

Angkor Redux: Colonial Exhibitions in France

Dawn Rooney offers tantalising glimpses of late 19th-early 20th century exhibitions that brought the glory of Angkor to Europe.

“I saw it first at the Paris Exhibition of 1931, a pavilion built of concrete treated to look like weathered stone. It was the outstanding feature of the exhibition, and at evening was flood-lit with yellow lighting which turned concrete to gold (Fig. 1). I had then never heard of Angkor Wat and thought this was just a flight of fancy, a wonder palace built for the occasion, not a copy of a temple long existent in the jungle of French Indo-China.

But within I found photographs and read descriptions that introduced me to the real Angkor and that nest of temples buried with it in the jungle. I became familiar with the reliefs and carved motifs that decorated its walls, and that day I formed a vow: Some day . . . Somehow. . .” – Claudia Parsons, ‘Vagabondage’, 1941

For many, such as Claudia Parsons, awareness of the Angkorian kingdom and its monumental temples came through the International Colonial Exhibitions held in France in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when French colonial presence in the East was at a peak. Much earlier, the Dutch had secured domination over Indonesia, the Spanish in the Philippines, and the British in India and Burma. France, though, did not become a colonial power in Southeast Asia until the last half of the nineteenth century when it obtained suzerainty over Cambodia, Vietnam (Cochin China, Tonkin, Annam) and, lastly, Laos. Thus, the name ‘French Indochina’ was coined not only because of the location of the three countries between



Fig 1. Angkor Wat, Colonial Exhibition, night view, Paris, 1931



Fig 2.
Shrine of King Sisowath
commemorating the French-Thai
Treaty of 1907, Phnom Penh

two giants – India and China – but also because they absorbed influences from both of them, although not equally.

In August 1863, France signed a protectorate that gave it administrative control over Cambodia except for the northwestern provinces of Battambang, Sisophon and Siemreap (where the ancient capital of Angkor is located). The three provinces remained in Siamese (now Thai) hands until April 1907 when they were returned to Cambodia after a treaty between France (signing on behalf of Cambodia) and Thailand was made. A postcard published by Ludovic Crespin circa 1915 depicts a shrine commemorating this historic event at the base of Phnom (hill) in Phnom Penh. The king sits on a throne with three princesses standing on his left, representing the three provinces that were returned to Cambodia (Fig. 2). Another postcard features a map that clearly shows the demarcation after the 1907 treaty (Fig. 3).



Fig 4. *Le Petit Journal*, 24 June 1906

France hosted several large international exhibitions highlighting their colonial empire between 1889 and 1937. Southeast Asia was still an anomaly to Europeans in the late nineteenth century, and so the idea of an exhibition designed to bring together displays of a country's economic and cultural interests abroad took hold. News media, such as *Le Petit Journal* (Fig. 4), posters, and postcards widely disseminated information about the exhibitions. Postcards with scenes of places other than Angkor, and marked 'Exposition Coloniale Paris 1906' on the face confirm that postcards were used to give the public a different view of France's colonial empire in Cambodia. An example is an elaborately decorated boat on the Bassac River at Phnom Penh, illustrating the annual water festival that is held to give thanks to the spirits for the bountiful supply of water in the past year. Boat races highlight the grand, three-day celebration (Fig. 5).

Postcards issued between 1900 and 1931 feature Cambodian pavilions that were constructed by the French for international exhibitions. Models of Angkor Wat and the Bayon, two twelfth-thirteenth century Angkorian temples, imitated the originals enough to make an immense impression on Europeans at that time. The pavilions dominated the Indochinese sector, and attracted widespread attention because of their uniqueness, size and exotic appearance.



