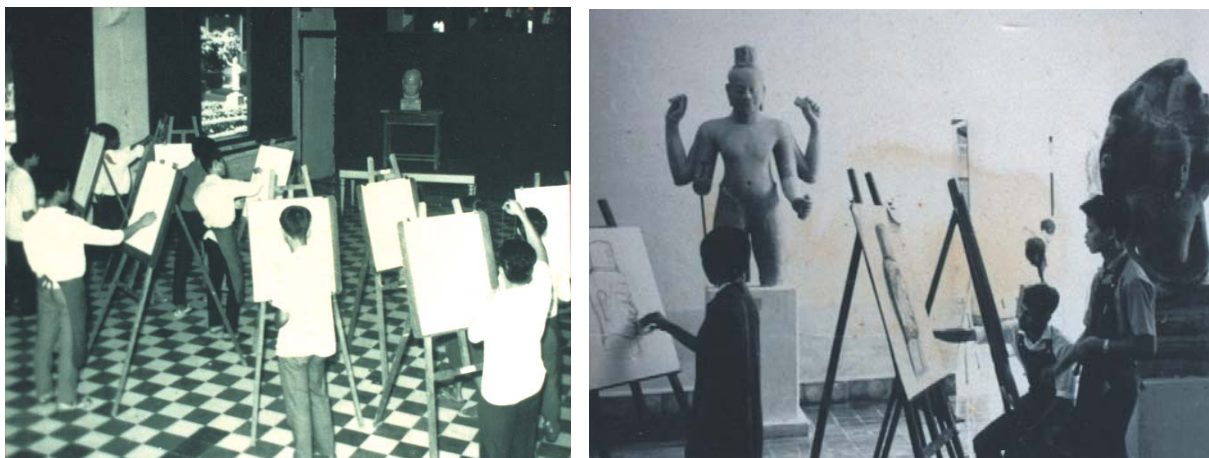
Figure 13: Sam Yuan, central figure of a group of artists dedicated to social realism. Picture taken in early 1930s. (Courtesy of Chet Chan)

not beautiful and that painting should represent social reality. In their view, the subjects of painting had to be the poor and disenfranchised. While the paintings of such subjects could still be formally beautiful, the aim of painting was to bear witness to the socially unconscionable and thus uglier aspects of life in the waning days of Sihanouk’s Sangkum government.⁷

Whether they were painting urban beauties or rural poor, the immediacy of the subjects which Suzuki first urged on his students, and which had preoccupied young painters during the late 1950s, seems to have become curiously congealed during the 1960s. While Suzuki vehemently insisted that his students work on site, directly observing the light and setting of what they painted, as his students established themselves as “artists” and were able to rent or buy studios, they tended for many reasons to find it easier to access life through photographs rather than engaging directly with ever-changing scenes. As the 1960s proceeded, not only artists and art students but also elementary and high school pupils were introduced to drawing from life not through life as immediately observed, but through the study of spot lit objects deemed culturally recognizable as

⁷ In her thesis, Ingrid notes: “The reader will of course want to see the paintings of Sam Yuan. The only problem is there are not any that I know of, at least not in Cambodia. There are two woodcut prints by Sam Yuan that hang in the private painting museum of the Royal Palace. They show landscapes with peasants at work, long sweeping views of nature and labor knit together” (Muan 2001: 230, n. 99). (Ed.)

Cambodian. In assignment after assignment, students learned the “international” form of representation from life (shading, perspective) through rendering the statues and objects of Angkor (Figures 14a and b). The photograph and the stereotype thus inserted themselves between the immediacy of the view and its painted record in a way which has become more and more insistent in contemporary visual practice.



*Figures 14a and b: Publicity shots for the newly opened Royal University of Fine Arts, 1965.
a/ A drawing class at the Department of Plastic Arts. The model is a copy of a classical Angkorian (12th-13th-century) sculpture of the head of a royal figure thought to be King Jayavarman VII.
b/ Students from the Department of Plastic Arts drawing from observation of sculptures on display in the National Museum of Cambodia. (Royal University of Fine Arts Photography Collection (uncatalogued))*

To reach the end of the 20th century, we must of course traverse the decades of war and killings. It is perhaps important to remember that visual production did continue through these times. To give only a brief summary, Suzuki's students were instrumental in producing the visual effects (posters, banners, newsletters) used in protests under the Lon Nol regime (1970-1975). Nhek Dim continued to paint album covers and tranquil landscapes of Angkor for the remaining high urban elite right up until 1975. Under the Khmer Rouge (1975-1979), several painters I know produced posters, public service billboards, newsletters and illustrated magazines of regime achievements. And after 1979, the Vietnamese-sponsored regime hired artists to create many forms of visual imagery for communication with the “people,” while emphasizing the teaching of publicity and design at the School of Cambodian Arts. Under these rapidly shifting regimes, what was visually sanctioned mutated with bewildering speed (Figures 15a and b). Artists who



