

WHAT TO MAKE OUT OF LOSS: EXPLORING THE MISSING TEXTILE
COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF CAMBODIA

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Abstract

Through successive waves of acquisition, loss, and recovery, the textile collection at the National Museum of Cambodia reflects Cambodia's chaotic twentieth-century history. Founded during the French protectorate in 1919 and opened in 1920, the museum, primarily called Musée Albert Sarraut after the then Governor-General of Indochina, became the largest repository of Cambodian archaeological antiquities (stone statues, bronze statuettes, ceramics, gold jewellery and silverware) and ethnographic artefacts in the country, including contemporaneous textiles purchased from local weavers and merchants. From the French colonial era to the civil war in the early 1970s, the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-79) and its aftermath in the 1980s, this paper concentrates on the formation of the textile collection, the loss of three-quarters of its artefacts between the 1970s and 1990s, and the surviving material and archival evidence of these textiles. In doing so, this paper considers the ways in which the materials found post-conflict help link together these contrasted historical periods. Centring on absence and loss offers a dynamic framework to reevaluate how textile artefacts are embedded by colonial policies and war, to acknowledge further the destructiveness of the Khmer Rouge regime on Cambodian arts and crafts. How to reconstruct the textile collection when dealing missing artefacts? And how may such fragmented sources be remobilised to understand this material history of conflict, thus revealing the politics and dynamics behind the museum's acquisitions? The transience of the National Museum of Cambodia's textiles offers a case study through which absent objects in institutions can be identified, reintegrated and memorialised as another kind of presence, inflecting views on surviving material culture and heritage.

Keywords: crafts, archives, metadata, colonisation, cultural heritage, phnom penh, khmer rouge.

Overlapping textile temporalities at the National Museum of Cambodia

The methodology for this essay combines historical and archival research, as well as interview and object-based analysis to explore how the effects of decades of political upheavals are charted through the specificities of Cambodia's national textile collection within its impermanent state. To do so, I rely on limited and fragmented evidence in the form of paper datasheets, catalogues, inventories, and objects from the National Museum of Cambodia archives, archival documents held at l'Ecole Francaise d'Extrême Orient (EFEO) (French School of Far East Studies), and photographs from scholars who visited the museum before 1975. These documents stand as powerful clues to reconstruct the missing collection and materialise the richness of textile craftsmanship available pre-1970 in terms of motifs, styles, and techniques.

While French colonialism in Cambodia and its involvement in local cultural and artistic politics have been extensively explored, studies on cultural heritage and museum collections have remained at the margins of scholarship focusing on the Khmer Rouge period and its aftermath.¹ This article proposes to connect these two historical periods to consider the ruptures heavily affecting a collection rooted in the French protectorate, taken over by Cambodian curators in the latest years of the Independence era, and left vulnerable to damages and looting in a decade-long of political turmoil during and after the Khmer Rouge regime (fig.1).²

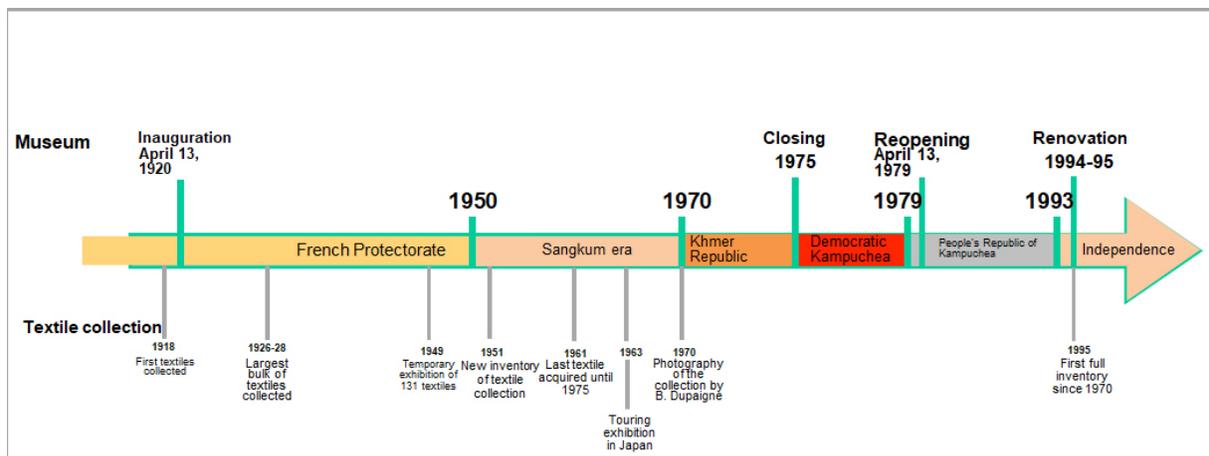


Fig.1. Historical timeline of the National Museum of Cambodia. Author's image.

