

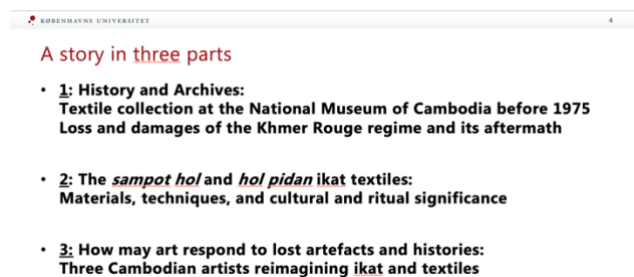
Presentation by Dr Magali An Berthon, Postdoctoral fellow at the Centre for Textile Research, University of Copenhagen, for the exhibition *The Art of Ikat: A Cambodian Renaissance* on February 22, 2024 at The Royal Library at South Campus, University of Copenhagen in Denmark.

Thank you so much, Eva, for this wonderful introduction to some of the most important aspects of what's being done at CTR. CTR is a centre of textile research that brings [not only] historians, archaeologists together, but also craftspeople, artists, and [CTR] is very much interested in living practices. So, this exhibition is an attempt in combining those aspects through my research and [through] this work.

So, it's entitled *The Art of Ikat: A Cambodian Renaissance* and it's my pleasure to introduce you to this exhibition on the woven world of Cambodian silk ikat, which is [specific] to the region. It's called *hol* in Khmer. It's a resist-dye weaving technique and a century-old craft.

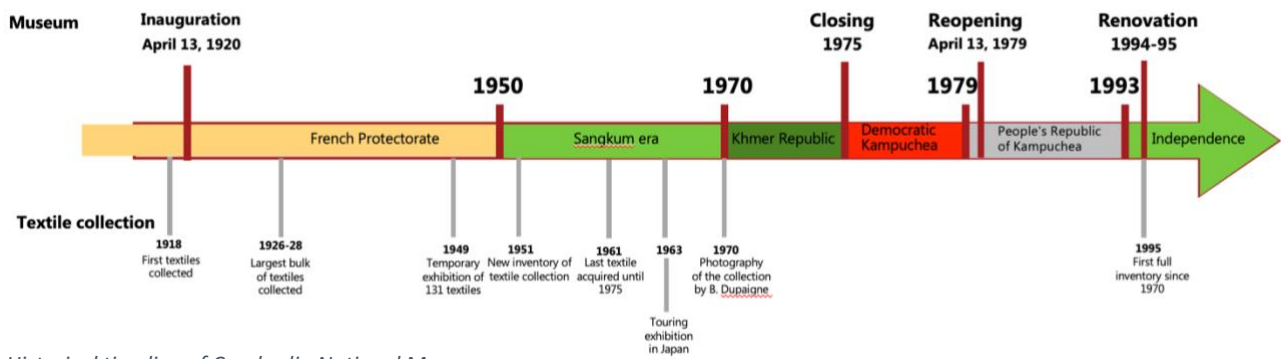
And it's been existing in the countryside, [grounded in] the villagers' activities, but also [within] the royal workshops, historically, [...] which have been producing those refined silk textiles to supply the Cambodian Royal court. So, this exhibition presents a piece of Cambodian modern history of textiles. It looks into this rich heritage and wants to trace the formation of a specific textile collection, [namely] the textile collection from the National Museum of Cambodia, how it was formed in the first half of the 20th century, and how it was lost through the civil war and the Khmer Rouge regime in the 1970s [...].

The exhibition opens to contemporary practices, so it's an exhibition that is small but hopefully concise and designed in three parts. The first part is really historical and archival. It wants to shed light on the devastating effects of the Cambodian civil war, as I mentioned, on the material culture and heritage in Cambodia. And then it focuses specifically on the art of ikat: what does that mean in Cambodia to produce those textiles, and what kind of textiles those are –in terms of materials, techniques, cultural, and ritual significance. And finally, it opens up to contemporary creation and artisanship; thinking about how contemporary artists, in Cambodia, also from the diaspora, can think about those lost artefacts and lost histories, and reflect, through their own practice, on this lost heritage.



Slide from presentation by Magali An Berthon.

