

Roaming Restorers in Luang Prabang, Laos

Restaurateurs Sans Frontieres (RSF) is an organisation that mobilizes groups of conservators, restorers, and other professionals to undertake assignments around the world, helping in the conservation-restoration of heritage, objects and monuments. Founded in the early 1980s, RSF is particularly interested in the heritage, such as those that are not protected under the Unesco World Heritage list. The professionals in this established worldwide network - including architects, technicians, craftsmen, historians, scientists, ethnologists, image experts, etc. - collaborate in projects concerning forgotten heritage in various parts of the world.

The director of RSF, Robert Bougrain Duborg, has master's degrees in art conservation from France and Belgium, and visited Southeast Asia in 1979 with his wife, a Médecins Sans Frontieres doctor, and they both helped in the refugee camps on the Cambodian-Thai border. During that time, he had the opportunity to visit many sites and temples in the region, and was struck by the state of several monuments. After his return to France, he founded RSF, which proceeded to carry out repair/restoration of monuments, starting with four in different parts of the world, each of a major religion: a Havana synagogue in Cuba; an Islamic house in Cairo, Egypt; an orthodox monastery in Greece; and a Catholic church in France.



Robert Duborg

In 1998, a crew from RSF restored the murals of a temple, Wat Srisakhet, in the province of Nakhon Ratchasima, following which they worked on the collection of paintings belonging to HM the King of Thailand. When they first began restoration at Wat Srisakhet, Dubourg observed that the temple was visited by few villagers, and learned that it had been like this for several years. He said that the villagers saw the progress of the work, and when it was finally concluded, a new Buddha

statue was enshrined, a ceremony held, and the community began visiting the temple again.

RSF has worked on other projects in the region, relating to: the mural paintings inside Wat Phou Xang and the National Museum in Luang Prabang (both in Laos); the paintings in the collection of Jim Thompson (Bangkok, Thailand); restoration of the Kiem Lien temple (Hanoi, Vietnam); the paintings of the Pagoda (Phnom Penh, Cambodia); and work on temple of Kompong Tralach (Cambodia).

The organisation is guided by the philosophy of gaining understanding of the culture in which they work, and relying on indigenous materials with the view that the efforts can be replicated and continued by local craftsmen. In Dubourg's view, humility, respect, and solidarity are required in their conservation approach as monuments and objects reflect the spirit of the community that share them. These monuments and objects represent the sensibility of those who conceived them, those who respected and worshipped them, lived in them, used them, etc.. He considers intervention as entering a profound and essential communication with the community, its creations and its ideas and beliefs. The RSF director sees the work of a restorer/conservator beginning with learning from scratch, appreciating both the outcome of and the original intentions for the work; to try to feel the essence of the creator's act, for to restore beauty is to show again the spirit, story, functions and roles that are inherent in the creations. Restoration also starts with a need, an expectation, and a distress call, and it is therefore necessary to evaluate the condition of the work on the basis of these elements.

Dubourg wants another group involved in his projects: Buddhist monks. He feels that temples have resources that allow the monks to do more. He is interested in persuading temples to restore the old parts of it, rather than build new ones, pointing out that he has seen the joy in locals when they saw that faded murals and faltering structures in the place they have worshipped in for years were revitalised and used again.

The following is a summary of a project report produced by RSF on its restoration work in the National Museum in Luang Prabang, Laos in 2003.



Restoration of Paintings in National Museum, Luang Prabang

RSF engaged students of Ecole de l'Art d'Avignon (School of Art, Avignon) in a project to restore paintings inside the National Museum in Luang Prabang, Laos. The effort lasted six weeks, including a two-week workshop in Bangkok at the Silapakorn University. From 15 March to 12 April last year, a team of nine persons worked in Luang Prabang; it consisted of two students from the conservation-restoration section of L'Ecole de l'Art d'Avignon; five RSF professionals (two of whom, Robert himself and Laurence Durand supervised the work on the site); and two students of Fine Arts Group (Lyon) who worked on the photographic documentation of the restoration and conservation activities.

The project was implemented with the support of AFFA (Association Française d'Action Culturelle, Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Ministry of Culture and the Region of Provence Alpes Cote d'Azur. RSF in Bangkok provided financial assistance for the restoration work.

Background

The idea for the project was first discussed when representatives of RSF and La Maison du Patrimoine de Luang Prabang (a heritage organisation of Luang Prabang) met in January 2001 during the conference, 'La conservation et la gestion des monuments ancient et des oeuvres d'art' (the conservation and management of historic monuments and art works). During the conference, organised by the French Embassy, presentations of RSF and its activities attracted the attention of many concerned with heritage conservation not only in Thailand but also the other countries of Southeast Asia. La Maison du Patrimoine de Luang Prabang contacted RSF with regard to conservation matters, and consequently, a decision was made on repairing and restoring the paintings in the National Museum in Luang Prabang, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1995.