*Figures 15a and b: Plastic Arts Department student drawings from the early 1980s. (a/ left and b/ right)
a/ Drawing of the bust of Lenin pictured at right along with busts of Ho Chi Minh and Marx brought by
Vietnamese advisors to the School in the early 1980s.*

*b/ Drawing of a statuette of “Neang Thorani,” the Earth Goddess, who is frequently represented in Khmer
religious imagery.*

wanted to live adapted with a kind of chameleon-like facility. As Pech Song, a painter who both survived and worked for each of the last five political regimes in Cambodia explained to me, “In the end, I am just a painter. My skill is painting. Don’t think! Just paint what they tell you to paint.” And so he managed not only to garner government commissions during Sihanouk’s Sangkum and under Lon Nol, but to draw plans of Battambang mine fields for the Khmer Rouge, to turn around and do the same for the invading or liberating Vietnamese army, to then become a head propaganda painter in the People’s Republic of Kampuchea and today to not only paint identical apsaras for the tourist trade but to also once again serve as court painter, producing many of the portraits of past and present Kings which grace a gallery in the Napoleon Pavilion of the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh (Figures 16a-h). He was, by necessity, a shape shifter. Thus it was perhaps only normal that when we⁸ asked him, in 1999, to paint five large paintings representing each of the regimes for which he had painted, he turned not to his own lived experience, but rather to a trove of what he called “documents:” publicity stills, Lon Nol-period news photos and, in the most eerie displacement of what he had actually lived through but seemingly refused to directly remember and thus envision, the march out of Phnom Penh for which he said that he

⁸ Ingrid is referring here to the “we” of The Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture, founded by Ingrid Muan and Ly Daravuth, which was at this early stage actually called “Situations.” (Ed.)



*Figures 16a-h: Work by Pech Song, early 1980s-1999.
a/ Design for poster celebrating the five-year anniversary of the People's Republic of
Kampuchea (January 7, 1979 – January 7, 1984).*



*b/ Poster design: social unity, production and traditional culture pictured together for
the five-year anniversary of the PRK.*



c/ Poster design for military recruitment, early 1980s: "Volunteer to serve the army."



d/ Poster design for military recruitment, early 1980s: "Step up to ensure the protection of the motherland."



e/ Poster design, early 1980s: "Commit to increase production during the dry season to 100%."



f/ Poster design, early 1980s: "The alliance of workers, farmers, soldiers and intellectuals."



*g-h/ Apsara paintings, 1999. (Oil on canvas, approximately four-feet high.)
(a-f: Photographs of paintings now destroyed, courtesy of Pech Song;
g-h: Ingrid Muan)*



Figure 17: Photograph of a painting by Suzuki, gridded off for copying, Pech Song's studio, 1999. (Ingrid Muan)

modeled his Khmer Rouge killers on cavemen illustrated in a French school book. His later Khmer Rouge related work, all painted on commission from foreigners, is likewise copied from gridded photographic models. Again and again, in studio visits over the last eight years, I have found painters working from such gridded models (Figure 17). It is as if the copy of the Protectorate has become entangled with Suzuki's view, producing a curious hybrid of both the Protectorate and post-independence regimes.

The photograph – or the “document” as painters call it in Khmer (Figure 18) – seems to carry an authority as a surface on which stereotypes congeal, creating an officially sanctioned, internationally recognized picture of Cambodia that is simply to be copied by the painting hand. Thus an early aerial photograph reproduced in *The Opening of Aerial Tourism in Indochina* (1929) is repeated from all angles in the



Figure 18: Photographic “model” (left) and tourist painting (right), Pech Song’s studio, 1999.
(Ingrid Muan)

various lights of sunrises and sunsets (Figure 19). Details from engravings of Delaporte’s drawings (Delaporte 1880) are rendered as large contemporary oil paintings (Figure 20). And then there is *National Geographic*. In painters’ storefronts and studios, I repeatedly was shown worn examples of images from a 1960 *National Geographic* article entitled “Angkor, Jewel of the Jungle,” illustrated by specially commissioned paintings (Figure 21). The images of this article are said to “re-create the daily life of this lost civilization,” their accuracy ensured by the “minute scrutiny of French scholars who have devoted years to unraveling Angkor’s riddles.”⁹ Photographs and xeroxes of the *National Geographic* illustrations in Phnom Penh painters’ studios are scored with the familiar pencilled grid which turns them into squares of proportion, replicable by the same visual comparison used to copy ornamental diagrams under the Protectorate system (Figure 22). But copying here also becomes a springboard for variation, if not for imagination (Figure 23), and perhaps this is the only possible contemporary space for painting, given the histories I have sketched and the forces of cultural tourism battering Cambodia today. Within their traditional frame, Groslier told us,

⁹ Moore 1960: 517. This text serves as a kind of celebratory entrance to the article, printed on its opening page.

