

Examination and Documentation of Looting at Cambodia's Archaeological Sites

Prepared by Terressa Davis

Archaeology carries with it the weight of the past — we owe our present understanding of history's successes and failures largely to the archaeological record. But to collectors and dealers of ancient art, it is often viewed as a source of capital — an attitude that has commercialized archaeology, creating a demand for artifacts that is spurring a worldwide epidemic of looting at archaeological sites. At this very moment, looters around the world are reducing countless sites to rubble in their search for buried treasures.

Few countries are more threatened than the small Southeast Asian nation of Cambodia, the heart of the ancient Khmer Empire. Throughout their rule, the Khmer filled their territory with thousands of stone temples. Some, like Angkor Wat, rival the Egyptian pyramids in scale. Others have been all but lost to the jungle. These temples have immense historic and religious significance to the Cambodian people, and attract millions of tourists each year, making them an important economic resource. But having survived centuries of war and abandonment, they may not survive the threat of looting.

While the severity of the threat is clear, the specifics are not, which naturally hampers anti-looting efforts. With the generous support of the Mortimer Hays-Brandeis Traveling Fellowship, I spent the last year helping to correct this oversight by providing data on looting in Cambodia. From a base in the capital of Phnom Penh, I worked to document past looting across the

country, identify threatened sites, and investigate the antiquities trade overseas. I did so in association with Heritage Watch, a non-profit organization that has been working since 2003 to staunch looting in Cambodia.

Documenting previous looting was an important, if challenging, first step. Due to the clandestine nature of the antiquities trade, any quantification must be circumstantial. But while official statistics do not exist, it is possible to glean an insight into the extent of looting and the resulting trade through other means.

I created a database of reported looting incidents in Cambodia since 1996, using the archives of the *Cambodia Daily*, the country's main English language newspaper. Most occurred in the northwestern province of Banteay Meanchey, which borders Thailand. It follows that most — if not all — of the artifacts looted from this province were smuggled over the border to Thailand and on to Bangkok, a major transit point for antiquities going East to West. The scale of this cross-border traffic was indicated by reports in the *Daily*, as well. Since 1996 alone, some 1,600, looted Khmer artifacts were confiscated en route to Bangkok by Thai and Cambodian authorities. No doubt this number is just a fraction of those that make it to their final destination.

As the *Daily* suggests, most looted Khmer antiquities are transported overland to Bangkok. Many are also smuggled by sea to Singapore. Bangkok has 97 listed antique shops, and Singapore has 188. I visited many of these shops with local archaeologists, and discovered that genuine Khmer artifacts are sold openly at many. Neither city discourages their sale. Singapore even encourages

it. The Singaporean Tourism Board tells visitors the following: *There is no better place to shop for antiques than Singapore. With a free port and minimal import regulations, our dealers are able to source widely from the region.*

After visiting these cities and witnessing the impunity with which looted antiquities were sold, I worked with Heritage Watch to form a petition encouraging both Singapore and Thailand to ratify the 1970 UNESCO *Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property*. By joining the 107 nations already party to the Convention, Thailand and Singapore would agree to prohibit the import of stolen cultural property and also to monitor the antiquities trade within their borders. This petition is being distributed in Southeast Asia by Heritage Watch, and in the United States by the Archaeological Institute of America.

Until this, or similar, legislation is implemented, millions of dollars worth of looted art will continue to enter Bangkok and Singapore each year. Much will be shipped onward, eventually reaching the major auction houses of Paris, London, and New York. Of these, Sotheby's is unsurpassed in terms of scale and reputation, and is a long established dealer of Khmer art. It thus provides an excellent starting place for examining the overseas market in Khmer antiquities.

An analysis of the catalogues from Sotheby's auction house in New York revealed sales of up to \$7,000,000 in Khmer material over just 15 years. More disturbing, however, is that only 20 percent of this material had a provenance. In the art world, provenance refers to a piece's ownership history. Pieces with a

provenance — those known to have been published, exhibited, or to have come from a collection already in existence — are often more valuable than those without, given that provenance acts much like a pedigree. Thus, if an auction house does not advertise an artifact's provenance, it is usually for one of three reasons — the provenance is known and legitimate, but the consignor does not want it published; the provenance is known, but somehow incriminating; or the provenance is unknown. Either of the last two reasons suggests that the object was, at least at one point in its history, illegally acquired.

