

**THE ART OF  
THE  
ANCIENT  
KINGDOM  
OF CHAMPA  
ITS ORIGINALITY AND DIVERSITY**

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For those who have visited the Bangkok National Museum, the art, or at least the sculpture, of ancient Champa is not completely unknown. And while this art, which is at times so admirable, yet often so perplexing, is not as well represented in the museum as Javanese art, the six sculptures in the collection which were presented to King Rama VII about seventy years ago (fig. 1), reveal certain tendencies which are the most striking and the most unvarying in Cham art. Dating from the 10th to 12th centuries, these six pieces are almost sufficient in showing how different, both in terms of aesthetics and popular themes, the schools of Cham art are from the rest of Southeast Asia.

These sculptures testify to a vision of beings and of objects which is essentially decorative, and a denial of the existence of a division between what is real, or at least what appears to exist, and that which is imaginary. And yet, this art, which is so profoundly original, is often nothing more than a sort of plagiarism of sculptures from the various neighboring or distant regions with which Champa had more or less lasting relations. Yet, if the diverse sources of inspiration or prototypes (whether successive or contemporary) of Cham art, can generally be identified without difficulty, not once has a work of Cham art ever been confused with its prototype. Through many centuries, Cham sculptors have revealed their own unique personality, as well as having shown much refinement in their interpretations. This rule holds true during the eleven troubled centuries of Cham history, whether the subject is animal or human, real or mythical; as well as for floral elements, borrowed from Indian art, the significance of which art historians have forgotten, stressing instead their decorative value.

But before trying to explain Cham art more precisely, without doubt it would be useful to recall in a few words, that this ancient kingdom, which today no longer exists, was in 1177 AD "presumptuous" enough (according to inscriptions) to dare to attack the Khmer capital Angkor, which Chams were valiant enough to seize.

Before finally being absorbed and integrated into Vietnam at the beginning of the 19th century, and following almost incessant conflicts and conquests which lasted 850 years, (which occurred even after Vietnam

became independent) Champa remained the most oriental of the Indianized kingdoms in the Indochinese Peninsula due to its direct contact with Chinese culture and with Sino-Vietnam. Founded at the end of the second century, it was also – with the exception of the southern part of the Malay Peninsula – the only region in the Indochinese Peninsula whose population spoke an Austronesian language.

Without even taking into account geographical conditions, which were hardly favorable for the establishment of national unity (the Cham kingdom,

which extended along some 1,100 kilometers, was compressed between the mountains and the sea, and the whole region consisted of a series of small plains with difficult access to each other except by sea, fig.2) it should be noted that Champa owed its undeniable originality to a

collection of heterogeneous, or even at times antagonistic components: an Austronesian base, a superimposed Indian culture, peaceful or more frequently antagonistic contacts with China and later with Vietnam, contacts with Indonesia (in particular with insular and peninsular Srivijaya), contacts with the Khmer kingdom (which followed the original contacts with Funan)...

With such a historical background and with its almost incessant warfare – which as one knows is never favorable for the flowering of a culture – what is most remarkable is that Cham art was able to develop as it did. If perhaps it lacks homogeneity (is there an art which is perfectly homogeneous?), still it has produced some of the most authentic masterpieces to



FIGURE 1. SIX CHAM SCULPTURES EXHIBITED IN THE BANGKOK NATIONAL MUSEUM



FIGURE 2. MAP OF CHAMPA



FIGURE 3. BUDDHA FOUND AT DONG-DONG. BRONZE. FIRST HALF OF THE FIFTH CENTURY A.D.

be found in all of Southeast Asia. At the center of a production, which at times seems puzzling, and which continued even during the kingdom's most destructive and decadent periods, is an art which never leaves one indifferent. The Chams observed all, copied all, with their own unique vision, often placing very little value on 'classic' beauty, and instead giving grace to that which is graceless, beauty to that which is ugly, and a serene grandeur to that which is nothing but ridiculous.

Various writers have proposed that Cham art is the heir of the Dong-son culture (the civilization famous for its bronze 'kettle' drums). This theory does not take into account all the facts, and if we raise the issue here, it is because this mistaken idea continues to reappear from time to time. The bronze drum culture is a Vietnamese proto-historic culture, or to be more accurate, a Sino-Vietnamese culture, which was for the most part exported by sea routes as far as the Malay Peninsula, and towards the upper part of the Me Nam Klong (Tham Ong Ba) in western Thailand, as well as towards Indonesia (where it became an aspect of the local 'Bronze and Iron' culture). Yet Dong-son culture never appeared in ancient Champa.

