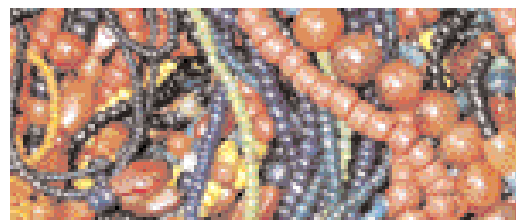
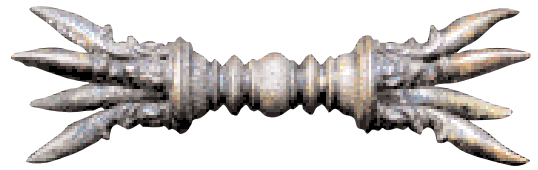


FEATURE ARTICLE:

**Cataloguing Cambodia's Treasures:  
The CKS Collection Inventory  
Project of the National Museum  
(2004-2010)**

Darryl Collins



**N**ow in its final phase, the CKS National Museum Collection Inventory Project has brought a revitalized sense of order to the Museum's collection and personal confidence to trained Museum staff, who now oversee this important ongoing project. It has greatly assisted the Museum's international exhibition and publications programs, identification and repatriation of missing works of art, links with re-established provincial collections and the fostering of both established and newly formed conservation workshops in stone, metal and ceramics. It has won international acclaim.

Most importantly, the location and condition of thousands of works of art in storage have been digitally catalogued, with works arranged in a logical and systematic way. Ongoing agendas include digital photography of every work, scanning of extant French inventory cards and cross-referencing the past and present catalogue systems. Greatly improved trilingual labeling now offers visitors clear and accurate identification of some 2,000 works on display and provides a great resource for researchers wishing to access the collection.

It wasn't always so. In the wake of the Khmer Rouge regime, the National Museum, repository of the extraordinary treasures of Cambodia's past, had suffered from years of neglect, was run by a staff lacking formal training, and occupied a building ill-equipped for the second millennium. The conditions of Museum storage were particularly worrisome. Locating a work of art in its basement was challenging. Documentation was incomplete and inaccessible.

### **A fortuitous visitor and a collaboration with CKS**

In early 2004, art historian and CKS Trustee Emma Bunker visited the National Museum with a group of friends, including the distinguished collector Douglas Latchford and American arts patron and philanthropist Shelby White. They met with director Khun Samen and his then deputy, Hab Touch at the Museum. Moved by the poor conditions of the Museum, Shelby White generously offered to fund a long-term project through the Leon Levy Foundation, in collaboration with the Center for Khmer Studies. They agreed on the all-important goal of an inventory project—a bold undertaking to catalogue the Museum's entire collection. In the grant proposal, the current situation and the project's ambitions were starkly set forth:

"When the Museum officially opened on 13 April 1920, there were over 1,000 objects on display. Today the museum has approximately 14,000 objects and the collection is growing at a rate of over 300 objects per year. The majority of the collection is stored in a basement storage area. The project will bring together, and draw on, all existing registration methods used by the Museum at different times in the past, including several French card catalogue systems, Khmer handwritten inventory lists and a pre-existing-database. As part of the inventory and cataloguing project,



*CIP team measuring the Reclining Vishnu on display in a museum gallery in 2010*



*CIP staff members Sokha (left) and Sophal (right) documenting a stone sculpture in the museum basement through digital photographs*



all previous documents relevant to a particular object will be scanned and attached to that object's record in a newly developed database".

The project began in August 2004. Darryl Collins was chosen as the project coordinator, to train the staff and set up the cataloguing procedure.