So, if I start with the first part. So you'll see it's taking a historical turn at the start. I'm a textile historian, so that's my background, and it has been my research also for the past two years now that I've been at CTR; going to the National Museum of Cambodia and trying to put back together their textile history. So, this museum has an interesting history because it was originally called the *Musée Albert Sarraut*, and it was a French colonial museum. It was inaugurated in Phnom Penh in 1920 under the French Protectorate. And it was under the leadership of French scholar and artist George Groslier that the institution started to gather pre-Angkorian and Angkorian ancient statuary, art, ceramics, silverware – but also ethnographic objects, such as textiles and textile tools. And in 1970, you know, Cambodia plunged into a civil war. And by 1975, the Khmer Rouge seized power and turned the country into a communist peasant dictatorship pretty quick. And during that period, the National Museum was closed - and it was closed until the regime collapsed in 1979 and was ousted by the Vietnamese forces.



Historical timeline of Cambodia National Museum

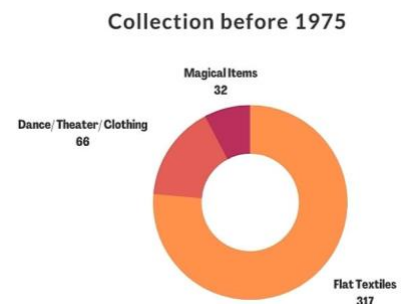
So, this timeline, I think, is useful because it helped me kind of track down all the important events relating to textiles, but also relating to the life and history of the museum itself. And during those years of closing, the collection was cared for by French directors and then by Cambodian directors; Chea Thay Seng and Ly Vou Ong, and both of them died during the Khmer Rouge regime. So when the museum reopened, the collection had been left unattended for several years. The first object to enter the collection, in terms of textiles, dates from 1918 and it was a silk satin hip wrap called a *sampot* and was purchased in Phnom Penh. And by the 1960s, the collection counted 415 pieces. It included a whole range of objects that I've listed here.

Flat textiles collection before 1975

Typology of objects	Quantity
1 Sampot hol	167
2 Kanseng chraboch	53
3 Hol pidan	31
4 Sampot charabap	23
5 Sarong	15
6 Floor coverings lboeuk	10
7 Sampot lboeuk	10
8 Diverse scarves - handkerchiefs	8

* Total 317 flat textiles

List of objects in the collection by 1960.



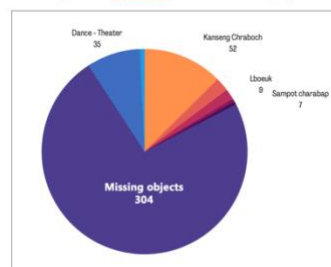
Graph showing objects in the collection by 1960.

So, to explain *sampot hol* are ikat hip wraps, *kanseng chraboch* are scarves or tie dyed. *Hol pidan* are also ikat banners, *sampot charabap* are brocaded silk textiles, *sarong* are simple hip wraps, and then some floor coverings, some damasks and other types of objects. There were also some theatre and dance costume elements, and even cotton protective clothing. And all of that was part of those 415 objects. So that's kind of the outline of the collection.

And what happened is after the museum's reopening, about three quarters of the collection had disappeared. So, I've put this, it was hard to visualise, so on that circle you have those missing objects – just to see the balance between what's there and what's lost. And so, what was left was about 70 textiles, plus 30 costume/dress elements from theatre and dance. And all of the ikat, that were the most precious pieces, had disappeared. So, about 300 objects had gone missing.

Loss of the collection post-war

- > What is missing? About three quarters of the collection
- > Loss of all *Sampot hol* (silk ikat hip wrap)
- > Loss of all the *Hol pidan* (pictorial silk hanging)



Textiles on display at the Musée Albert Sarraut, circa 1930.

Slide from presentation by Magali An Berthon.

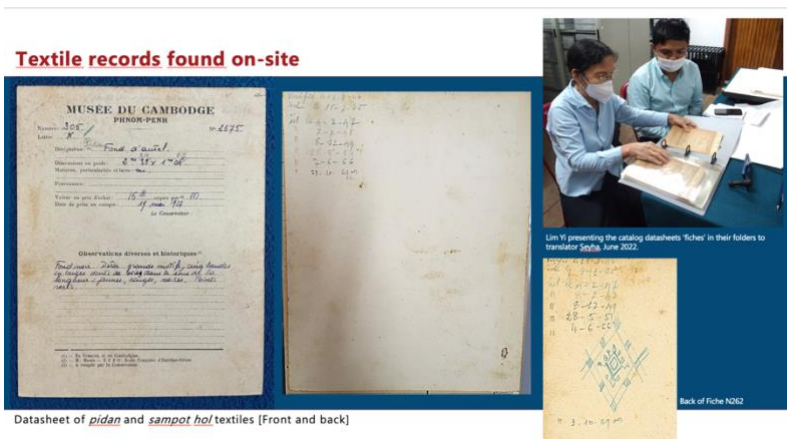


Lim Yi, retired archivist and librarian showing where she found the records, picture by Magali An Berthon, 2022.