The Albert Sarraut museum was inaugurated in Phnom Penh in 1920 by French artist and educator George Groslier (1887–1945), who was commissioned to establish a programme of training in the arts for Cambodian populations as part of the French 'civilising mission'.³ Promoting and redefining traditional arts and handicrafts aimed to strengthen Cambodian cultural identity to be then catered to a Western audience as a colony of the French empire. This ambition was supported by colonial writings from French theorists such as Henri Marchal, architect and director

of the Conservation of Angkor. He considered Cambodian culture – and handicrafts as a direct expression of the population’s skills, artistry and commercial potential—on the verge of decline.⁴ Illustrating imperialist nostalgia, Marchal praised the strong aesthetic of Khmer ornamental art, which he directly linked to the motifs on the carved walls of Angkor Wat. This vast archaeological religious complex in the outskirts of Siem Reap province had garnered increasing scholarly interest following its Siamese retrocession to French-colonial Cambodia in 1907.⁵ To Marchal, what he identified as a specifically Cambodian decorative aesthetic – once associated with the splendour of the Angkor Empire – should be promoted and ‘revived’ through artistic training.⁶

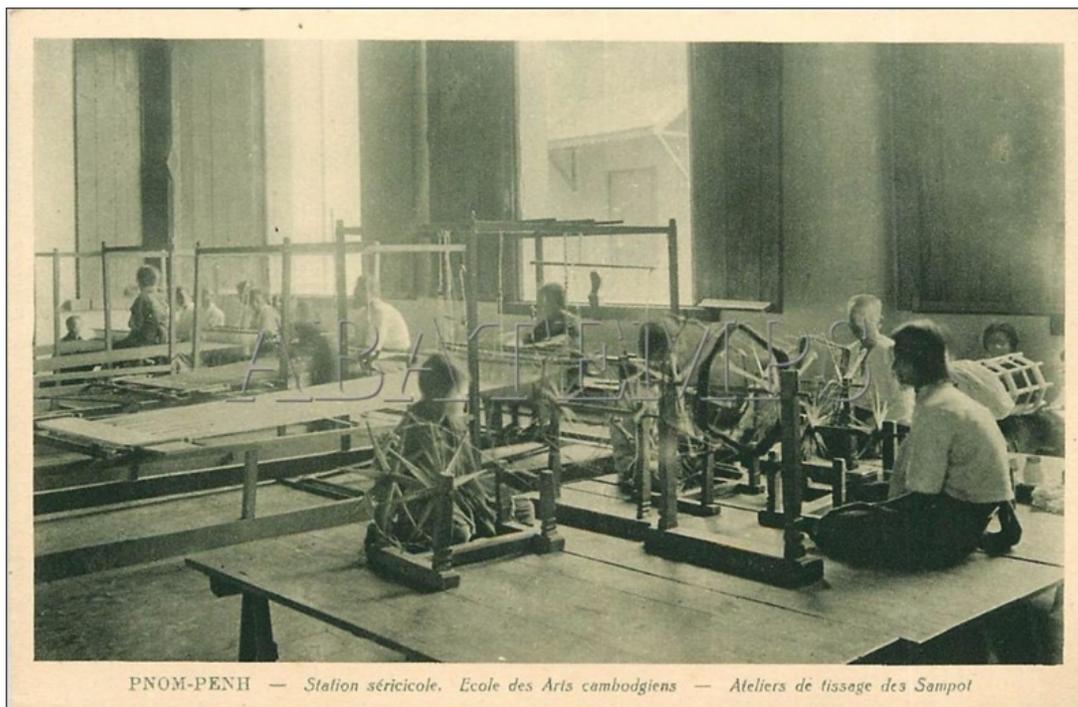


Fig. 2. Silk yarn spinning and weaving on floor looms at the School of Cambodian Arts. French colonial postcard, unknown source, c.1920.

To this end, Groslier transformed the workshops behind the Royal Palace into a school combined with a museum. The school was open to Cambodian craft apprentices in six disciplines: drawing and architecture, sculpture, woodworking and gold plating, foundry, silverware, and weaving. In the mid-1920s, the silk weaving workshop was comprised of an average of twenty young women (fig.2). Once trained, weavers would be invited to join the commercial guild *Les Corporations Cambodgiennes* (Cambodian Corporations), which fulfilled orders for the museum shop and exports to the French metropole via the colonial sales department *Le Service des Arts* (Arts Department). During that time, textiles were important and ubiquitous items in Cambodian daily life. Weavers mastered the art of ikat called *hol* in Khmer, a resist-dye technique in which weft threads are tied and dyed in successive colours

according to predetermined motifs and consequently woven onto the loom to form multicoloured decorated textiles (fig.3). Cambodians, especially women, wore polychrome silk ikat textiles as *sampot* (hip wraps) and *chawng kbun* (wrapped trousers) for religious and wedding ceremonies. Large pictorial canopies called *hol pidan* representing scenes of the life of the Buddha found their place on temples' altars and ceilings, especially in the southern region of Takeo. In an essay on Cambodian arts, Groslier recalled that 'many women know how to weave and dye boldly coloured silks which are essential to every home', he also regretted that 'cotton percales and floral fabrics imported from Britain [were] replacing local textiles'.⁷



Fig. 3. Hol (ikat) weaving on the loom, using spindles wound with weft ikat silk threads, preliminarily tied and dyed to create specific motifs on the surface of the cloth, Siem Reap. Author's photograph. 2012.