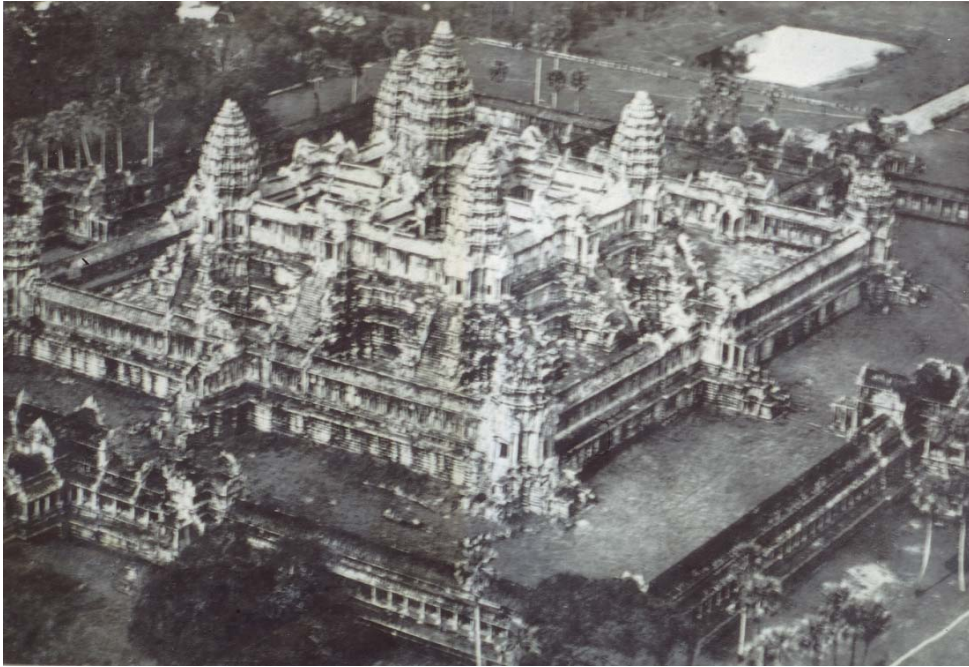


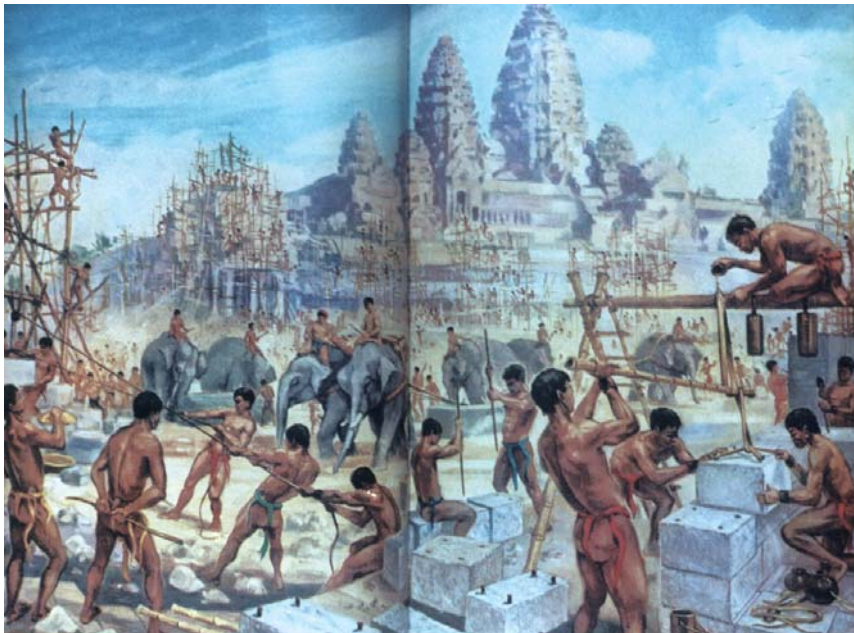
Figure 19a-b: a/ Aerial view of Angkor Vat temple photographed in the late 1920s.