Fig 3. Postcard with a map showing the demarcation after the 1907 treaty



Fig 5. Annual Water Festival

The Kingdom of Angkor (Fig. 6)

“Angkor was once the heart of a magnificent kingdom and what an immense city it was – and is.” - Harry A. Franck, ‘East of Siam, Ramblings in the five divisions of French Indo-China’



Fig 6. A postcard, with snippets of temple views, circa 1906

Angkor, capital of the Khmer Empire, was a large kingdom in Southeast Asia, and at its peak in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, its territorial control extended beyond Cambodia to northeastern Thailand, the Malay Peninsula and parts of Laos and Burma (now Myanmar). Reconstruction of Angkor’s history is a work in progress as new discoveries continue to be

made. Epigraphists translate inscriptions written in Sanskrit, Pali and Khmer; art historians and conservators analyze sculpture; geologists, anthropologists and scientists study other aspects. The most extensive material evidence of Angkor is the remains of temples built of brick and stucco or sandstone that are spread over a vast area of more than 200 square kilometres. Thirty-nine kings ruled the Khmer Empire for over 600 years beginning in the early ninth century, and each one strove to create a symbolic relationship between the ruler and the divinity to ensure harmony on earth and prosperity for the kingdom. The kings built temples that embodied their power, and emulated an earthly microcosm of the macrocosmic world.

Angkor Wat, the creation of King Suryavarman II, was built at the pinnacle of Khmer artistic skill and creativity. A later king, Jayavarman VII, constructed several large monastic complexes and the Royal City of Angkor Thom with the Bayon temple at the centre. However, after his death, circa 1218, no other temples were built, and the kingdom dwindled gradually. It suffered from invasions by the Thais, loss of manpower, overbuilding, depletion of the forests, weakening of central power and increasing autonomy in the provinces. Then, after a long seven-month siege by the expanding Thai Kingdom of Ayutthaya in the mid-fifteenth century, the inhabitants of Angkor migrated to Oudong, Lovek, and eventually established a capital at Phnom Penh where it remains today.

What happened to Angkor after the Khmers left? Angkor Wat and a few other temples were maintained by Buddhist monks; most, though, were neglected and at the mercy of the rapidly growing tropical jungle for more than 400 years. A few Portuguese, Spanish and French missionaries and German, British and Japanese travellers saw Angkor, and reported their findings. Charles-Emile Bouvillevaux, a French missionary, published the first report on Angkor in the mid-nineteenth century. It was not, however, until the diaries of Henri Mouhot, a French naturalist, were presented posthumously in March 1862 at the Royal Geographical Society in London that an awareness of and interest in Angkor developed. Perhaps it was because Mouhot’s diaries, published in 1868, included the first drawings of the site.

Commander Doudart de Lagrée, a French naval officer, led a Mekong Expedition in 1866-7 to explore the Mekong River with the aim of establishing commercial relations between southern China and southern Vietnam. Two notable members of the mission were Francis Garnier, deputy, and Louis Delaporte, draftsman. En route, the expedition visited the ruins of Angkor. Detailed notes and drawings by Delaporte provided early views of the temples. He subsequently organised four archaeological missions to Angkor between 1873 and 1897 during which sculptures were removed and mouldings were made of objects that would be of interest to museums in France (Fig. 7). A gigantic stone balustrade from the late twelfth-century temple of Preah Khan was displayed at the Paris Universal Exhibition in 1878. It is one of a pair of sculptures with 108 demons on one side and the same number of gods on the other side; they hold the scaly body of a naga (serpent) which terminates with its nine heads rising upwards, and spread



Fig 7. Transporting sculpture from Angkor, drawing by Louis Delaporte, 1880



Fig 8. Naga balustrade, Preah Khan Temple, Angkor, 13th C, in Musée Guimet, Paris

like a fan. Today, this structure is at the entrance of the Khmer gallery in the Musée Guimet (Fig. 8).

The École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) was founded at the end of the nineteenth century (1898) to carry out research on the archaeological and philological exploration of the Indochinese Peninsula, and to contribute, by every means possible, to the understanding of its history, its monuments, and its languages. Work on the Angkorian monuments did not begin in earnest, however, until after 1907 when the three provinces were ceded back to Cambodia. Thereafter, the French worked tirelessly for nearly three-quarters of a century

clearing jungle that had overtaken the monuments, building roads to give access to the temples, documenting their work, and setting up the Archaeological Park of Angkor.

