

# Cambodian bronze



In 2006, a woman digging in her garden unearthed seven ancient Buddhist bronzes in Sdaeung Chey village, Cheung Prey district, Kampong Cham Province in Cambodia. Rather than selling them on the black market, she did the proper thing and gave them to the Cambodian National Museum. They appeared to date back to the sixth and seventh centuries and although they displayed different styles and seemed to have come from different backgrounds they formed a unique group that had been in the same spot in the ground for centuries. They are by no means the only ancient bronze artifacts still to be found in the ground, or that have been unearthed in recent times, but needless to say, they do not all end up in the museum in Phnom Penh or other public venues.

Dick van der Meij

## Reviewed publication:

Louise Allison Cort and Paul Jett (eds.) 2010. *Gods of Angkor: Bronzes from the National Museum of Cambodia*, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, distributed by University of Washington Press and Silksworm Books, ISBN: 978-0934686-17-4

THESE OBJECTS usually enter collections silently and are seldom, if ever, shown to a wider audience. The well-intended UNESCO conventions on the prohibition and prevention of illicit import, export and transfer of ownership of cultural property, may well be one of the reasons for objects 'going underground', never to see the light of day again. Connoisseurs and art collectors are now forced to find illicit ways to acquire their beloved objects, as it is otherwise impossible to procure them. In this way the objects are kept out of sight and cannot be enjoyed by wider audiences, or be studied. This is not an exclusively Cambodian problem, of course, as can also be seen in the article by John N. Miksic on the riverbeds of Sumatra, the latest target of treasure hunters (The Newsletter #59, p.47).

## Cooperation

The National Museum in Cambodia was a victim of the Khmer Rouge atrocities and only after the cessation of hostilities in 1992 did restoration of the Museum begin, with enthusiastic foreign help. This aid was provided not only for the bronze collection, but was also made available for the ceramics collection. Conserving, cataloguing and presenting Cambodia's Khmer bronzes has been the aim of a long-standing cooperation project between the Cambodian National Museum, the Australian National Gallery, the Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution. The present book was published to accompany an exhibition of 36 bronze masterpieces in Washington DC in 2010 and Los Angeles in 2011, entitled *Gods of Angkor. Bronzes from the National Museum of Cambodia*.

The book and the exhibition aim to show that Khmer metalworkers perfected their craft over two millennia. It also wishes to point out that, although limited in number compared to their stone counterparts, bronze sculptures also played an "important role aesthetically and ritually in Khmer temples and private shrines". (p. 10) The book contains four essays written by Ian C. Glover from London, Hiram Woodward from Baltimore, Paul Jett from Washington, and John Guy from New York.

## Bronzes from the early metal age in Southeast Asia

In the first chapter Ian C. Glover discusses bronze drums, urns, and bells from the early metal age of Southeast Asia. These objects found their way all over mainland and insular Southeast Asia. The first to mention the existence of a bronze drum was Georg Rumph (Rumphius) who, as early as 1705, mentioned the famous 'Moon of Pejeng', now in the Pura Penataran Asih temple near Ubud in Central Bali. These drums apparently triggered interest to such an extent that "The literature on these drums in multiple languages probably exceeds that of all other aspects of Southeast Asian prehistoric archaeology put together". (p. 20) They are not only aesthetically appealing, but provide much information on numerous aspects of the life and surroundings of the people who made them, and their research-worthiness therefore comes as no surprise. The archaeological source of these drums remained a mystery until 1924 when a fisherman found a number of these bronzes in the Dong Song village, which gave these drums their future name. Romantic, scholarly and political backgrounds were subsequently responsible for the explanations offered on the history, use, and spread of these fascinating objects. Ian Glover states that the drums probably served many roles (p. 20) – a statement I greatly enjoy because we are so often lured into thinking in singular roles for things from the past. The National Museum of Cambodia has several drums although none originate from Cambodia itself.