La Maison du Patrimoine de Luang Prabang is an inter-ministerial national commission, to whom the Laotian Ministry of Foreign Affairs delegated in 1996 the full responsibility of management and conservation of heritage. The commission was established at the initiative of the mayor of Chinon, France, with the support of funds and technical assistance. The Commission co-ordinates the financial and other support

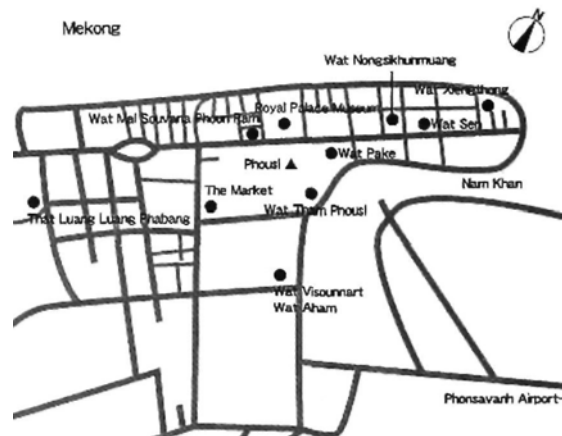
among the several ministries, UNESCO, European Union, the French government, and local French organisations.

Project Site

The National Museum is located at the foot of the Phousi mountain in Luang Prabang. It was constructed with the help of Vietnamese engineers, under French supervision (Luang Prabang was once a protectorate of France). The building was the royal palace of King Sisavangvong, but after the monarchy fell in 1975, it was opened to the public as the National Museum. Divided into numerous halls and rooms which display the throne, the presents that the King received from other countries, and a collection of Buddha images, the museum is of an architectural style that illustrates the combination of traditional Lao motifs and French influence.

The reception room

The paintings that are restored under this project are in the room that used to be the royal reception room. All four walls in the room are covered with huge canvas paintings, which were created in 1930 by the female French painter, Alix de Fautereau, who lived in Southeast Asia in the beginning of the 20th century. She came to Luang Prabang after being commissioned to decorate the walls of this room, making nineteen paintings on canvas that depict life in Luang Prabang then. The artworks were produced from the perspectives of the French painter, and they illustrate the daily local life sensitively. Apparent from the entrance of the museum, the art pieces present and introduce visitors and guests to the everyday aspects of life and customs in Luang Prabang.



Problems encountered

The building of the National Museum, including the walls of the reception room, where the artworks are located, were infested by termites. The paintings were significantly damaged; termites damaged the cellulose as well as the wood, paper, leather, parchment, bone, and ivory. The climate of the country and the conditions of the museum

favoured the proliferation of these organized and social insects which are lucifugous, and which thrive in heat and shumidity.

Conclusion

It seems that the techniques and the materials used for the paintings by Alix de Fautereau in 1930 are totally occidental. The products used in the project were carefully chosen. Several problems are related to these techniques and materials: the use of caséine (sort of glue) to prepare for painting caused a fragmentation of surfaces, as it is a very weak adhesive for oils.

The use of organic colours during that time, because of their weak stability, contributed to considerable deterioration of visual quality in the course of time. It also appears that cotton canvas, which had not been part of the initial plan of decor, was not an ideal material to use in this context.

Results of Survey and Problems of the Collection

Results from the survey before restoration work revealed that thirteen paintings were severely deteriorated. There are various types of treatments for restoring and conserving paintings, such as stretching, incrustation and reproduction for long-term conservation. The paintings required attention for their conditions: broken paint layers, torn fabric, deformation and deterioration of the picture frames (caused by termites). The survey results also indicated that disintegrated paint layers on the paintings needed to be scraped off before repainting.

Insecticides were used, and placed on the wall and in the nail holes to exterminate weevils and other wood insects. The use of insecticide had been accepted as a temporary measure, with the whole building included in the treatment programme. Approval for the treatment plan was sought from the museum's conservator and from La Maison du Patrimoine.

Problems found during restoration

Restoration work had to be conducted in what used to be the Reception Hall of the Royal Palace where the pictures were. As a first step, the parquet floor of the Hall was covered to protect it from dirt.

