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Angkor Wat: A History

This encyclopedic study of the twelfth-century Cambodian temple of Angkor Wat is itself a towering accomplishment. Painstakingly researched over a ten-year period, it presents an in-depth exploration of the shifting and multilayered values accorded to Angkor Wat over the past 150 years. Published in two combined volumes with a total of 1,150 pages of text and approximately 1,400 color and black-and-white illustrations, maps, and architectural plans, this is the most comprehensive and exhaustive study of Angkor Wat’s modern history ever assembled. Based on extensive multi-country archival research that revealed a wide range of previously untapped sources, it is unlikely that it will ever be surpassed in terms of its scope or depth of focus.

Michael Falser approaches Angkor Wat (and Angkor in general) as a “place of memory” with ever-changing symbolic meaning through the colonial, postcolonial, and national periods (vol. 1, p. 2). As a result of various conservation, heritage, and staging strategies, it has become a transcultural “heterotopia,” “a site of limited and controlled access, illusion, deviation and compensation,” as well as a “third space” where colonial, global, and universal concepts have been reinterpreted through local agency to yield new “hybrid” understandings (vol. 2, p. 13; vol. 1, p. 6). As a “transcultural heritage product,” the “career” of Angkor Wat has resulted from specific “affordance qualities” and “actionable capacities” that have enabled it to serve various purposes and for which it has been exploited (vol. 1, p. 18). After its initial construction as a Hindu temple dedicated to the god Viṣṇu and its subsequent conversion to a Buddhist shrine, it became a secularized artifact of art/architectural history and an icon of cultural heritage for various stakeholders, including French colonizers, the independent nation of Cambodia, and the international heritage and tourist industries.

In a lengthy introduction, eight chapters, and an epilogue, the first volume (Angkor in France: From Plaster Casts to Exhibition Pavilions) traces the permutations of Angkor Wat’s “cultural heritage-making” from the French colonial imaginaire “into the Cambodian postcolonial psyche” (p. 18).
Through a nineteenth-century French colonial lens, Angkor Wat’s architectural features, which corresponded well to the Beaux-Arts aesthetic, and its potentially grand performative qualities offered a vehicle for the French “civilizing mission” of salvage, restoration, and replication—all of which ultimately amounted to the dispossession of Angkor Wat from the Khmer and its incorporation into French patrimony. The material appropriation and “translation” of Angkor Wat from Cambodia to France occurred through various means, including the willful misrepresentation of Angkor as entirely abandoned by Khmer people, photography and publications, the pillaging of artifacts, plaster cast replicas, and architectural pavilions at “universal exhibitions” (the last two being the primary focus of volume 1).

Alongside initial French exploration of the region and the first efforts to document Angkor (chapters 1–2), Angkor Wat (and Cambodia in general) came to be staged primarily in France as a decayed civilization requiring French intervention and salvation. A long succession of hybrid multimedia exhibitions and architectural pastiche-pavilions—eventually triggering a sort of Angkormania—are explained in illuminating detail: the Universal Exhibition of 1867 in Paris (chapter 1); the Musée khmer in Compiègne and the Universal Exhibition of 1878 in Paris (chapter 2); Louis Delaporte’s Musée Indo-chinois in Paris (ca. 1880–1925) and the Ethnographic Museum in Berlin (chapter 3); the Universal Exhibition of 1889 in Paris (chapter 4); the expositions in Paris (1900), Lyon (1894), Bordeaux (1895), Rouen (1896), and the National Colonial Exhibition of Marseille in 1906, which famously included forty-two Khmer dancers and twelve musicians (chapter 5); the National Colonial Exhibition of Marseille 1922, also accompanied by indigenous performers (chapter 6); the grandest spectacle of them all, the 1931 Exposition Coloniale Internationale in Paris (chapter 7), which made Angkor Wat a “global icon of cultural heritage” but also triggered an anti-colonial backlash (p. 324); and finally the 1937 International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life (chapter 8), also in Paris, which emphasized the “living heritage” performances of arts and crafts traditions that had been “revived” under colonial tutelage. As part of his goal to avoid reinforcing “the old-fashioned dichotomy between the West and the non-West,” Falser concludes volume 1 with an epilogue that considers two case studies of “cross-Asian” reception, translation, and appropriation of Angkor Wat: nineteenth-century Siamese claims to the Angkorian inheritance, including a reduced-scale replica of Angkor Wat, and, in a show of Hindu universalism and nationalism, recent plans to build an enlarged replica (“mega translation”) of Angkor Wat near Patna in northern India (p. 407).