As museum keeper, Groslier oversaw the acquisition of a large collection of Cambodian antiquities (stone, metal, wood and ceramics) from the pre-Angkor and Angkor periods, stemming notably from the Angkor archaeological site, as well as a former repository of Angkorian art established by the French officials in 1912, and active excavations across the country. The museum also received precious gemstones, gold jewellery, and theatre and dance costumes donated by the Cambodian royal court.⁸ While remaining a minor part of the collection, nineteenth and early twentieth-century ethnographic objects (wood carved tools, musical instruments, weaving accessories, loom parts and textiles) were also collected, which demonstrates

the museum's interest in documenting and conserving vernacular cultural practices. Nearly all of the textile collection was acquired during the French protectorate. The first textile object entered the museum collection in 1918. A total of 364 textiles – a majority of handwoven silk ikat hip wraps and canopies– were progressively collected and purchased directly from merchants and local weavers under Groslier, who remained in charge of the museum until 1944.⁹ In 1945, he was captured in Phnom Penh by Japanese troops during the Japanese occupation of Cambodia in World War II. Groslier died during the interrogation. After the war ended, France regained control over Cambodia until 1953. In the transitional years that led to Cambodia's independence, a few notable textile-related events took place. Six textiles were lost between 1920 and 1944 as identified by interim director Pierre Dupont in an internal report and confirmed in 1947 by successor Jean Lagisquet.¹⁰ In 1949, the then-director Solange Thierry organised an ambitious temporary exhibition showing 131 pieces from the collection including silk *sampot* and pictorial canopies in the ikat technique, vibrant tie-dyed scarves from Cham muslim ethnic groups, and wedding attire, jackets and trousers, as well as a loom and weaving tools, which were deployed in three galleries for three months. The press release published on the cover of the French colonial newspaper *La Liberté* stated that: 'The art of weaving in Cambodia, highlighted by this successful exhibition, showcases remarkable qualities of refinement and harmony that it would be precious to continue'.¹¹ While a selection of textile artefacts was part of the permanent display until the 1970s, the 1949 show was the first and only temporary exhibition focusing on Cambodian textiles arts until the 2010s.

Following this exhibition, museum director Jean Boisselier, appointed in 1950, embarked on a thorough inventory, assessment and storage project of the entire textile collection, which he detailed in successive activity reports across 1950-51. In 1951 he also incorporated 17 ritual cotton textiles (handkerchiefs, turbans and tunics) adorned with auspicious protective motifs in black ink as a subsection of the textile collection.

While Cambodia became independent in 1953, the institution, then called Musée National de Phnom-Penh, was led by French keepers until 1966 following Bilateral accords in 1956 between the Cambodian government and EFEO which was tasked with scientific management over the museum and the conservation of Angkor.¹² This period was largely marked by continuity with the French colonial era, in which EFEO continued to mandate successive French directors to run the museum. Internal communication remained in French in the form of inventories, reports, summaries, and steady correspondence with the organisation's officials. Textile acquisitions stopped during these years, except for a silk scarf donated by the Mongolian delegation at the Sixth Conference of The International Buddhist Association in 1961 under the supervision of the last French curator Madeleine Giteau. Objects also travelled internationally. By the 1960s, the collection counted a total of 415 pieces, which included flat textiles, theatre and dance costume elements, and ritual cloths. In June 1963, a group of 21 textiles, in a diverse range of styles selected by Giteau, travelled to Japan as part of an exhibition on Khmer art in

department stores in Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya.¹³ For this event, the Royal Palace also loaned a selection of dance costumes, masks and *mokot* (headpieces). Chea Thay Seng was the first Cambodian director appointed in 1966, followed by Ly Vou Ong in 1973. Both archaeologists were trained at the Royal University of Fine Arts of Phnom Penh and in France. There is no record of new textile acquisitions under their care. In 1975, when the Khmer Rouge took the control of Cambodia and marched over Phnom Penh, the capital city was forcibly evacuated by civilians. The National Museum was closed and abandoned until 1979.¹⁴ The museum only reopened to the public on April 13, 1979, with the building and artefacts in derelict.¹⁵ The roof had been damaged and was colonised by bats and the basement, where most objects were stored, had been flooded during rainy seasons. It was found inundated with sewage water and infested with rodents.¹⁶

The Khmer Rouge especially targeted intellectuals and government officials who were treated as enemies of the regime and promoters of Western ideologies. Most of the pre-1975 museum's original 90 employees had died, resulting in a significant loss of knowledge about the museum's history and objects. Both former directors Chea Thay Seng and Ly Vou Ong died during the dictatorship.¹⁷ At age 44, Chea Thay Seng was executed in 1976 at S21, the main secret interrogation centre and prison established in Phnom Penh by the Khmer Rouge.¹⁸

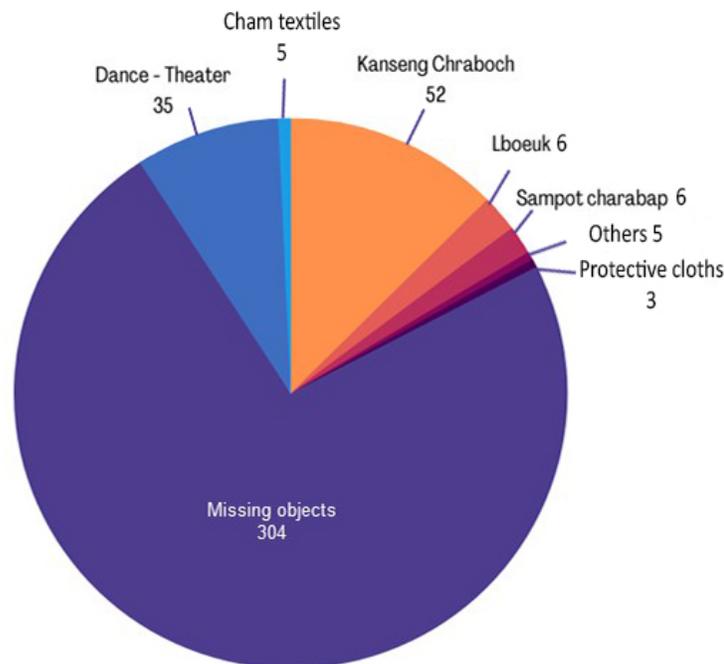


Fig 4. Diagram of the breakdown of the original textile collection in the post-war era including the found and the missing objects. Author's image.