Working Process

There were five steps in the process:

Removing paintings from frames

Cleaning the frames

Mending

Stretching

Placing linens on the frames

Cleaning the frames

The damaged frames were cleaned by using a knife and scissors to scratch off the dirt caused by termites.

Mending

For mending the canvas, linens were dipped in Plextol 50%, which was diluted with water. The areas around the holes were glued with Polyvinyl. To reinforce the linens and the canvas, medium-thick polyester fabrics dipped in Plextol B500 and Plextol D360 (2:1) were used.

Stretching

Beva 371 was used to stretch the linen.

Place linens on the frames

The damaged frames were cleaned with colourless insecticide products, which were procured in Laos. Each wire used for stretching the canvas was about 10 mm. each.

Analysis

During restoration, painting materials on the canvas were segregated and carefully analysed. The scientific results helped the conservators to comprehend the painting techniques, which led to decisions on the most suitable products for the task.

Canvas

Linen

Cotton

Most of the canvases were linen imported from overseas, along with



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pigments and linolenic oil. According to the treatment plan, the conservators were supposed to use the same types of original materials in the restoration of the paintings. However, in the case of repairing the canvas of the painting above the door, an adaptation was necessary, and the original cotton was replaced by cotton made locally in Laos.

Preparation



*Frame of painting
(view from the back)*

Calcium carbonate, carbohydrate and casein were mixed together to apply to the canvas to reinforce it. It was obvious that at that time the artist was aware of the humidity of the local region, and that casein, as a substance, had adhesive capabilities to prevent against damage from humidity. However, the substance was too harsh for the soft canvas and it caused drooping. Consequently, cracks occurred and pigment layers dropped off. The condition of the painting was quite severe, and fragile. Carbohydrate found on the painting was analysed, and found to have had been pasted during the preparation before painting. Nowadays, this method of blending two substances is unknown but it had been largely used at that time. The mixed compound protected the canvas from water and humidity better, and kept the painting in conditions that could tolerate considerable impact.

Paints and Pigments

The result of the analysis revealed that all the paints used were of good quality and imported from overseas. Some paints were glazed, such as bright red and bright green. These glazed colours did not protect the painting from humidity and light, so the artists needed to apply the opaque paints on them. Local materials were not found in the paints.

After the preparation, two wheel-scaffoldings were put into position. These scaffoldings, which were donated by La Maison du Patrimoine, were 4 metres high, 2 levels, and 6 square metres on each level.

La Maison de Patrimoine had kindly offered help in documenting, removing and returning each painting to its proper place. Tables were set up to place the more important paintings during the conservation process. The conservators took all the paintings down from the wall, laid them on the floor and worked on them together, to make faster progress. There was not enough light, although the throne hall had

many doors and windows, thus gas lamps found at local markets were used to light the room. The preparation lasted a week before the team started working on the paintings.

During the Restoration

Some tasks had to take place outside the museum; for example, making stands to support the stretched canvas, coating and glue-spraying to strengthen the canvas, and cleaning and repairing the stands. Because of the improper sizes of the tables and the number of paintings, two new scaffoldings were made to lay painting frames.

Operation hours corresponded to the office hours of the museum, six hours a day. To make faster progress, the team extended the working period for two more hours each day.

Procurement of Material

There were some difficulties in obtaining necessary materials and equipment, thus some were imported from France and Thailand, such as linen canvas, polyester fabrics, including a few implements used for conservation works (scalpels, etc.). Other supplies included: absorbent papers, newspaper sheets, spraying machines, pliers, hammers, metal sheets, lamps, 90% alcohol solvent and ready-to-use termite insecticide that were found easily in the local area.

At the local market where the staff shopped, it was difficult to find implements appropriate for the conservation work. Language barriers and difficulties of communication with vendors and merchants also slowed down the process. However, some museum officers and native Laotians were able to help the conservators to obtain suitable tools.

The work was gradual, sometimes more rapid, but over time, and with hard work, the team generally succeeded in carrying out the tasks. II