The article continues with a photo of a rather large group of beautifully decorated urns. What the objects really are and what their use(s) were is still unknown, although the name given to them – 'urn' – which conjures images of vessels for the ashes of the deceased, makes me suspect that the researchers had an underlying notion of what they were. Frederik Bosch discovered an urn in 1922 in Kerinci, Sumatra, Indonesia (not portrayed in the book – but for those interested, it is portrayed in another exhibition catalogue: *Sumatra. Crossroads of Cultures*, edited by Francine Brinkgreve and Retno Sulistaningsih, Leiden: KITLV Press 2009:33). At present, the author knows of 15 of these urns, while most recent finds are in private collections in Switzerland, Thailand, the United States, and Belgium. Although also dubbed Dong Song drums, they do not

belong to the Dong Song culture proper, especially since none have been excavated in the wider Dong Song area. The author makes the interesting observation that the urns are found in relatively 'drum-free' areas (p.26).

In conclusion, the author is of the opinion that more research is needed to the archaeological context of these objects and their dating. For me, here comes the importance of the fight against looting as looters have little patience (literally) with scholarly mapping and the description of archaeological sites and thus they destroy the sources of crucial information for wider understanding.

## Bronze sculptures of ancient Cambodia

This second chapter by Hiram Woodward pays attention to the relationships between bronze and stone images, including the "degree to which the inherent properties of the two media are lost in the quest for ideal form". (p.31) The question is "whether bronzes were 'reflections' of stone images or whether there were established iconographic types that had no counterparts in stone". (p.31) Another issue is the "nature of Cambodia's connections with the world outside". In effect, the first issue relates to craftsmanship and mastery of the basic materials. Of course, the few pages this issue could be afforded in this book did not give the author the room to elaborate much, but the idea is fascinating. The second issue is important as it touches on Cambodia's position as a site of the confluence of Indian culture eastwards and Chinese culture westwards.

## A technical study of the Kampong Cham figure group

This third chapter in the book is by the hand of Paul Jett and gives the reader some insight into the results of the thermoluminescence dating for bronzes. It uses the seven bronzes found in 2006 mentioned above. These bronzes were made using the technique of lost wax casting. The thermoluminescence dating system was used "[b]ecause TL reveals the last time the clay core was heated to a high temperature, it sometimes indicates when a bronze was cast, although it frequently gives only a rough estimate of the date". (p.79) The author makes a side-remark, which is however crucial in this context, in that the pieces had been "lightly cleaned since entering the museum". (p.79) In view of the dating mechanism it would appear that cleaning should be done under guidance and under strict conditions ensuring that the accrued waste (the clay necessary used in the manufacturing process and now used for dating) is not discarded. Many questions remain on how, when and why these seven objects that originate from three distinct (Khmer, Thai, and Chinese) cultures came to be preserved together. Here again we see that the archaeological context is crucial.

## Angkorian metalwork in the temple setting

The final contribution to the book is elegantly written by John Guy. Presenting translations of ancient historical sources the author gives a vivid picture of the metal religious imagery of Angkor and what happened to many of these images when looted by one king after another. He also provides us with descriptions and pictures relating the different sizes of the objects, from tiny pieces of jewelry to a giant 6 meter sleeping Vishnu on the serpent Ananta, excavated from the island temple West Mebon. This contribution shows that in the old days Angkor was indeed a golden city.

The book ends with a catalogue of the objects exhibited, providing information on the image, measurements, provenance and National Museum catalogue numbers. Each object is portrayed again.

## Conclusion

The book is lavishly illustrated with color photographs of every object in the exhibition. The objects have been presented more than once and show them from various sides enabling the reader to gain a much better idea of the objects' features than when only one photo had been provided. It is a good thing that the measurements of all the objects have been provided as the presentation of the book might sometimes give us a wrong impression. Because of the prominent place of the bronze Ganesha that adorns the front and back cover of the book, and which is portrayed no less than six times more, I was fooled into believing that it was much larger than the 26 centimeters it in fact is. Because the book is an accompaniment to exhibitions, it is of course not exhaustive on the subject matter it deals with. This is not a problem as it gives readers sufficient information to whet their appetites.

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