All this information suggests that the illicit market in Khmer antiquities is thriving — all the way from Cambodia to New York City. This belief is confirmed by the quickly deteriorating state of Cambodia's archaeological sites, especially those far from the well-guarded, heavily touristed temples of Angkor. Hundreds of temple sites are scattered throughout the country, and many have suffered a great deal at the hand of looters.

Over the last year, I traveled to a dozen of these temples. Many remain quite remote, reached only by daylong drives through heavily mined countryside. Others are just a couple of hours from the capital city. Nature and time have taken a toll on all of these sites, but nothing compared to the violent destruction caused by looters. I documented the damage through photography and video, but even I failed to realize the full extent of it until I saw photographs showing these sites before they were looted.

I obtained these photographs from the Paris archives of the École Française

d'Extrême Orient, founded in 1898 to conduct archaeological research and exploration throughout Asia. The EFEO archives contain tens of thousands of photographs of Cambodian archaeological sites. While the vast majority depicts the Angkorian temples, I was able to find nearly 100 photographs useful to my research — the more remote temples of Koh Ker, Banteay Chmar, Phnom Chisor, Beng Mealea, Preah Khan, and Preah Vihear.

Most of these photographs were taken in 1936, and thus show the sites long before any looting occurred. The difference between then and now is shocking. It truly brings home the scale of destruction taking place around the country. I have used these photographs to put together a list of missing artifacts in Cambodia, which Heritage Watch is using to raise awareness of the issue. Also to this end, I am working with Heritage Watch on a public exhibit entitled “Then and Now,” which contrasts the 1936 photographs with others I have taken of the site today. The exhibit will also be available on the Heritage Watch.

Raising public awareness about looting is very important, since looting is largely caused by ignorance — ignorance of both those who loot and those who buy looted antiquities. Looting is driven by the demand for illicit artifacts, and this demand will only cease once collectors realize the repercussions of their actions. Hopefully, the work I have described thus far will help Heritage Watch to get this point across.

Education, however, can only go so far — immediate action is needed. Cambodia does not have the resources to guard all its archaeological sites.

Unfortunately, the only thing that can be done is to document these sites before they are looted. This is important both for academic and practical reasons. The former is obvious, but the latter applies to eventual repatriation efforts. If a looted Cambodian artifact appears on the international art market, according to international law it can often only be returned to the country, if there is documentation placing it in Cambodia after 1996 (when Cambodia's *Law on the Protection of Cultural Heritage* was enacted).

For this reason, I also spent the last year documenting hundreds of threatened artifacts at sites around the country. Using photographs and video, I thoroughly recorded these objects — such as bas-reliefs, carved lintels and pediments, inscriptions, and freestanding statues — and entered them into a database. Additionally, I located these artifacts on site maps.

Heritage Watch will update this information every six months, sending staff into the field to check for signs of looting using these maps. If an object has been stolen, Heritage Watch can take immediate action by contacting the necessary authorities. I have made contact with Interpol, the International Council of Museums, US Customs, the Scotland Yard Art Squad, and the FBI Art Squad — all of which monitor the market for known stolen antiquities. Heritage Watch will report recent thefts to these groups, which will know if the antiquity in question shows up on the legitimate market, and will ensure its return.

The international trade in stolen art and antiquities is gaining prominence, receiving not only increased attention from the media, but also from

governments around the world. It will only gain importance with time, and, as it does, the need for people with an understanding of it will grow. I aim to continue working on this issue, especially as it affects the region of Southeast Asia. I thus decided to pursue a Master's in Southeast Asian Studies, focusing on archaeology, at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies. I have deferred my acceptance, however, to take advantage of an opportunity to work with Heritage Watch for the next year. During this year, I will use the knowledge I gained through the Mortimer Hays-Brandeis Traveling Fellowship to educate both Cambodians and foreign tourists about the importance of protecting Cambodia's great past.