While stone sculptures and bronze artefacts remained mainly untouched, all the gold artefacts and most of the silverware, ceramics and ethnographic collection

had disappeared.¹⁹ It is not known whether objects also disappeared in the years following the reopening. It took extensive efforts to clean and restore the facilities with the support of the international community. Six surviving staff members resumed work by 1980.²⁰ In 1985 museum director Ouk Sun Heng launched the inventorying of the entirety of the museum's remaining collection. The first full inventory of textiles in the post-conflict era started in 1994 and was completed in 1997.²¹ In a time gap of twenty-two years between 1975 and 1997, of 415 pieces recorded before 1975, only 73 flat textiles and a costume collection of about 40 pieces, mostly accessories for Cambodian dance (belts, necklaces, hairpieces, two embroidered fans) and theatre costumes such as shirts, trousers and shoulder pads were found (fig.4). About three-quarters of the textile collection was missing. Hab Touch, former director in the 2000s and now Secretary of State of the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, attributed their loss to environmental factors and looting due to the lack of security at the museum, without providing supporting evidence for this hypothesis.²²

This attempt to articulate a linear chronology of textile acquisitions and interventions at the National Museum of Cambodia, despite obvious limitations, reveal numerous material itineraries for the objects, which intersect with the museum's different periods of leadership and internal politics.²³ By the 1960s the textile collection had progressively solidified into an arbitrary yet comprehensive assemblage as defined by French perspectives, then faced a five-year vacuum of care under the Khmer Rouge until a nearly total disappearance is observed in the post-war era.

Collating archival fragments in the absence of textiles

Faced here with missing objects, absent witnesses, and lost memories, one may ask, what to make of such loss? The lack of objects and oral histories may be balanced by the examination of other forms of evidential traces. Archives are by definition incomplete and reconstructed, inherently summoning 'fragments, objects, and ghosts' in the words of cultural geographer Sarah Mills.²⁴ In her views, researchers are tasked with implementing 'tactics to seek out the cracks', developing creative methods to deal with the 'absent-presence of archival research'.²⁵ Given this, the missing textile pieces from the National Museum of Cambodia bring theoretical and methodological questions on how to incorporate gaps, instability and damages into the study of a once-material, clearly delineated collection. Instead of focusing only on what was found, it enables the researcher to investigate and redress absence as a topic in itself to materialise the damaging effects of the Khmer Rouge regime on artefacts, and more broadly on the survival of the pre-1975 Cambodian cultural and material heritage.

The museum has recovered invaluable archival documents, mostly dating from the French protectorate, in the form of inventory datasheets, catalogues, diagrams, and inventories left in the museum library. It is not known if Chea Thay Seng and Ly Vou Ong wrote about the museum's monthly activities. During

Democratic Kampuchea, numerous records and books from all the Phnom Penh archives and libraries were deliberately destroyed.²⁶ It is very likely that museum documents were discarded at the National Museum in 1975. Only one box of documents covering their tenure in the 1970s has been recovered and does not mention any textile-related activity. Therefore, in terms of positionality, the available data remain exclusively in French, hence mediated by French perspectives, which adds to the fragmentary nature of the knowledge left on these objects. Other resources (activity reports, letters, inventories, ephemera and personal notes) were kept by the French curators and brought back to France. Most of these documents are compiled and stored at the EFEO Library in Paris, which is also the repository of the organisation's administrative paperwork and internal communications from as early as the EFEO's foundation in 1898. The cross-examination of a variety of files scattered between Cambodia and France helps to retrace the textile collection's history and has supported the chronological outline provided earlier in this article.

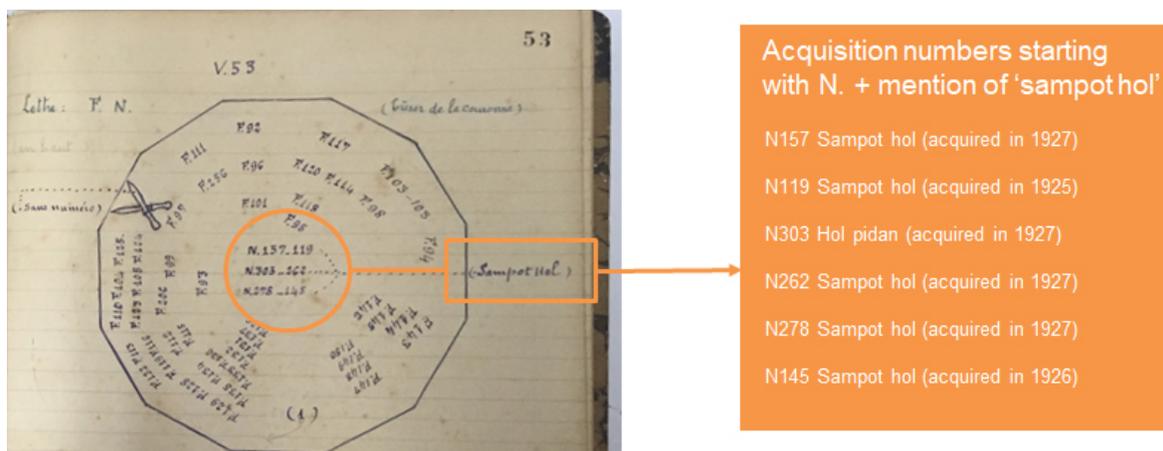


Fig. 5. Diagram of the exhibition display in the National Museum of Cambodia's permanent galleries in 1948 from *Inventaire par vitrine* (1948). Courtesy of the National Museum of Cambodia library.