And so, how do you do research when you're a historian and you have no objects left and no data? Where do you find or look for it? So it's been a bit of my work and it's what I'm trying to share with this exhibition. So, what I had to do to retrace the formation of the collection and the extent of the loss, was to look into archival documents; and those were recovered in the late 1980s and 1990s, especially by this little lady [referring to a picture of a woman], Ms Lim Yi, who is now retired but loves her job so much that she keeps going as a volunteer to the library and to work, and she's basically the only person who knows where the things are.

And so, she's the one in the 1980s who put them back together and the institution had retained some interesting documents from the French protectorate.

The Khmer Rouge destroyed a lot of documents, but not all [inaudible]. So, Lim Yi found those documents, catalogues and also data cards like that index card. And she put them together and sorted them into plastic sheets and filed 400 textiles. These index cards were used by the museum directors in the 1920s, 30s, 40s, and 50s to register the acquisition of these objects, and they were written [on] successively by different curators through time.



Datashheet of *pidan* and *sampot hol* textiles [Front and back]

Slide from presentation by Magali An Berthon.

And if you look at the back of the cards, you can see dates as well - up to [1969 and] 1970. So, this means that they were checked, they were verified. This means that there was somebody to care for these objects from the time they entered the collection until the civil war started in 1970, basically. So those objects carry some interesting information. Some of them also have at the back: some drawings, some motifs that were drawn of the pieces. Because

unfortunately we don't have photographic records that were produced as part of the acquisition.

There are other archives that I found, actually, in France, at this French School of Far East Studies in Paris. Because until the 1960s the museum was under French management even though Cambodia was an independent country by the 1950s, they remained in collaboration with the French for the management of the museum, and so, the French School of Far East Studies / L'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO). The French curators have collected items also that they brought back to France. And some of them are available [here] today. I found an invitation card about a 1949 textile exhibition at the National Museum in Phnom Penh, and there were about 150 textiles that were showcased. There are some records that say that they have been hand drawn by someone, but there's no... I couldn't find those drawings. I looked for them everywhere but haven't found them yet. But there were catalogues naming the objects that were presented their reference number and their names in Khmer also. So we know maybe the name of the motifs that were presented. And

there's also a newspaper cover here from a former colonial newspaper showing the press release at the centre about the exhibition. So, there are more traces of this exhibition through time.

Archival photographs



Picture of a *hol pidan*, National Museum of Cambodia, by Bernard Dupaigne, 1970



Eveline Porée Maspero, *Étude Sur Les Rites Agraires Des Cambodgiens* tome 2, Chapter « La fête des eaux » pp.353-477, Figures 15, 16, 17

Slide from presentation by Magali An Berthon.

And to conclude, there is no photo from the museum. But there were some photographic evidence from external visitors. On the right you have this French scholar, Eveline Porée Maspero, who had published this book and published three photos of three pieces in black and white of those pictorial ikat hanging.

And then on the left you have an analogue photo that is kind of faded,

so you don't have the original colours of the piece and we'll never know the original colour of the piece that was taken by a French anthropologist, Bernard Dupaigne, in 1970. He came and photographed all of those textiles, but he didn't take records of their numbers. So even if I have an index card and a photo, I cannot necessarily match them because it's hard with the very short descriptions on the cards. So he was the last person to ever see the full collection in 1970 before the war broke [out]. So there are ways like that to reconstruct through archives and photographs this lost collection.

And then moving to the ikat itself, right? The art of ikat itself. So it's very specific to the region. In Cambodia, as Eva mentioned, weaving is an artisanal women-led cottage industry, let's say activity, and you learn it mostly from the family, from mothers to daughters. But in the 1970s the civil war and the regime of dictatorship nearly stopped silk practices to the benefit of industrial cotton weaving. And in the post-conflict era, the art of ikat resumed in the south of the country, in Takeo and Kampong Cham provinces, and was relaunched also in Siem Reap in the north in the tourist area near the Angkor Wat temples in the late 1990s. The term ikat is actually from the Malay term *mengikat* that means to bind, to tie. It's been used across now, globally. And it refers to a resist-dye technique, in which you tie and dye in the weft threads before dyeing them into different baths of colours, to create a multicoloured pattern that will then be put into weaving on the loom. So it's almost printed on a surface but made through the art of tying and dyeing following specific motifs.

And you have to do it several times to create different colours and create vibrant hues and kinetic designs. And then eventually they're woven onto a three-shaft loom to create an intricate piece.