Angkor Wat (the city that is a temple)

“Angkor Wat is the most remarkable body of ruins in the world, whether one regarded the prodigious magnitude of the ground plan, the grandiose dimensions of the principal palaces, and temples, or the artistic beauty and delicacy of the bas-reliefs and sculpture.” - Hon. George N. Curzon, ‘Journeys in French Indo-China’, The Geographical Journal

An architectural masterpiece, Angkor Wat is unequalled in composition, balance, proportion and carving. The Hindu temple is the largest religious stone monument in the world. Construction began soon after King Suryavarman II ascended the throne in CE 1113, and it was completed sometime after his death in CE 1150. In contrast to most Khmer temples which are entered from the east, the main entrance of Angkor Wat is at the west, the direction presided over by the Hindu god Vishnu to whom the temple is dedicated.

Khmer masons, decorators and painters constructed the Angkor Wat pavilion for the colonial exhibitions in France. Only part of the plan was recreated but it was enough to make Angkor Wat the most spectacular of all the pavilions. A wide moat and wall enclose the original temple. In the exhibitions, though, the moat was replaced with a pond that reflected the towers, just like the original (Fig. 9). Even in the truncated version, it was possible to perceive the temple’s superb symmetry and repetitive elements.



Fig 9. The towers of Angkor Wat reflected in the surrounding pond, Colonial Exhibition, Marseille, 1922



Fig 10. Causeway leading to the entrance of Angkor Wat, Colonial Exhibition, Paris, 1931

Two long causeways flanked by naga balustrades led to the entrance (Fig. 10). The cruciform-shaped Terrace of Honour, in front of the central entrance, served as the stage for performances of the royal ballet where scenes from the Ramayana and other popular epics from Hindu mythology were enacted (Fig. 11).

Although Angkor Wat looks like it is on one level from the entrance, the temple actually rises to an astonishing height of 65 metres from the ground to the top of the central tower. Its height is achieved through three elevated levels, each one surrounded by a gallery decorated with carvings. Twelve sets of stairs with 40 steps each ascend at a 70-degree angle giving access to the top level (Fig. 12). Five lotus-bud shaped towers (one in each corner and a central one) representing the five peaks of Mount Meru, the centre of the universe, adorn the top most level and are a timeless symbol of Angkor, as ubiquitous as ever (Fig. 13).



Fig 11. Royal Cambodian Dancers, Angkor Wat



Fig 13. Five lotus-bud shaped towers of Angkor Wat, Colonial Exhibition, Paris, 1931



Fig 12. Steps leading to the top level of Angkor Wat, Colonial Exhibition, Paris, 1931

The Bayon

“No better mask can be put on to a face than that of a smile. Slightly curving lips, eyes placed in shadow by the lowered lids utter not a word and yet force you to guess much.” – P. Juennerat de Beerski, ‘Angkor: Ruins in Cambodia’

The architectural scale and composition of the Bayon are majestic, and the elements juxtapose harmoniously. The whole is eternally protected by some 200 faces on each side of more than 50 towers. It is generally accepted that the faces are those of the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, a being in Mahayana Buddhism, and that they represent the omnipresence of the king. Pierre Loti, a French naval officer, saw the Bayon in 1900, and wrote in his diaries that the towers are *“... so far exceeding human proportions that it requires a moment or two to fully comprehend them.”* The temple gives a powerful and yet primitive impression. Its thick, dense grey sandstone blocks layer, one on top of the other, to form the square profile of the temple culminating in a central, circular mass

Cambodia in Colonial Exhibitions (Exposition Coloniale Internationale) in France

The Cambodian pavilions in early colonial exhibitions in France were less authentic than later ones because the French did not have sufficient access to the site to make drawings, to take photographs or make casts of the sculptures until after 1907.