Looking at the available sources from the National Museum reveals the involvement of consecutive museum directors in the acquisition, registration, and curation of textiles. In the early 1920s, Groslier established the first cataloguing system at the museum. Each artefact was registered under a different letter pertaining to a specific material (stone, wood, silver, etc.). N was the letter for textiles and garments, to which Groslier had assigned a number in chronological order as in N1, N2, N3 etc. This codification was also used in exhibition display diagrams, to show the arrangement of different selected pieces in window casings in the permanent galleries, such as in this window casing dedicated to the Royal treasury gifts (fig.5).

In the 1950s, Boisselier changed the system, adding subcategories to each family of artefacts by adjoining a number with a code and comma to the letter such as N1,1, N1,2, etc., a system which remained in place until 1975.

A range of documents exemplifies these different registration systems. A collection catalogue published by Groslier dating from 1924 includes the first hundred textiles acquired in the collection with brief descriptions in French and their N reference codes. In comparison, the *catalogue méthodique*, or systematic listing of the collection, prepared by French keeper Giteau in the early 1960s, reported 415 pieces all classified under the letter N with a code and comma. In detail, the catalogue listed 317 flat textiles in various styles and provenance including different types of silk *sampot* (hip wraps): *hol* (ikat), *lboeuk* (figured silk textiles) and *charabap* (brocaded textiles with gold or silver thread), *pidan* (pictorial canopies), and *kanseng chraboch* (tie-dyed silk scarves) made by Cham communities. There were also 66 *robam* (dance) and *lakhon* (theatre) costumes and accessories including 15 masks and crowns, and 32 auspicious textiles decorated with black ink.

Furthermore, the major archival documents establishing the detail of the pre-1975 collection are inventory datasheets relating to 400 textile and clothing items. The datasheets operate on several levels of meaning-making, countering the transient nature of the original physical objects. First, they serve as data repositories. Research data scholar Stefan Thiemann stated that ‘metadata are data about data. In other words, there are original data and there are data describing the original data’.²⁷ He also compares metadata to ‘real objects with sheets of paper attached containing information about the objects’.²⁸ Given this, the information provided on the museum datasheets is to be treated as the descriptive metadata of the original missing textiles, presenting their provenance, the purchase price in colonial piastre, acquisition date, cataloguing number, and storage location within the museum. While provenance is often unknown, when stipulated it includes the merchant or donor’s name, and where the piece was found, for instance in Phnom Penh or another region. The colonial sales department and the weaving workshop at the School of Cambodian Arts are not mentioned as suppliers, which means that the textiles and garments were acquired through other networks. As written on the cards, the large majority of these objects were kept in a cabinet in the curator’s office, with a limited selection on display in the galleries. This tends to confirm the hypothesis that most textiles were stolen at some point between 1975 and in the first years following the museum’s reopening, as artefacts in the office cabinet remained sheltered from environmental degradation, away from the flooded basements.

Second, these datasheets provide insights on past human actions on the part of the museum’s staff and successive curators, evidencing a continuum of care throughout the years in terms of assessment, study, verification, folding, storing, and protection of these carefully collected items until the 1970s. It also shows potential biases linked to French taste and interests, in the sense that French curators decided which object was worth collecting. The datasheets’ most remarkable feature is in the detailed descriptions provided for each object, meant to facilitate their identification, as confirmed by Boisselier in 1950 who had noticed imprecisions and implemented rewrites:

‘The writing of the new sheets focusing on 366 pieces took a long time, as descriptions must be extremely precise to be usable, dimensions and colours

rarely changing, it is only through thorough descriptions of the overall decor, background and borders, that the differentiation of the pieces can be effective'.²⁹