Photographs supplied by RSF

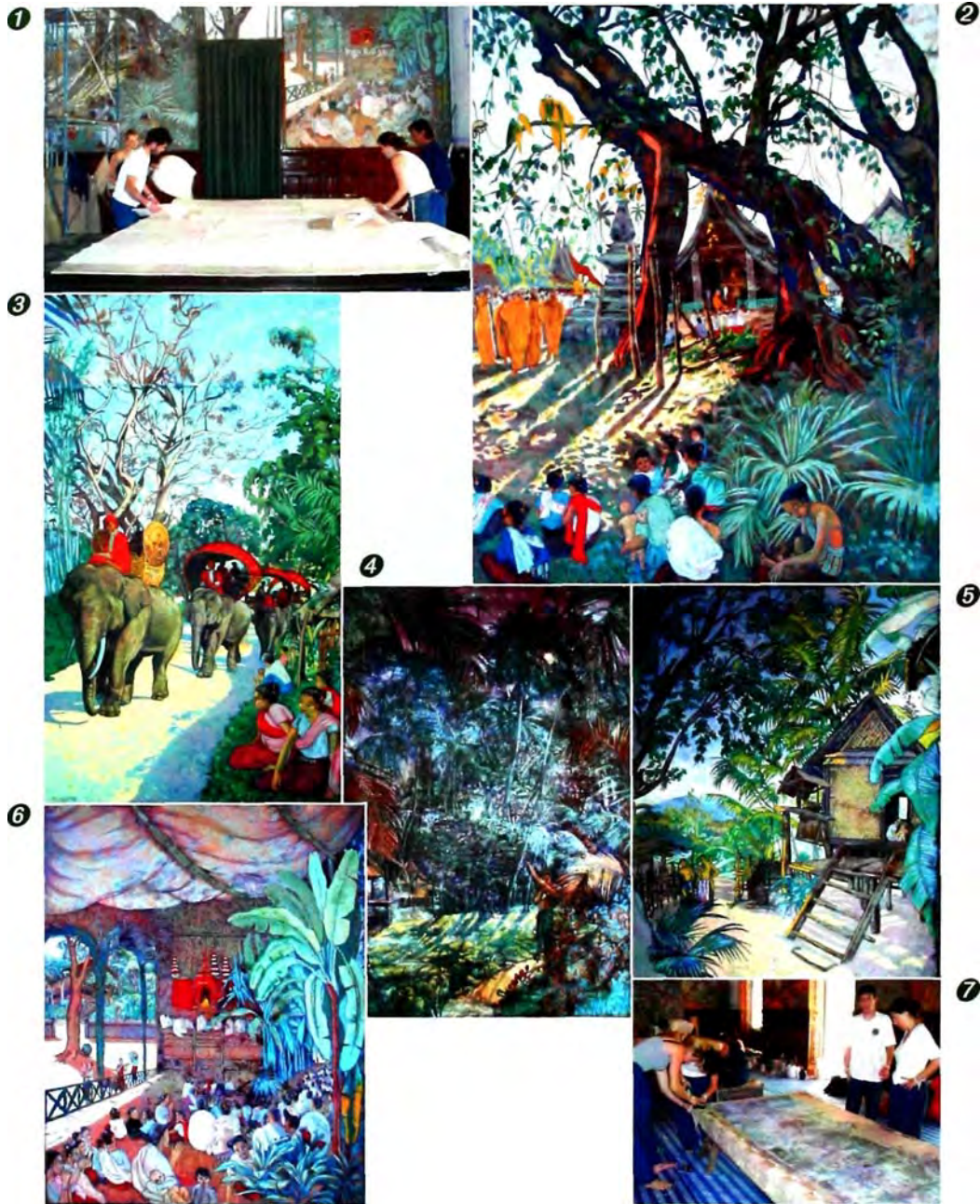


O Temple with monks. Principal colours used: greens, ochres, earth browns and blues.

@ Scene of children in the afternoon, vegetation and a temple on the horizon. Principal colours used: greens, ochres, earth browns, whites, reds and blues.

© The market is depicted in this painting. Different ethnic groups of the country are distinguished by their respective traditional clothings. Principal colours: greens, ochres, earth browns, red and blues.

O The river in the painting seems to be the Nam Khan, a tributary of the Mekong. Principal colours used: greens, ochres, earth browns and blues.



- Treating deformations on a painting, applying humid blotters.
- Painting depicts a religious ceremony in front of a temple. Principal colours used: greens, ochres, earth browns, reds and blues.
- This scene describes a parade of elephants, a day of festivities, perhaps the New Year. In the foreground are young women in traditional dresses, watching the parade. Principal colours used: greens, ochres, earth browns, reds and blues.
- This scene describes the serenity of the town once night has fallen. The main tone of the picture is very dark, with moonlight through the foliage of trees. A man plays an instrument in the foreground, and villagers are at rest. Principal colours used: greens, ochres and earth browns.
- The scene represents a traditional house surrounded by tropical fauna in the morning light. A young mother looks after her child while villagers pass by her house. Principal colours used: greens, ochres, earth browns and cerulean blues.
- © A religious gathering. Principal colours used: greens, ochres, earth browns, reds and blues.
Using small tension bands to stretch and reinforce canvas.