Figure 19a-b: b/ A series of paintings of the aerial view, shop paintings Phnom Penh, 1995. (Ingrid Muan)





*Figure 20: Left: engraving after a Delaporte sketch 1870s. (Delaporte 1880)
Right: Painting displayed in one of the painting stores opposite the National
Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, 1997. (Ingrid Muan)*



*Figure 21: Angkor temple construction scene by Maurice Fiévet, National
Geographic, April 1960. (Ingrid Muan, from New York City Public Library copy)*



Figure 22: Gridded xeroxed copy of Angkor temple construction scene from the National Geographic April 1960 issue. (Ingrid Muan, photographed at the Khemara Angkor Drawing Shop, Siem Reap, 1995)



Figure 23: Four store paintings presenting variations on the National Geographic temple construction scene, 1995-1998. (Ingrid Muan)

Cambodian artists would innovate. Their language was given but its details could vary.¹⁰ The paintings in this sense are a perverse return to Groslier's notion of tradition and permissible change. In some construction scenes, the towers of Angkor Vat transform into those of the four-faced Bayon temple; shrines and scaffoldings are added, while men and elephants are slightly shifted with repetition. Each painter thus claims "his own" version of the construction despite the similarity of the scenes; a familiar vocabulary is used to produce never ending variations. In another popular theme, Angkorian landscapes peopled by "early men" are cobbled together from a set of motifs which include the faces of the Bayon and the silhouette of Angkor Vat (Figure 24). These imaginary landscapes are copied with such minute variations that different paintings at first seem identical. In the proliferation of such paintings, we can read a paradoxical fulfillment of Groslier's prediction that the "richness" of Cambodian art would allow product development to "proceed to infinity" within the limited range of a traditional language (Groslier 1924). In such a reading, contemporary visual production becomes a sediment of its pasts, haunted by the twin regimes of the Protectorate and post-independence periods which entangle both its form and subject matter.

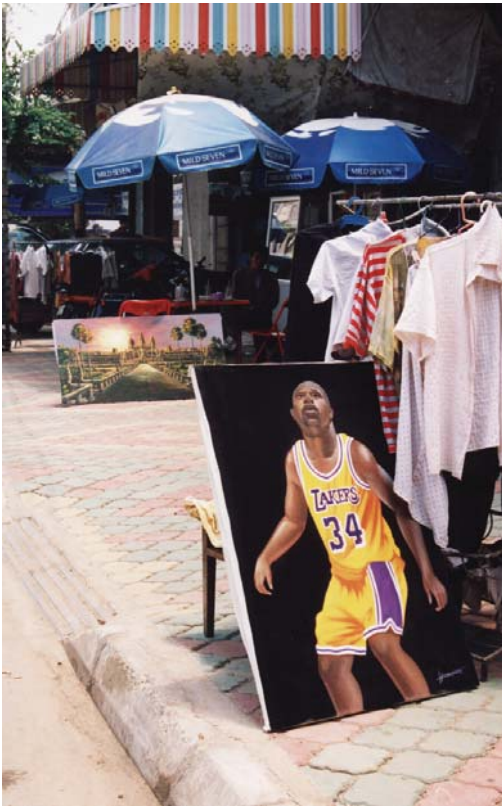
But there is another way to read these images in terms of the present, with which I will end. A recent book by Evan Gottesman has attempted to characterize the socio-political situation in Cambodia from 1979 to the present as a single regime, thus rejecting the standard narrative of progression from 1980s socialism to 1990s UN-sponsored parliamentary democracy (Gottesman 2003). In Gottesman's portrait, the regime of the 1980s never consolidates into a socialist state. Instead, the anarchic forms of the early 1980s consolidated into a curious kind of State Capitalism which continues largely unchanged into the present, despite elections and purported regime changes. By allowing local officials to enrich themselves using the possessions of the State, the government of the 1980s, according to Gottesman, "created networks of happy officials whose loyalty the regime could count on, even after the Vietnamese withdrew and [King] Sihanouk returned" (Gottesman 2003: 300). The vastly changed public appearance and posture of the state and its officials since UNTAC is thus read as a kind of charade, a performance for the donors which speaks the language of human rights, elections, free markets, and social change while continuing with business as usual behind the surface of things.

All that has really changed then *is* the surface of things: in visual terms, the appearance of public space, the fronts and facades, the labels and logos, what is and is not painted. If we accept Gottesman's well argued characterization of a State and a system which endures, behind a

¹⁰ See Groslier 1925, 1926 (part 1) and 1930: 271-2



Figure 24: Various versions of Angkorian pastoral scenes displayed in painting stores across from the National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, 1995. (Ingrid Muan)



surface which can perform any and all roles in order to satisfy the international community, then the recent paintings I have shown you can also be read as a symptom of such a state. Able to represent anything with an unnerving equivalence (Figure 25), able to render all forms in either high or low art valences, this is a reflective painting which produces for any market, supplies any demand. So when I think of painting today in Cambodia, I return again and again to its surfaces. In its bland seamless distance, and its refusal from close up to turn into anything other than methodically applied mechanical paint, one can read a realism which is a portrait of the current surfaces of insincerity.

Figure 25: Paintings drying in the sun outside of the painting stores across from the National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, 2000. In the foreground, part of a complete set of Los Angeles Laker's basketball players painted on commission; in the background, Angkor Vat temple. (Ingrid Muan)

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