And the technique, here you can see some ideas of that, so the tying here, then some baths of

How to make ikat textiles? Exploring the weaving process



Tying with banana leaves, KTT, 2012



Silk warp untied after dyeing, Golden Silk, 2012



Spinning, Golden Silk, 2012



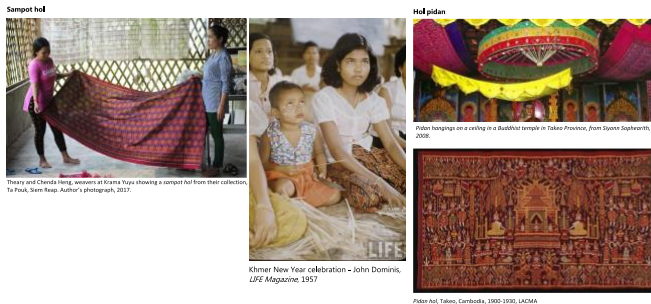
Hol weaving in the making, KTT, Siem Reap, 2012.

Slide from presentation by Magali An Berthon.

colour, and then spinning and then putting into the loom on those little sticks. I have two of them in the exhibition. You can see those little sticks here, then being placed on shuttles and then woven to create the pattern.

And so how do you wear silk ikat textile in Cambodia? So, they're mostly worn for ceremonial purposes, for weddings or at the temple. And they feature often geometric designs, flora and fauna,

How to wear and use ikat textiles in Cambodia?



and often finished with decorating bands. And when they have those figurative images, they're mostly used for Buddhist temples and made as an offering for religious purposes. But they take so much time now that less and less people do it, and they only find them in specific workshops. And they are mostly destined now to a foreign and tourist clientele. So, these are kind of the two type of textiles that are being produced with ikat.

Slide from presentation by Magali An Berthon.

And this brings us to the final part of the exhibition that is kind of an open part - that is also open for more collaborations, I hope, in the future. So, in this particular case, I invited three artists, or makers, into an artistic dialogue with the National Museum of Cambodia's lost heritage. Faced with missing objects, these creators have made use of the museum's remaining archives, photographs, textiles and motifs on index cards, and old catalogue records to find inspiration. Each with their specific set of skills, they imagined three original pieces: woven, painted, printed, and assembled, which are not reproductions of lost textiles, but contemporary interpretations of the unique form of Cambodian ikat textiles.

And so, OUM Sophea, she's the founder of Golden Silk Pheach. It's a workshop that is based in Siem Reap and it was opened in 2002. She's worked with her team to produce a very complex ikat that you'll see in the exhibition. And she worked also with her sister to recreate some motifs. The piece is entirely locally produced because they produce their own silk thread and their own dyestuff. So, it's natural dyes, natural fibres, all made in house, and that she produced with her team - it took about eight months/nine months of work.

And the second artist I invited, she's Australian Cambodian. Her name is SOK Linda. She's actually based in the US and she's a fibre artist. Som in her case, she revisits what I call the *pidan*, a sort of pictorial hanging. What she did is that she looked at the cards and sent them to her family in Australia, her Cambodian family in Australia. And they drew some drawings of the things that it meant to them. And she kind of tried to put together those drawings and create a motif herself. And instead of doing tie dye, she actually used silk-screen printing techniques to print on the surface of the cloth before weaving it. So, it's a bit of a take on the *pidan*, on that banner, but with contemporary methods and practices. So, these two artists, really compellingly, demonstrate the vitality and resilience of Cambodian arts and crafts, and hopefully embody the restorative power of making, imagination and memory.

And the final artist I invited to join is FONKi, otherwise named Yavanna Chhem Kiet. And he's Cambodian Canadian, but based out of Phnom Penh, and he's a street artist and a painter. And he's participated through giving those two portraits of women wearing *krama* textiles. The *krama* is a

vernacular gingham cotton textile that people would wear on a daily basis, but that was reclaimed by the Khmer Rouge regime as a symbol of their oppression. So he's been working also, producing a piece that talks about that part of the heritage.

This exhibition was made possible with the help of many. I want to thank Morten Grymer-Hansen for being my co-curator on this project from the start and bringing the idea to Archana here and Oddur here. I want to thank Luisa and Sarah, my great installation team that's been helping me with installing the exhibition. Also, Anne Laure was here to help me with labels and curation. And Eva, who's been supporting the project from the start. And it was also made with the generosity of funders. So, I want to name the EU Horizon 2020 scheme, the Asian Dynamic Initiative at the University of Copenhagen, the Carlsberg Foundation for the one-day workshop and the Design History Society for this opening event.

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