In the case of Cham art, it would seem that following a late neolithic period, characterized by ceramic production (the culture of Sahuynh), an Indianized culture, no doubt transmitted through the intermediary of Funan or directly from India by maritime routes, was superimposed in the region. In fact, the most ancient Sanskrit inscription of Southeast Asia, that of Vo-can, dating at the latest to the 3rd century, and found *in situ* near Nha-Trang, marked the farthest limit of Funan. This location would become one of Champa's most sacred sites. But, in contrast, the famous Buddha of Dong-Duong (fig. 3), attributed

rather vaguely to the southern Indian style of "Amaravati," and dated to approximately the first half of the 5th century, could not have been carried to where it was found except by a maritime route. This image thus attests to the probable religious dissemination in Champa of the teachings of Gunavarman (a Kashmiri prince who became a Buddhist monk). He travelled to Nanking at the request of Emperor Wudi of the Sung dynasty in order to teach dhyana (meditation) according to the Sarvastivadin school. He must have arrived in China in 431 after having left Sri Lanka around 413-414 and stopping in Java and Champa.

The two historical 'boundary markers' just mentioned, serve above all in showing the paths by which Indianization left its marks on Champa; they also help to better explain the types of contact established between those regions, either neighboring or distant, with which Champa had relations.

However, even if from the 4th century onwards (according to inscriptions), the Indianization of Champa was an established fact (at

least in part), we must wait until the second half of the 7th century in order to find Cham art which can be dated with any certainty. And, there is a Khmer influence which seems to pervade in the Mi-son E. 1 Cham sculptures of this period. This influence can be explained by the existence of ancient ties with Funan, and even more so by relations with pre-Angkorian Cambodia during the reign of King Isanavaraman (617-634) who was of sufficient notoriety to be mentioned by the Chinese pilgrim Xuan Zang and with whom the surrounding kingdoms wished to establish dynastic relations. Such relations were most likely desired by the kingdom of Dvaravati according to a bronze inscription found at U-thong in Thailand, and most certainly also desired by the Chams.



FIGURE 4. STONE STEPS FOUND AT MI-SON E.1.  
SECOND HALF OF THE SEVENTH CENTURY A.D.



FIGURE 5. GANESHA OF MI-SON E.5. STONE. SECOND HALF OF THE SEVENTH CENTURY A.D.



FIGURE 6. DHARMAPALA (THE LAW GAURDIAN) FROM A VIHARA AT DONG-DUONG. 875 A.D.



FIGURE 7. DVARAPALA (DOOR GAURDIAN) RIDING ON A BEAR AT THE SECOND GOPURA (GATE) AT DONG-DUONG. STONE. 875 A.D.

Although certain Khmer influences are undeniable, these are not sufficient in explaining what constitutes the real beauty of the Mi-son E. 1 works and their indisputable originality. In addition to the compositions being unknown in Khmer art (low pediments, bases with pedestals which are monumental and narrative), their decorations have only slight connections with pre-Angkorian art, and hardly more with so-called "Dvaravati" art. But even this double ancestry does not suffice in explaining everything, because the figures decorating the steps (fig. 4) as well as the compositions of the frame-work of the staircases suggest a connection with southeast India or even Sri Lanka (although Mi-son E. 1 is indisputably Brahmin in outlook.) From such complex sources of inspiration, combined with the undeniable talent of Cham sculptors – a talent which is doubled by a sensibility that is rarely found elsewhere— emerges the true beauty of these 'first' Cham sculptures. The only statue which can be attributed to the same period, the Ganesha of Mi-son E. 5. which is hierarchical and monumental in spite of its small dimensions (fig. 5), does not come close to the same beauty. In fact, this statue confirms how limited Cham dependency on pre-Angkorian iconography was. As it is not a question here of summarizing the history of Cham art, but only to draw attention to what constitutes its originality, we will pass over two centuries without stopping, in order to briefly discuss the art of Dong-duong, an important Buddhist monument. Founded in 875 AD, this edifice gives birth to a style whose power, and at times, whose heaviness and even ugliness, does not limit its originality nor its grandeur (fig. 6). A number of

unique characteristics found here led Ph. Stern, one of the rare scholars of Cham art, to write that this art, which is extremely original, was without a doubt the most profoundly Cham in nature. Although his proposal is seductive, it is not acceptable, unless one believes that the originality of Cham art is due to the most diverse borrowings, which have been remodeled by a very specific type of aesthetics and subjected to profound changes. If one takes into account this reservation, then it is possible, and only then, to regard

the style of Dong-duong as the most authentically Cham. In fact, there is no other art style that has received so many foreign influences— Indonesia, Dravidian, and above all Chinese (figs. 7,8) – in a manner which is so personal, so obviously unrestrained, and yet without altering the most universally accepted aesthetics.

As it would have been difficult to develop any further in the direction described above, the 10th century (style of Tra-Kieu) bears witness to a radical change in Cham art and a return to a conception of beauty which is closer to more generally accepted ideals. In this case, Indonesian influences prevail, leading to a search

for beauty, or for a charm, which is more humane. This profound change induces one to speak of a 'Second Golden Age' of Cham sculpture, the first having been represented by the works of Mi-son E. 1 style. However, such an idea is based on subjective considerations influenced by our Greco-Roman aesthetic. It is certainly permissible to doubt whether the Chams had in mind the same criteria because, during the 10th century, as well as the 9th century, they were not looking to create mere menial copies of their models.



