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Art from Angkor Wat at Asian Civilisations Museum



The exhibition has prime examples of Khmer art and architecture dating as far back as the 9th century, and also represents France's contribution to studying it. ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

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SINGAPORE - On Sunday (April 8), the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) opens a showcase of ancient Khmer art from the Guimet Museum in Paris. Angkor: Exploring Cambodia's Sacred City runs until July 22.

The exhibition has prime examples of Khmer art and architecture dating as far back as the 9th century, and also represents France's contribution to studying it. Alongside are ashtrays and memorabilia from the 1931 Colonial Exposition, when the French government commissioned a life-size replica of Angkor Wat's central tower to loom over Parisians in the city's largest public park.

The replica ignited furious discussion over France's role in the-then protectorate of Indochina, made up of Cambodia and Vietnam. But as the exhibition at ACM shows, French interest in Khmer art also allowed certain masterpieces to be preserved before they were destroyed by conflict or decay.

Angkor: Exploring Cambodia's Sacred City features some of the first photographs of Angkor Wat, taken by members of a mid-19th century expedition led by the French.

Many of the rubbings and plaster casts on display are accurate reproductions of artworks that in reality have been ruined.

There are watercolours and pencil sketches done by Louis Delaporte, who travelled in the regions now known as Thailand and Cambodia. He took sketches and sculpture back to Paris. When the famous Louvre museum denied him a showcase, the Khmer art found a permanent home in the Guimet Museum, set up by well-travelled industrialist Emile Guimet.

The museum's collection was built up by 19th century expeditions. In the early 20th century, however, a National Museum was set up in Phnom Penh and more masterpieces were sent there instead.

Currently, the museum only expands its collection via the occasional sale on the open market, or through the generosity of other collectors, says chief curator Pierre Baptiste.

He also gets letters from people who inherited pieces of the Angkor Wat replica made in Paris in 1931 - after the Colonial Exposition, it was taken apart and auctioned off.

None of those pieces have made it here but a fascinating late acquisition is the statue of a 9th century female deity with a serene expression. In 1936, only the headless body was discovered and brought into the Guimet Museum's collection. Seven decades later, the museum received a head, donated by the former United States ambassador to Cambodia.

There are up to 30 statues of the same style in the Guimet Museum's collection but while Mr Baptiste was assessing the collection, he decided to see whether this body and the donated head would fit together.

But first he checked to see that no one was watching him do something this absurd.

"I'm not very strong so I didn't fit it properly at first. I thought that it's too small for the body," he recalls during a tour of the exhibition at ACM. But just as he came to that conclusion, he heard a sound and the head came to rest in the correct position.

The complete statue looked benignly at the amazed curator. "As I tell you this, I have chills. She did it by herself," he says.

Alongside the museum exhibition, contemporary Cambodian artist Sopheap Pich presents two new works of art in his signature wood-and-metal wicker style. There will also be an academic conference and performing arts festival next month.

ACM director Kennie Ting says: "ACM's mission is to explore encounters and connections between civilisations in Asia, and so this exhibition has a cross-cultural, East-West perspective, presenting not only the splendours of Khmer art and civilisation, but also works of art related to the French encounter with Angkor and their reintroducing Angkor to the world in the late 19th and early 20th century."

Angkor: Exploring Cambodia's Sacred City runs from April 8 to July 22 at the Asian Civilisations Museum. Go to acm.org.sg for details.

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