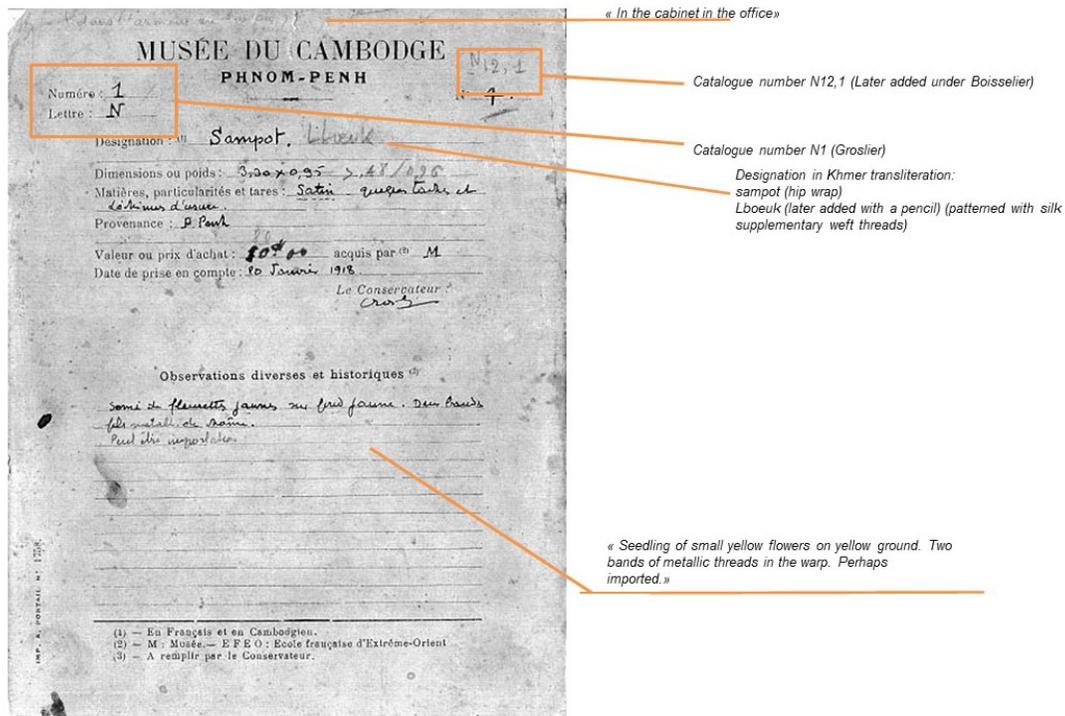
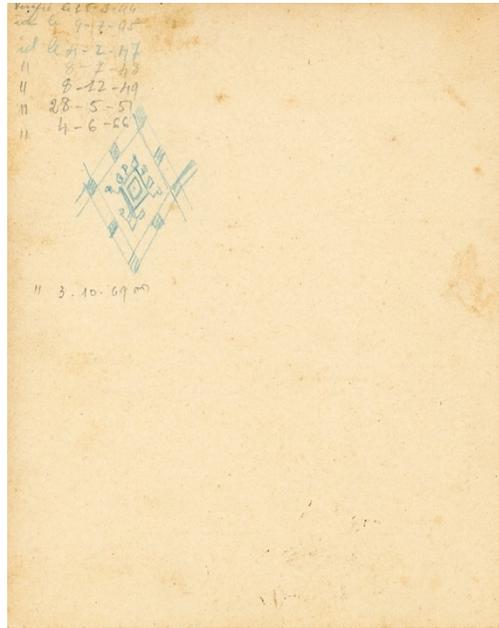
These descriptions illustrate a clear intent to improve scientific expertise in terms of terminology, iconography and technical knowledge, which was directly in line with the EFEO's mission to expand French scholarship on Cambodian art history and ethnography.³⁰ While French remains the language through which these artefacts were considered, activity reports show that museum directors sourced information on terminology from their Cambodian collaborators.³¹ The datasheets were annotated with object designations written in Khmer transliteration, which precisely identified different styles of collected textiles such as *sampot hol* to designate ikat textiles, *kanseng chraboch* for the tie-dyed headscarves, and *sampot charabap* for the brocaded silk textiles worn by the royal elite and classical ballet dancers.

Finally, these paper datasheets are historical physical objects in themselves, which carry tangible material qualities, at risk of disappearing and in need of preservation. In the absence of textile objects, they become sensory, material placeholders for the objects, allowing the viewer's touch and vision experiencing the various paper textures, different types of writing in pencil and ink, yellowing stains, and instances of erased or crossed pencilled words. Focusing on what archivist Peter Lester calls 'the performativity of the document', that is, 'the embodiment of the author's intention [...] but also the value and importance that its creator has placed upon it', adds to these files' significance as records and testaments of the National Museum textile collection.³²

Contrary to the datasheets prepared at the museum for the sandstone sculptures and wood-carved objects, no photographs of textiles were attached to these records, a difference which remains unexplained to date. Through time, each textile object entering the collection was registered in French on these paper cards, often signed by the curator and filled out manually or using a typewriter. For each object three separate printed paper cards of similar sizes were found, corresponding to three key curatorial time periods: one dating from the Groslier era (between the 1920s and 1940s), one from Boisselier's (in the 1950s) and one from Giteau's (in the mid-1950s to 1960s). A style of datasheet using Khmer script instead of French and prepared under the Khmer Republic had been printed but not filled out by the time of the museum closing in 1975.

Groslier's datasheet is the first item assessing the object and its acquisition details, including its N number, short description, and purchase price (fig.6). It was used further as a matrix by the successive keepers, who annotated and edited the terminology, description, cataloguing number, and storage location directly on the card. The following datasheets issued for the item share similar information updated with the Boisselier revised cataloguing number. The back of the 'Groslier' index cards shows pencilled dates of inventory check-ins running from 1942 at the earliest up to 1970 at the latest, as evidence of human care for these objects, which continued under

Cambodian director Chea Thay Seng. A handful of datasheets for *sampot hol* textiles also show hand drawings of ikat construction details and motifs on the reverse, highlighting the curators' interest in the iconographic study of Cambodian textile aesthetics (fig.7).



Figs. 6 and 7. Paper datasheet prepared and signed by George Groslier for the first textile (sampot lboeuk) acquired in the collection in 1918. Courtesy of the National Museum of Cambodia library; reverse of the paper datasheet for Object N262 showing the sketch of an ikat motif and pencilled annotations of inventory check-in dates. Courtesy of the National Museum of Cambodia library.