While attendees were fascinated by the massive Eiffel Tower – soaring to the sky at 324 metres – that was built as the entrance arch to the 1889 international exhibition, it was the Cambodian female divinities that captured the attention of Paul Gauguin (1848-1903),



Fig 14. Cambodian pavilion, Colonial Exhibition, Paris, 1900



Fig 15. The Cambodian tower (the Bayon), Colonial Exhibition, Marseille, 1906



Fig 16. The Bayon, drawing by Louis Delaporte, 1880

a post-impressionist Parisian artist best known today for his paintings of the people and landscapes of French Polynesia (Tahiti and the Marquesas Islands). Two years later, Gauguin left France for Tahiti, and one of his earliest works was a painting of a Tahitian female standing in repose which was inspired by the ethereal apsaras/devatas (celestial nymphs) of Angkor Wat that he had seen at the exhibition in Paris in 1889. The 1900 pavilion featured a modern-style Cambodian Buddhist temple built on a mound with a staircase flanked by stone lions and two guardian figures at the entrance to the temple (Fig. 14).

In 1906, an attempt was made to replicate the Bayon temple (Fig. 15). It was, though, more of a fantasy that drew inspiration from drawings made by Delaporte in the late 1800s rather than from the original temple (Fig. 16). Nevertheless, the structure with its monumental, enigmatic faces adorning all four sides of the central tower dominated the Indochinese pavilion.



Fig 17. King Sisowath of Cambodia (r. 1904-27)

An official visit to France by King Sisowath (r. 1904-27) of Cambodia in 1906 marked the peak of French colonial expansion. He was sixty-six years old and the first Cambodian king to visit Europe. Sisowath sailed from Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh) on a French liner to Marseille. The French received King Sisowath graciously. He was described by the press as a “good-humoured man of medium height, with large, expressive eyes, and a heavy-lipped mouth with a thin moustache” (Fig. 17). During the visit to the exhibition, he wore a silk *sampot chang kben* (a formal silk, pant-like garment), black silk stockings, a western-style tailcoat and white gloves (Fig. 18).

Some 100 royal Cambodian dancers and musicians accompanied him, and they attracted enormous attention (Fig. 19). The dancers, in unique costumes and headresses, and their movements as well as the music, possessed an exotic quality (see Fig. 11). The entourage, soon after landing at Marseille, went to Paris where the President of France hosted a garden party for the king in July 1906, and the Royal Cambodian dancers and musicians performed. Françoise-Auguste-René Rodin, the renowned French sculptor, saw a performance in the Bois de Boulogne, and mesmerized by the beauty and uniqueness, he said: “I contemplated them in ecstasy!”. He was so besotted with the dancers that he



Fig 18. King Sisowath of Cambodia visiting the 1906 Colonial Exhibition in Paris



Fig 19. One of King Sisowath's premier dancers



Fig 20. Drawing with watercolour by Auguste Rodin, 1906

followed them back to Marseille where he spent a week making more than 150 drawings focusing on their female sensuality, lithe bodies and sensuous movements. He later added a subtle palette in watercolour to the drawings (Fig. 20). When the dancers left France, Rodin commented that they "... took with them all the beauty of the world." Today, these pieces are in the Rodin Museum in Paris, and are considered amongst the highlights of his art.

When it was time to leave France, French officials escorted King Sisowath to the port of Marseilles, wished him a safe return journey, bid farewell, and departed. The king, though, did not leave. Instead, he went back to Paris where he stayed for several more months, and returned to Cambodia just in time to sign the French-Thai Treaty of 1907 that gave Angkor back to Cambodia.

1922

The size of the Angkor-inspired pavilions more than doubled between the 1906 exhibition and those of 1922 and 1931, probably because of the growing public interest and increased attendance at the exhibitions. It was also due to the temples being returned to Cambodia in 1907, after which the representation of Cambodian pavilions became more authentic. The model of Angkor Wat built for the colonial exhibition in Marseille that opened in February 1922 was the largest of all pavilions (Fig. 21). Auguste Émile Joseph Delaval was the chief architect of the model, the interior of which contained some 35,000 plaster casts made of carvings and sculpture. Original sculpture and cast moulds of decorations in the collections of the Musée Guimet and the Musée Khmer au Palais du Trocadero were also on display. An effort was made to create a replica close to the original for the exhibition although it was scaled down in size. The apex, though, was the

readily recognizable quincunx of lotus-bud shaped towers, making it amongst the most impressive pavilions at the 1922 exhibition.