In four chapters and a second epilogue, volume 2 (Angkor in Cambodia: From Jungle Find to Global Icon) investigates how the colonial cultural, aesthetic, and performative values of Angkor Wat—as well as the concept of cultural heritage—were transferred (“back-translated”) to Cambodia such that the actual site was “gradually assimilated to its equivalent role model on temporary stage[s] ten thousand kilometres away” (p. 38). This process began with the French colonial efforts to map Angkor; establish a protected zone and archaeological park (eventually becoming, according to Falser, an “archaeological theme park” [p. 39]); and develop tourism through infrastructure, guidebooks, and itineraries (chapter 9). A noteworthy contribution of chapter 9 is its thorough chronological analysis of the debates surrounding the “conservation” of the Angkor temples, the development of various physical intervention strategies used by colonial administrators, and the problems and challenges that occurred as a result (including, in the years leading to World War II, the unfortunate practice by the French authorities of offering original artworks for public sale or as diplomatic gifts). From efforts to clear the temples of vegetation (and local people), these strategies expanded to involve various types and degrees of conservation, restoration, and ultimately total
(re)construction with the aim, according to Falser, “to make Angkor Park a picture-perfect archaeological heritage reserve” and “a kind of ‘back-translation’ of the ‘theme park’-like setting around the Angkor Wat replica in the Paris 1931 International Colonial Exhibition” (p. 119).

Intertwining the narrative with technical details, Falser provides an excellent account of the historical vicissitudes of Angkor Wat through wars, postcolonial developments, and regime changes. Chapter 10 focuses on the postindependence period (1953–70) when the French colonial conceptions of Angkor and its “inheritance” were mobilized by Norodom Sihanouk as the basis of his campaign of Buddhist socialism, nation-building, and modernization. During this period Angkor’s temples and the reimagination of the Angkorian King Jayavarman VII (r. ca. 1182/83–1219/20 CE) served as models for Sihanouk’s nationwide building and revival campaign, New Khmer Architecture, historical reenactments, and cultural heritage diplomacy. This diplomacy included tours of Angkor, “traditional” Khmer dance, and sound-and-light shows in front of Angkor Wat, all staged as “heritage commodities” after the fashion of the French colonial expositions but now repurposed to serve the political needs of Sihanouk (p. 216).

Chapter 11 provides a detailed examination of the fate of Angkor during the conflicts of the 1970s from Sihanouk’s overthrow (1970) and the Khmer Republic (1970–75) through the Khmer Rouge period (Democratic Kampuchea, 1975–79) and the Vietnamese occupation (People’s Republic of Kampuchea, 1979–89). Falser has turned up a wealth of interesting details about this relatively under-researched twenty-year period in the history of Angkor Wat, perhaps most notably about the North Vietnamese occupation of the Angkor site during the early 1970s. Among his conclusions are that—despite war, genocide, neglect, vandalism, and the illicit market in antiquities—Angkor Wat was not seriously damaged because the competing regimes appropriated its prestige as “a rhetorical framing device” for each of their respective cultural heritage and inheritance claims (p. 396). In a twist of received wisdom, he argues that it was not Sihanouk or UNESCO to first “instrumentalize” the concept of Angkor as “cultural heritage of/for humanity,” but rather the idea appeared first during the Khmer Republic and was then consolidated by the Khmer Rouge government-in-exile of the 1980s who “successfully took the archaeological site of Angkor diplomatic hostage for their struggle for political survival” (pp. 304, 396).