Lim Yi, a 76-year-old retired librarian, was recruited in 1984 by the Cambodian Ministry of Culture to help sort the books and paper documents found at the National Museum under the then director Khun Samen. About the state of the library at the time she says: ‘There were high cabinets in the library with a lot of insecticide. It had been spread all over the books; we were intoxicated by it. I had to remove it all, it was *insecticide en poudre* (sic) [powder]’.³³ Lim Yi found the datasheets, which she calls *fiches* using the French term, in wooden cabinets located at the back of the library’s book storage (fig.8). In the early 1990s, she received different forms of training from Australian archivists and historians. Art historian Darryl Collins donated archival folders with acid-free plastic sleeves and new cabinets to the museum, to support the preservation and rehousing of all the documents found on site.



Fig. 8. Retired librarian Lim Yi showing the cabinets where she found the datasheets, National Museum of Cambodia Library, June 2022. Author’s photograph.

With his assistance, Lim Yi managed to reorganise all of the objects’ paper records in order, following the object categories established under the French curators Groslier and Boisselier. For textiles, the last *N fiches* she found was prepared by Madeleine Giteau in 1962 for the grey silk scarf donated by the Mongolian delegation at the Sixth Conference of The International Buddhist Association in 1961. This

object has disappeared, as well as all of the *sampot hol* and *pidan* pieces from the pre-1975 collection. Seeking out the cracks of the missing artefacts has opened a realm of potentialities in the analysis of other forms of evidence. Archival documents are not static records but repositories of a collection in the making, responding to successive waves of safekeeping, rewrites, and reassessments over several decades spanning Cambodia's twentieth century.

Contemplating gaps in surviving artefacts, images and memories

Photographs are often treated as reliable evidence of objects. However, while they preserve memories, photographs also distort, crop, and only partially represent those objects captured at a specific time and place.³⁴ As Susan Sontag puts it, 'there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture'.³⁵ In 1968, Singaporean curator Constance Sheares studied and photographed a dozen textiles from the museum, specifically *sampot hol* and *pidan*, in black and white with her Leica camera while on a short study trip in Cambodia. In an email exchange, she recalls obtaining the permission from the then museum director and being assisted on site to examine the pieces. She adds: 'Those on display were hung vertically from rollers in glass cases, and those in storage were laid flat in long and wide chests of drawers'.³⁶ More than forty years later, Sheares' memories are limited. She could not recall the names of the people she met or where the storage chests were located. She no longer has the prints of the textiles she photographed. These pictures can only be seen in an article she published in the *Heritage* journal in 1984.³⁷

In 1970, also under Chea Thay Seng's direction, French anthropologist Bernard Dupaigne photographed in colour a larger bulk of the collection over half a day of documentation. Dupaigne lived in Cambodia from 1968 to 1970 where he taught ethnology in the Archaeology department at the Royal University of Fine Arts of Phnom Penh, which was also directed by Chea Thay Seng at the time.³⁸ To this date, he has kept the prints and has scanned them. These analogue pictures now show desaturated colours, which are no longer representative of the original artworks. The yellow hues have fully faded. Reddish and blueish tones remain dominant. Dupaigne's pictures often focus on pattern details and do not show the full length of the pieces. Regrettably, neither Sheares nor Dupaigne recorded the catalogue numbers of the textiles they photographed, which makes it difficult to match them. The pictorial ikat hangings (*hol pidan*), whose museum datasheets contain more extensive descriptions, could potentially be cross-referenced with some of these photographs for further identification. These images showing the objects in the collection are useful sources, yet remain as incomplete and ephemeral as the objects themselves. The abundant archival documentation also provides information about the remaining objects from the pre-1970 – and now incomplete – textile collection of the National Museum. In the 73 textile objects listed in the post-war inventory in 1994, there are four ceremonial brocaded silk hip wraps called *sampot charabap* dating from the 1870s, originally from the former royal capital of Oudong and donated

by the Royal Palace. Khmer classical ballet artefacts were acquired in 1920, also as a gift from the Royal Palace. There are also six colourful *sampot lboeuk* (patterned silk pieces) dating from the 1910s purchased from different merchants, some showcasing metallic threads and others fully in silk. Pieces produced by Khmer Islam communities in Cambodia make up the most of the surviving collection with six handwoven pieces of different types (ceremonial headscarves, sarong, decorative floor covering, and), one pair of ceremonial silk trousers, and a large group of 52 colourful tie-dyed silk headscarves (*kanseng chraboch*). ‘Khmer Islam’ is the common term used to indifferently unify Cham and Jvea groups living in Cambodia.³⁹ Cham people are an Austronesian ethnic minority originating from the Champa Kingdom (c.192–1832), which was located in the central part of present-day Vietnam. Jveas are another Austronesian ethnic group, which migrated from Java and the Malay peninsula as early as the fifteenth century.⁴⁰ These two Muslim ethnic minorities were active textile producers known for their remarkable skills, which sparked George Groslier’s interest in the 1920s. While curators made a point to differentiate the pieces between Cham and Malay provenance, they made a few errors in their technical identification, mistaking embroidery for brocading effects. Other pictorial pieces in the *hol pidan* category – now all gone – were identified as Khmer by the French keepers. However, some of them were most likely produced by Jvea weavers, in particular, those representing boats and water scenes.⁴¹



Fig. 9. Kansèng chraboch, early 20th c. Object number Cha.13 / Ga.6250 / N321. Courtesy National Museum Cambodia. 2018. Author’s photograph.