1931

The greatest of all colonial exhibitions in France took place at Lake Daumesnil, Paris, in 1931. It opened in May 1931, and closed six months later. The pavilion occupied 110 hectares of the Bois de Vincennes, and featured the reconstructed grand temple of Angkor Wat, including sculpture and bas-reliefs made from plaster molds. It took six years to build the temple, under the supervision of Charles and Gabriel Blanche, father and son architects; George Auberlet, a French architect, was the sculptor.

The reliefs on the walls of the first and second galleries were replicated, which gave the visitor a sense of the interior. Apsaras on the inner walls of the gallery are one of the most renowned decorative elements at Angkor Wat, where some 1,700 female apsaras, carved in stone, stand in sublime beauty and grace. These exquisite and sensuous creatures, created to please the gods, appear singly or in pairs or triplets, and face the central tower. They are dressed in luxurious attire, and bejeweled with gold and precious gems.

Each one wears an ankle-length, filmy skirt that clings to her legs; a belt inlaid with precious gems holds it in place. Her upper arms, wrists and ankles bear



Fig 21. Angkor Wat, Colonial Exhibition, Marseille, 1922



Fig 22. Apsaras adorn the walls of Angkor Wat, Colonial Exhibition, Paris, 1931

elaborate jewellery, and a sumptuous necklace drapes gracefully around her neck. Sometimes her headdress is like the spires of the great temple itself, and other times it is a tapering tiara that sets off her upswept hair (Fig. 22). Casts had been made of the originals for the exhibitions, so the apsaras at the exhibition gallery were exact replicas.

“I spent a week at Angkor. I could not have done with a day less...On my last visit to this temple I sat and watched the sunset from the topmost shrine...Sitting up here, I thought of those concrete steps that I had seen in Paris, put up for a temporary exhibition...I saw why the flood-lighting at the exhibition had been golden, only gold wasn't really the right shade. Away and away the jungle stretches over flat country, and the sun has an uninterrupted view of the towers till it plunges into a green ocean of trees. By that time the light is vermilion.

And now the sun went down on Angkor. But it would come again tomorrow, when I would be starting back over the long road home. Would the road be empty, I

wondered, now that ambition was fulfilled? But emptiness is a thing of mind, not space.” – Claudia Parsons, ‘Vagabondage’

In the first three decades of the 20th century, International Colonial Exhibitions in France were designed to boost trade and give the world a sense of France's colonial empire. In 1931, over 33 million visitors had the opportunity to see two of Cambodia's majestic Khmer temples. They could admire the architectural genius, the rhythmic symmetry, and the delicate carvings adorning the walls of Angkor Wat's galleries; and they saw the Bayon with its imposing towers carved with four faces expressing the enigmatic 'smile of Angkor'. A visitor could walk inside, and view the interior architecture, examples of food stuffs, clothing, fisheries, and forest products. Postcards capturing these various aspects were also available for sale. For most visitors, the temples were their first exposure to Khmer art and culture.

An international exhibition of the arts and techniques in modern life was held in the Bois de Boulogne, Paris, in 1937, and although it included hybrid representations of Angkor Wat and the Bayon, the pavilion was a greatly reduced version

of previous ones. During the post-depression years, the possibility of travelling to Angkor reached unprecedented heights in the 1930s, and allowed tourists to go to Angkor, and experience the original temples. Transpacific voyages became the norm. Luxury ocean liners, such as those of the Dollar Steamship Line, plied the seas between the west coast of the states and Asia. Air France, formed in 1933, flew to the French Colonies. Other European airlines followed with flights to Asia. The Thomas Cook Group offered round-the-world tours calling at ports in Indochina. During the same period, work at Angkor was progressing under the auspices of the EFEO. Increased roads, the clearing of more temples, further restoration, and additional tourist facilities such as local transport, hotels, and eateries, made travelling to Angkor more appealing and rewarding.

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