



Angkor - Sacred Heritage of Cambodia **15 December 2006 - 9 April 2007**

On December 15, 2006, an exhibition of objects of art from Cambodia will be inaugurated in the Art and Exhibition Hall of the Federal Republic of Germany (on until April 9, 2007). This is the first time that Germany will be host to an exhibition of this scale displaying art which - ever since it became known in the mid-19th century - has fascinated the culturally interested public in Europe and filled them with wonderment. Since then, the name Angkor has stood for unfathomably vast, mysterious temples, spread out in the Cambodian jungle – temples that can even today evoke the splendour that was once theirs (Fig. 1).

Ever since the country began to achieve political stability in the beginning of the 90s following the Paris Peace Agreement, the Angkor region has once again become accessible to travellers, and the public worldwide has become increasingly aware of the splendid culture of the ancient Khmer empire and its monuments, erected between the 9th and the 13th centuries. But what was the spirit behind these stupendous temples, which were the gods they were dedicated to, what was the social and economic structure that made their construction possible? What kind of a society was it that could bring forth such achievements? What was the self-image of its kings? These are some of the questions posed by anyone who wishes to get acquainted with ancient Cambodia.

And this is where the exhibition steps in. It not only provides the viewer the opportunity of gaining an overview of the diversity of art, but also takes up the most important themes in art history, so that the visitor gets an idea of the historical, social and religious context of the works.

Angkor formed the heartland of an empire that, at the height of its power, extended in the west across the Chao Praya (in present-day Thailand), in the east up to the Annamite Range (in present-day Vietnam), in the north up to the curve of the Mekong (in present-day Laos) and in the south up to the Cape of Camau (in what is today Vietnam). The lowlands by the Great Lake (Tonle Sap) where Angkor lies, are most suitable for rice cultivation. Trade was fostered by a variety of timbers and wild game together with gold, precious stones and silk, with the Tonle Sap and the Mekong providing access to the sea. Sound water management and an extensive network of canals regulated the irrigation of the paddy fields. It was in this environment, blessed with an abundance of natural resources, that the country developed into the most powerful empire in South East Asia.

Round 140 stone sculptures, bronze figures as well as silver objects and paintings will make their way to Bonn from the National Museum in Phnom Penh. In addition, objects on loan from the Musée National des Arts Asiatiques Guimet in Paris will also be on display at the exhibition. The timeframe covered will extend from the 7th century to modern times, for the exhibition aspires to show through the objects on display, the cultural base on which Angkor developed and the extent to which its legacy continues to resonate even today.

The earliest traditional works of art displayed at the exhibition are from the pre-Angkor empires of Funan and Chenla to the south and north east of present-day Cambodia. These are Buddhist and Brahmanical (Hindu) stone sculptures from the 7th and 8th centuries – objects of great beauty exhibiting an amazing degree of artistic perfection. They bear the distinct impress of Indian art and yet retain a style that is unmistakably their own (Figs. 2-6). Sandstone stelae bearing inscriptions give an idea of the overriding importance of epigraphy for gaining insights into the age (Fig. 7). It remains the most important source of information for all aspects of Khmer culture until the 14th century.

The real Angkorian period began in the 9th century when the centre of power was shifted to the west, close to the Tonle Sap. There the first temple mountain of stone, surrounded by wide moats and enclosing walls, was consecrated as the Empire's magico-religious centre. The complex was based on a cosmological concept strictly followed right into the 13th century: as per this, the Earth was visualised as a square surrounded by mountain ranges (enclosing walls). Beyond this ring stretch the mythical primeval oceans (moats). In the centre of this square, Mount Meru, residence of the gods, forms the axis of the universe (temple mountain) (Fig. 8). The main temple was often surrounded by smaller shrines where statues of divinities were placed. Apart from architectural elements such as carved door lintels (Fig. 9) and balustrades, the exhibition will also include an impressive number of stone and bronze figures from these temples, some larger than life-sized. These are both Brahmanical and Buddhist cult statues, their styles exhibiting an extreme diversity ranging from imposing representation (Fig. 10), elegant simplicity (Fig. 11) and vibrant vitality (Fig. 12) to profound spirituality (Fig. 13). One of the most splendid objects on display is a bronze figure of the God Vishnu, which even in its fragmentary state is overwhelming (Fig. 14). Clearly reflected in the style are the patrons' sense of life and role perception.

So typical of the art of Angkor, the bas-reliefs on the gigantic temple-mountain of Angkor Wat (constructed between 1113 and 1150), widely considered the most magnificent specimen of Khmer architecture, will receive special attention. Being immovable objects of art, these bas-reliefs can only be presented in segments on original-sized photo friezes and plaster casts. Transposed onto a substitute medium, they still succeed in providing an impressive display of the exuberant fantasy and artistic perfection that marks the representation of epic and mythical events (Fig. 15).

Angkor witnessed its last great efflorescence during the reign of the Mahayana Buddhist king Jayavarman VII (1181-1220). The temples constructed under him are dedicated to the Buddhist ideals of compassion and wisdom. This is most clearly discernible on the face-towers which leave their imprint on the late Angkorian period as no other architectural feature does (Fig. 16). Characteristic of this period is the inward smile on the monumental faces – Angkor's famous smile that also appears on the outstanding stone sculptures and bronze figures of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas on view in the exhibition. Unique among these is a head of polished sandstone portraying Jayavarman VII himself (Fig. 17), an object of extreme rarity, for other than the few portraits of the king and presumably of his queen Jayarajadevi which have survived, we know of no representations of individual personages in Angkor.

Following the death of this important ruler, a period of stagnation set in, and in the 15th century, Angkor was completely abandoned by the Khmer kings. They founded a new capital in the eastern part of the country, close to the Mekong. Theravada Buddhism was now the

state religion, with the stupa and pagoda forming the religious centre. In its Cambodian version (Reamker), the Indian epic, Ramayana, frequently represented in the Angkorian Period, continued to retain tremendous importance as a vehicle of spiritual knowledge. No longer chiselled on stone but painted on the inner walls of pagodas and repainted time and again, the Reamker influenced artistic creativity in Cambodia right into the 20th century. This important tradition is represented in the exhibition by a series of scenes from the Reamker, produced at the beginning of the 20th century in tempera on canvas (Fig. 18).

Through the centuries, Angkor has remained the reference point for Cambodia's national identity. Till today, its legacy has a bearing on the self-perception of the Cambodians.

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