Chapter 12, covering the years from 1987 to 1993, offers a critical analysis of the developmental steps toward the establishment of Angkor Park as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1992. Among the noteworthy arguments in this chapter are that the conceptualization, organization, administration practices, and conservation approaches of the park were essentially “recycled” from the French colonial period, and that the nomination process was misused and expedited to bolster UNESCO’s “cultural-political prestige and leadership claim at the ideological threshold of the Cold War into a new globalised era of heritage politics” (pp. 325, 400). Falser furthermore argues that various national lobby groups exploited the notion of humanitarian aid to Cambodia in order “to secure their long-term share over prestigious Angkor Park far beyond any ad hoc emergency measures” (p. 326). He characterizes this as a “neo-colonial dispossession strategy … incapacitating Cambodia’s own natural (i.e., national) role in managing its own site on its own terms in the present and in the future, and at whatever pace was deemed appropriate” (p. 331). Thus, “the ‘enacted utopia’ (after Foucault) of an archaeological heritage reserve called Angkor Park as ‘world heritage’ itself became a veritable ‘world’s (af)fair’ where over-restored temple sites were now presented, like picture-perfect pavilions in universal and colonial exhibitions, by various national (but not Cambodian) teams” (p. 403).
According to him, the management of Angkor has been “totally internationalised ... with approximately twenty countries implementing some sixty projects in Angkor Park over a time span of almost thirty years” with local authority consequently reduced and marginalized (p. 405). While this is indeed lamentable, his summary of various projects (in chapters 11, 12, and the epilogue of volume 2) includes both missteps and what strike me as undeniable technical accomplishments worthy of praise as well as criticism. And, as Falser’s story of Angkor Wat demonstrates, although Khmer people have sometimes been swept aside, marginalized, and ignored, they have also been heavily invested in the site, its protection, and its interpretation.[1] It may be that Falser has overlooked some Khmer perspectives and contributions in his discussion of recent conservation and restoration efforts.[2]

Despite the generally high level of research, there are some errors, gaps, and contradictions scattered throughout the two volumes. These are primarily related to historical matters (pre-nineteenth century) and are mostly incidental to the author’s focus, but the result is that these discussions do not always measure up to the standards set by the rest of the publication. On page 11 (vol. 1), for example, Falser comments on the “Sanskrit script”; Sanskrit of course is a language that has been written in various scripts. When mentioning early inscriptions, the author does not cite them by inventory number or scholarly bibliography. This leaves the reader no means to follow up or verify his statements. For example, in a discussion of Angkor Wat’s names, he writes, “the temple name Vrah Visnuloka or Brah Bisnulok was found on a seventeenth-century inscription” by which he presumably means IMA 16b dated 1632 CE (vol. 1, p. 12). It is perhaps worth noting that this name (Brah Bisnulok), likely indicating Angkor Wat, occurs in earlier inscriptions (IMA 2 & 3, both dating to the late sixteenth century), and that it is probably derived from twelfth-century inscriptions (K. 298:2 and K. 298:17) that identify King Suryavarman II, the original patron of Angkor Wat, by his posthumous name, Paramaviṣṇuloka, “He who has gone to the highest world of Viṣṇu.”[3] Similarly, Falser states that “inscriptions inside the bas-relief galleries of Angkor Wat name Brah Bisnukar as the architect, although he most probably only finalised the overall project after the death of Suryavarman II” without referencing any specific inscriptions mentioning Braḥ Bisṇukār (e.g., IMA 27/1671 CE and K. 301 or IMA 38/1701 CE (vol. 1, p. 12).[4] And there is no discussion of the fact that Braḥ Bisṇukār is Middle Khmer for Viśvakarman (Sanskrit), the divine artist/architect, and therefore reflects the seventeenth-century Khmer tradition regarding Angkor Wat’s celestial origin.[5] The names of the original twelfth-century architects and artists of Angkor Wat are in fact unknown. We do, however, know the name of the royal artisan, Braḥ Mahidhara (inscription K. 296/1546 CE), who oversaw the carving of the third enclosure’s northeastern reliefs during the sixteenth century.[6] Unfortunately, this information goes unmentioned. Contrary to the author’s implication, the name “Angkor Wat” did not appear during the nineteenth century but rather by the seventeenth (IMA 27 as Braḥ Aṇgkar Vatt; IMA 17 as Braḥ Nagaravāt).[7]