The largest group of textiles found in the museum consists of colourful ceremonial headscarves (*kanseng*) in machine-made silk damask and chemical dyes, which were tie-dyed, a process called *chraboch* on the datasheets which means 'serpent scales' in Khmer.⁴² Figurative motifs such as flowers, stars, zigzags, boats, and animals were obtained through the tight binding and dyeing of different areas of the cloth into successive baths of colour.⁴³ The first two pieces were purchased in 1926, one of them was lost, and then 51 followed in 1928, most likely from the same Cham village, as they all strikingly share a similar aesthetic (fig.9). In 1950, French keeper Jean Boisselier praised this set for their decoration themes and colours, being 'extremely audacious in their balance and show[ing] a real tendency to surrealism at a relatively recent date, with a frequent and very successful use of designs borrowed from the West such as boats, automobiles, bicycles, which are however well-crafted'.⁴⁴ In a post-war context, all these surviving objects remain compounded by absence. While grounded in Western perspectives, anthropologist Elizabeth Hallam and sociologist Jenny Hockey offer an invaluable analysis of mourning and grief-related objects in *Death, Memory and Material Culture*. They contend: 'These materials have connotations of transience as well as permanence which feed into the metaphors used to describe and account for the capabilities of memory'.⁴⁵ In this case, the presence of certain objects in conjunction with the absence of others invites new questions and potential meanings. The remaining textiles and costume elements also exist for all the ones that are missing, becoming evidence and memories of past textile activities in sericulture, weaving and dyeing. The question of why certain textiles were found, especially all the Cham textiles, when nearly all the Khmer-style ikat silk *sampot* and pictorial canopies disappeared, remains unanswered. Was it because the Cham textiles were stored in a different place at the museum that they were not taken away? During the Khmer Rouge regime, Cham people were heavily persecuted and forbidden to practice their religion and speak their language.⁴⁶ Was it then because Cham textiles were not sought-after commodities in comparison with Khmer silk *sampot hol* and *pidan*? The lack of interest in Cham crafts following those years of persecution has resulted in gaps of knowledge on their traditions and techniques. Their contribution to Cambodian textile practices and central importance within the National Museum's collection would require more visibility and recognition, reincorporating further their traditions into the national narrative on surviving forms of cultural heritage.

The trafficking of cultural artefacts started in Cambodia in the 1970s and increased in 1977-79.⁴⁷ In 1979, with the collapse of Democratic Kampuchea, Cambodians who had been displaced returned to their homes and were able to recover some of their belongings that they had kept hidden and secure in 1975. These goods were bartered and sold to ensure their survival.⁴⁸ The bulk of these artefacts most likely transited through refugee camps as black-market trade operated by professional smugglers to be sold in Thailand.⁴⁹ There, the main marketplaces identified for textile trade were River City and O.P. Place Shopping Center in Bangkok. River City was a major art and antiquities market, which gained prominence in the 1980s and is still open to the present day.⁵⁰ Unfortunately, with

the lack of comprehensive photographic records provided by the museum for each piece and the very nature of textiles, as portable, degradable, and easy to hide and copy material examples, it appears difficult to track the looted objects in other museums and private collections. Identification of Cambodian handwoven textiles is admittedly a complex task, as textile patterns have often been copied over time, reproduced between different weavers and neighbouring villages. All these factors complicate claims of ownership and protected copyright unless the artefacts in question have been properly documented and photographed before their disappearance. To this date, no textile piece from the National Museum of Cambodia's pre-1970 collection has been identified in international museums or in private collections.

Conclusion

In this essay, partial photographs matched with inventories, datasheets, and archival records are compiled, compared and pieced together to illuminate the historiography of the National Museum of Cambodia's lost textile objects, placed side by side with the items recovered post-war. The original textile collection at the National Museum of Cambodia itself can no longer be fully reconstructed, except in this composite form combining archives, fragmented memories, and remaining objects. The artefacts salvaged from the 1970s are themselves still facing transience and potential disappearance. Materials and clothes are not stable and degrade through time, requiring constant conservation and collection management. The collection has not remained as it was in the first decades after the Khmer Rouge regime. Since the 2000s, the collection has expanded to 235 pieces thanks to new acquisitions. Australian textile scholar Gillian Green gave 84 antique ikat silks she had purchased in the country in markets in the late 1990s. Japanese non-profit organisation Caring for Young Khmer developed new *pidan* with weavers, often inspired by ancient designs, and donated 27 pieces to the museum.

By examining the destruction and the gaps in the archival and material records, the methodological and conceptual use of transience effectively reveals the processes engaged behind museum collections instead of solely considering objects as static. This shift also changes the understanding of what Cambodian textile heritage means in a post-war context. Bringing together the forgotten and the found is not simply about assessing the extent of cultural and material loss. It helps to reconstruct the people and stories involved in the formation of a collection. It stands as an act of reparation to overcome the erasure of war. This paper itself provides a new piece of research for the museum to build on to continue to recover their century-old history. In the continuum of records and actions leading to the acquisition, documentation, preservation, and loss of textile artefacts, several key actors have emerged through time, especially following French and foreign agendas. This study highlights the prevalence of French voices while Cambodian voices, in particular from silk producers and weavers, remain largely absent from these narratives. The disappearance of witnesses and direct memories associated with textile practices in Cambodia is

another consequence of war and dictatorship. Future research around the activation of living archives would benefit from engaging a Cambodian audience, especially communities including silk weavers and Cham people, to dialogue with the history and materials of this collection and reconnect past with present practices.⁵¹ Repositioning archives through a collaborative process of imagination and remembrance will offer new ways to read the archive, thus reanimating forms of collective memory on textile techniques, material culture, and heritage.

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