During the course of the project, Shelby White and CKS President Dr. Lois de Menil made several visits to the National Museum in Phnom Penh. Shelby White, accompanied by Emma Bunker, returned in 2006. Dr. de Menil and Emma Bunker visited regularly. From the outset, the Center for Khmer Studies assured regular financial and administrative oversight of the project. As the growth and success of the project proceeded, the initial 3-year grant was extended to a period of 6 years that have seen to completion the documentation of the entire Museum collection

### **Press acclaim and new international visibility**

Once underway, this major project was widely acclaimed by the national and international press, drawing new attention to the National Museum and the importance of its collections. *The Cambodia Daily* noted aptly, in 2005: "In the National Museum's basement, order emerges from the chaos. 'A full-page article, entitled, 'National Museum Inventory Project: Phnom Penh' appeared in the London-based art newspaper *Asian Art* in October 2005, with Deputy Director Hab Touch commenting that he believed the project represented a major step forward for the institution, which until then had an incomplete knowledge of what was contained in its collection, and of what was missing. *The International Herald Tribune* titled its story, 'A Belated Rescue of Cambodia's Past.'

### **Impact on international scholarship and mission of the national museum**

International researchers began immediately to hail the project and to make use of the increased access to museum data for exhibitions and publications. The conservation workshops within the Museum now have orderly ease of access to the collection, as do curators when works of art are required for either national or international exhibitions. Objects can now be quickly identified and located, with digital photos and detailed documentation.

ICOM and ICOM-EFEO pamphlets and booklets have aided identification of missing works of art and alerted the world to trafficking in Khmer artifacts. An integral part of recovery is identification—establishing a provenance, or history of ownership. Using the new Inventory Project

resources, The Museum is now in a strong position to present appropriate responses in such cases.



Display of textiles in the NMC collection, documented by the CIP team and subsequently used in *Pictorial Cambodian Textiles*, by Gillian Green (2008)

### **The project staff 2004-2010**

The inventory project has benefited from the guidance and support of three Museum directors, Mr. Khun Samen, Mr. Hab Touch and most recently, Mrs. Oun Phalline. Registrars, photographic personnel and cataloguers drawn from the museum staff have now been trained. Those attached to the project number eight. The initial staff trained for the first year numbered four, three of whom are still with the project. Results speak volumes for the dedication of museum staff, for their willingness to work on the collection in a methodical and committed manner—to record, photograph, measure and locate works under less than perfect conditions.

Current cataloguing of the collection as of 2010 stands at: Metal objects 7,309 numbered (of a total of 8,454); Stone 3,211 numbered (of a total of 3,341 - still cataloguing); Ceramics 4,222 numbered (of a total of 4,740 - still cataloguing); and Wood 489 numbered (of a total of 558-still cataloguing).

The Museum collection now stands at a total of 17,468 works of art. In 2004, at the commencement of the project, an estimate of the Museum's collection numbered around 14,000 objects.

## Into the future

Discussion is underway to complement the cataloguing project with a Collection Database Project that would create digital links to give increased access to the collection. Also under discussion is a project to provide computers, equipment and training to provincial museums, using National Museum staff as trainers, with the object of ensuring that these collections become part of a greater Cambodian museum network. It is the Museum's deep hope that ongoing discussions will reach a successful outcome and a new collaboration.

This important project would never have taken place without the vision and generosity of American philanthropist and CKS patron Shelby White.



Shelby White during her visit in 2006 (back left) on the steps of the National Museum of Cambodia with the then CIP team and Hab Touch, then Deputy Director (far right)

# CKS SENIOR FELLOWS 2010-2011

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**Kathie Carpenter** is an Associate Professor in the Department of International Studies, University of Oregon. Prof. Carpenter's project entitled *'The Daily Lives of Children in Siem Reap's Orphanages'* sets out to describe orphanage life from the perspectives of the children who live there. More specifically, using a participant-observation methodology Prof. Carpenter focuses on the ways in which children, staff and institutional culture may combat the negative effects that long-term institutionalization can have on a children's development. As Prof. Carpenter notes, Siem Reap lies at the confluence of two important streams of people pouring into the city. Extreme poverty, especially in rural areas of the province, brings children into the city's many orphanages, while cultural and natural attractions brings tourists who are eager to contribute time and resources to support the children in orphanages. This confluence has led to an unusually high concentration of orphanages in Siem Reap, making it an ideal place to observe the conditions of a wide range of orphanages at all stages of their "life cycle" from newly opened to well-established. The results of Prof. Carpenter's work will con-

tribute to a greater understanding of not just the lives of Cambodian children, but the lives of the millions of chil-



Class at orphanage