FIGURE 8. BASE OF THE PRINCIPAL SANCTUARY AT DONG-DUONG, SHOWING ON THE TOP PANEL: THE CUTTING OF THE HAIR OF THE BUDDHA, AND ON THE LOWER PANEL: THE GREAT DEPARTURE. STONE. 875 A.D.



FIGURE 9. BASE OF THE DIVINITY OF PO NAGAR AT NHA-TRANG. 965 A.D.



FIGURE 10. STANDING LION FROM TRA-KIEU. NINTH-TENTH CENTURY A.D.

FIGURE 11. FRAGMENT FROM A BASE FROM TRA-KIEU. NINTH-TENTH CENTURY A.D.



No amateur, even the least knowledgeable, could confuse a sculpture form Mi-son or Tra-Kieu with an authentic Javanese piece. Always drawing from the same source – their simple, innate sense of decor – they were inspired to create a number of exceptional pieces, which as a result are superior to the models from which they were copied, as for example the base of the divinity of Po Nagar of Nha-Trang, which probably dates to 965 AD. (fig. 9).

Simultaneously, the traditional interest in Champa for animal figures (with the exception of the horse, which for some reason was generally poorly modeled) led to the limits of reality, often creating a mimicry of animals which is most unexpected, (fig.10) especially in the case of lions. These are mimicked in a manner which appears to be a predecessor of Walt Disney – a style not found elsewhere in the arts of Southeast Asia. This interest pushed the Chams to enrich their list of new and fantastic animals, and as a result they borrowed from the repertoire of Sino-Vietnamese animals, although their interpretations were always quite liberal in comparison to the original models (fig.11).

Advancing more than a century, we stop at the sculptures of Thap-mam, a vast monument, which had already begun to fall apart before it was finished, and which was only discovered in 1934. The sculpture of this unfinished temple dates to approximately the 12th century and is of rich iconographical interest. Inspired by traditional sources, both Indonesian and Sino-Vietnamese, the sculpture is characterized by contradictory tendencies, which however remain within Cham tradition: a search for decorative styles which are puzzling in their excesses (a misuse of heavy ornamentation, sculptural intrusions leading to divinities or fantastic animals being endowed with too heavy trappings) (fig. 12); a contempt for reality in the

representation of animals (whether concerning the morphology or posture of real or mythical animals.) This leads to a certain dryness in representation of human or divine figures. And yet, certain dancing figures– although unfinished– present a new paradox in Cham art, as they can be singled out as the most freely rendered in this school of art (fig.13).

Yet one of the most surprising aspects of this art, of which the influence was the strongest in the monuments of the region of Vijaya, the Cham capital from 1000 to 1477 AD, which was founded after Indrapura was abandoned due to Vietnam's movement towards the south, is that Cham art also held some

influence on Khmer iconography, in particular in the representations of the Garuda (fig. 14). That Cham art helped to promote the evolution of one of the most favored themes in Angkorian art, is not really unexpected. We have already alluded to the conquest of Angkor by Champa in 1177, an exploit, the consequences of which were more disagreeable for the conqueror than for the vanquished because Jayavaraman VII was to inflict a brilliant vengeance (according to Chinese texts) on Champa, the country being more or less completely

occupied by the Khmer until 1200 AD... From this Champa was definitely left weaker and poorer, and became an easy prey for Vietnam which seized Vijaya in 1471.

We could stop our discussion of Cham sculpture at this point, as it is never agreeable to dwell on a decline and its agony... However, we will continue because even up until its last manifestations, although suffering from a mediocrity of technique, the art of Champa maintained some of its more profound qualities. We can no longer look for Brahmanic sources of inspiration, because these, as in Indonesia, were exhausted, and in addition



FIGURE 12. DRAGON FROM THE SIDE OF A STAIRCASE, FROM THAP-MAM. 12TH-13TH CENTURIES A.D.





FIGURE 13. UNFINISHED DANCING FIGURE FROM THAP-MAM. 12TH-13TH CENTURIES A.D.



FIGURE 14. GARUDA FROM THAP-MAM. 12TH-13TH CENTURIES A.D.



FIGURE 15. KUT. LATE CHAM ART

sources of inspiration, because these, as in Indonesia, were exhausted, and in addition Champa had been completely cut off from these sources because the control of maritime routes had fallen into other hands. Thus it is perhaps in the very final works that the true Cham aesthetic ideals appear. It is an art which is more concerned with grandeur, (and the ornaments which evidence this grandeur: it must not be forgotten that statues of divinities were also ornamented with real jewelry) than with correct physical anatomy (fig 15).

Arriving at the end of this discussion, it must be underlined that never has an art, except perhaps, in a very different manner, the diverse pre-Columbian arts, more clearly shown how purely subjective the concept of beauty is, nor how much a personal vision of things and their interpretation could replace the creative imagination...The problem is being able to understand the true significance of 'creation' in artistic terms. In any case, it is possible to like the art of Champa in its entirety or to appreciate only certain works...but in either case it is an art which will never leave one indifferent.