

## Modernity in a Group of Antique Cambodian Textiles

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This presentation introduces a group of antique silk textiles in the collection of the National Museum of Cambodia in Phnom Penh. These, prepared from fine, machine woven silk cloth sourced probably from China or Vietnam, are patterned by the resist dye technique called *kiet* or *tcharaboc* in Khmer language. These are the Khmer words for the same techniques known in Indonesian as *plangi*, a ‘spot’ resist binding technique and *tritik*, a running stitch resist binding technique used to create the motif outlines. The dyes used are synthetic. They are just under two metres long and eighty to ninety cm wide. There are about fifty *kiet* altogether in the Museum collection. Of these approximately half are patterned with stars and/or flower forms in geometric array. They were prepared by Muslim Cham or Malay women for wearing as traditional headscarves. Eighteen of the remainder, however, have quite different imagery displaying what appear to be pictorial scenes. So although their size corresponds to the classic headscarf, their figurative pattern motifs indicate a different function.

The motifs appearing on these forms are diverse. There is the trio of bird, *nak* (snake) and tree of life; there are abstract sailing vessels with *nak* at prow and stern or, with a *nak* head and tail, both with a central structure (fig.1). There are buildings; forms of transport; birds of many kinds such as chickens, herons and pelicans; there are animals including elephants, deer, tigers and domestic animals, and in one example, mythical *kinnari* and *apsara*.

The first step in examining these textiles was to attempt to identify the motifs. Most likely the trio of bird, *nak* (snake) and tree of life, a universal animist symbol, in this context symbolises the end of the rainy season in Cambodia.<sup>1</sup> As for the *nak* headed vessels of either form, these undoubtedly represent *pratib*, the brilliantly illuminated floats associated with the three day Water Festival celebrations taking place at the end of the rainy season in Phnom Penh. These huge floating vessels, *pratib*, glide past the royal viewing platform each evening along the Sap River in front of the Royal Palace (fig.2). The ‘passengers’ on these floats, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were reported to be large animal images – elephants, marine monsters and fish. Post-Cambodian independence (1953) the images became more nationalistic depicting the royal coat of arms and various government ministries such as defence, law and agriculture. Other motifs represent ships of more practical nature such as a

Chinese junk and a European style steam ship both of which could be witnessed contemporaneously in Cambodian ports.<sup>2</sup>

The architectural structures include what are clearly Chinese style 'shop houses' (fig.3); structures modelled on buildings found in *wats*, and, interestingly, domestic houses sited directly on the ground which do not resemble typical Khmer wooden houses on stilts (fig.4). Many ground-based dwellings like these may be seen in Kampot province in the south of the country even today. Motifs depicting forms of transport contribute some very interesting information. One 'shophouse' textile has a pattern register including a car and a bicycle (see fig.3) while bicycles alone appear on another. The first car is reported to have arrived in Cambodia in 1912 and with the accession date of the textiles into the Museum being 1928 at the latest, this dates the manufacture of this particular textile to between those dates, its age being therefore at least eighty years old.

These observations lead to questions about the origin and purpose of these textiles, so different to the headscarf forms. Firstly who made them and secondly for what purpose were they prepared? The fact that the resist dye patterning technique - *kiet* (plangi and tritik) - are more associated with textile traditions of island Southeast Asia and in particular with Malay peoples, support the contention that they were prepared by Cham or Malay people living in Cambodia.<sup>3</sup> But the eclectic choice of motifs suggests that these craftswomen made them for a purpose other than traditional headscarves. If so what was this purpose? Did they perhaps function as decorative or ritual hangings in Cambodia? Historical and other contemporary records are not forthcoming on any pictorial textiles in use as hangings or decorative items at secular Cambodian celebratory events.

Fortunately historical documents, specifically the diaries, letters and reports of George Groslier, from 1918 the director of the newly-established School of Cambodian Arts and subsequently Director of the National Museum from its establishment in 1920, are invaluable. From these sources we can hypothesise a likely scenario in which these textiles may have been prepared. Part of Groslier's vision for the future of craft production in Cambodia - be it silver smithing, woodcarving, sculpture, jewellery making or weaving - was quite entrepreneurial. In essence he believed that the only way that Cambodian craft skills would be sustained would be by producing craft pieces including textiles to sell both in-country and overseas. Royal craftspeople, with the agreement of King Sisowath, were relocated from the

palace to the newly established School of Cambodian Arts. Their output became popular items of purchase with French officials, their families and the increasing number of tourists. Others were sold through the so called ‘Corporations’ a French government organization set up to promote sales both in Cambodia and at the growing number of International Expositions abroad.

This process I have termed an ‘impulse of modernity’. Here we can discern at least a rationale for the production of textiles such as these beyond the traditional realm in terms of usage and pattern. The inspiration for motifs and design came from all around the women who prepared them, from their observations of events, scenes and celebrations occurring in their urban environment. These they then transferred to the medium of a silk panel in traditional techniques of resist patterning.

There is intriguing evidence to support the statement that this ‘impulse’ occurred not only in Cambodia, but in other parts of Southeast Asia at that time, early twentieth century. Two batik patterned cotton cloths from Java have been illustrated in recently published books.<sup>4</sup> One dated to “1895 – 1900” depicts a car in great detail, just like that on the Cambodian example, together with bicycles and even airplanes above. Another depicts a car apparently colliding with a rickshaw in front of a prominent building identified as a bank building, which is located in the composition in the same place as the row of shophouses in the Cambodian example.

So it appears that textile practitioners, Cambodian or Javanese in these instances whatever their particular patterning skill, extended their range to incorporate modern motifs into their repertoire producing themes for textiles decorated in traditional ways but employing non-traditional motifs exhibiting the impact of modernism in their time.

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<sup>1</sup> I have argued this proposition in Green, G. 2008, *Pictorial Textiles of Cambodia*, River Books.

<sup>2</sup> These motifs also appear on antique silk *hol* (ikat) patterned Cambodian silk textiles, see figs. 307, 308, 309, 314 in Green, G. 2003. *Traditional Textiles of Cambodia*, River Books.

<sup>3</sup> It is possible that these women may have taught their Khmer compatriots the technique and that they prepared the textiles with a novel range of motifs

<sup>4</sup>Gallerie Smend, 2006, *Batik. 75 Selected Masterpieces*, Tuttle Publishing.

Wronska-Friend, M, 2008, *Sztuka Woskiem Pisana*, Gondwana, Poland,:fig.67.

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