Falser refers to Ta Reach, the large statue standing in the southern portion of Angkor Wat’s west gate (third enclosure), as “the great Vishnu” without consideration of an alternative (and more likely) view that this much-restored image with unclear iconography (assemblage?) was originally a Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara that postdates the construction of the temple and is therefore unlikely to have been Angkor Wat’s original principal cult image (vol. 1, p. 13).[8] At one point, Angkor Wat is mistakenly characterized as having been “originally Shivaist,” while elsewhere the author recognizes that it was dedicated to Viṣṇu before becoming a Buddhist sanctuary (vol 1, p. 413). The temples of Pre Rup and Prasat Kravan are said to date to the ninth century; however, both were built during the
In a discussion of Wat Phra Kaew in Bangkok, reference is made to “the library [PL: Phra Mondop] with four ninth-century Buddha figures at its corners, which Mongkut brought home from the Javanese temple site of Borobudur” (vol. 1, p. 414). These Buddhas are thought to have actually originated from a different Javanese temple, Candi Plaosan, and they were not acquired by King Mongkut (r. 1851–68) but by his son, King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910), during his 1896 visit to Java.[9] The statues presently at the corners of the Phra Mondop are copies made in 1982 when the originals were relocated to the Museum of the Emerald Buddha Temple, where they continue to reside.[10] Chulalongkorn did, in fact, acquire five Buddhas from Borobudur, and, while they were displayed for a time on the terrace south of the Phra Mondop, his son, King Vajiravudh (r. 1910–25), relocated them to other temples in Bangkok, where they remain.[11] Given the focus on the various “translations” of Angkor Wat, including in-depth coverage of replicas and miniatures, the prominently placed model behind the Silver Pagoda in Phnom Penh’s Royal Palace complex is conspicuous by its total absence from this study.

Editing should have caught some spelling/transliteration inconsistencies that occasionally encumber the text. For example, Javanese temples are variably referred to as “candi” and “tjandi” (see vol. 2, p. 162n75); one encounters both “Sukarno” and “Sokarno”; and some English readers may be unfamiliar with German transliterations, such as Chruschtschow (Khrushchev) and Breschnew (Brezhnev). The names of some scholars are misspelled, for example, “Bruno Brughier” [Bruguier] and “Charlotte Schmied” [Schmid] (vol. 2, pp. 339, 423).

However, typos such as these are remarkably few for a publication of such length and detail. The presentation is extremely well organized with a clear overall introduction, “preliminary reflections” to both volumes, summaries of prior content at the beginning of each chapter, and chapter-by-chapter “findings and conclusions” for each of the two volumes. On the one hand, this results in a level of repetition that can make straight-through reading rather tedious at times, but, on the other, each chapter can be read as a stand-alone piece. This enhances the utility for teaching at the advanced undergraduate and graduate levels. With its multidisciplinary approach and diverse theoretical perspectives, these volumes will appeal to a broad spectrum of specialists, educators, and students in heritage and culture studies, history, art history, archaeology, etc. Above all, this remarkable publication now stands as the standard reference work on the colonial, postcolonial, and modern history of what has become a “transcultural heritage conglomerate” and a “truly global icon” (vol. 1, p. 56; vol. 2, p. 419).

Notes


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