

THE MUSEUM OF RELIGIOUS ARTS OF THE WAT PHRA KEO

by

Thao Boun Souk

Lao-American Association  
Vientiane

"A people without a Museum is a people without tradition or soul . . . . The Museum is the sanctuary where that soul survives."

--Luc Benoist  
Honorary Curator of the  
Museums of France

"The temple must be maintained and embellished by, first of all, its own inhabitants . . . . Those who attend must not be indifferent to the collapse of the walls and columns, not even deigning to gather bricks and sweep the dust."

--Thao Nhouy Abhay  
Former Minister of Education

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(The Museum of Religious Arts of the Wat Phra Keo is open daily from 8:00 to 11:00 a.m. and from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m. Admission is 100 kip.)

PREFATORY NOTE

The study which you are about to read is not the "Guide" to the Museum of Religious Arts of the Wat Phra Keo. It is simply the English translation of a series of articles which I published in French in the press from October 1968 to July 1969, in order to make this museum known and to permit the public to admire its collections without awaiting the appearance of the Guide then in preparation.

I have added at the end an "Index to the Pieces Mentioned," however, which makes it possible to use this study somewhat in the manner of a guide in visiting the Museum.

I am most grateful to the management of Lao Presse and the Office of Tourism for kindly facilitating the publication of the French edition, and to the Lao-American Association which has undertaken the English edition.

--Thao Boun Souk

## INTRODUCTION

"The Wat Ho Phra Keo, which is rightly regarded as having been the Royal Temple, is today reduced to its building of worship and some debris of the surrounding wall, caught in the roots of a banyan."

--Henri Parmentier (1911)

After four months of labor (December 1968-April 1969), the Museum of Religious Arts of the Wat Phra Keo was reopened to the public on May 1, 1969.

The work of reorganizing the museum was directed by Miss Madeleine Giteau, of the French School of the Far East. From a veritable lumber room, scarcely inventoried, the Wat Phra Keo has become a true museum, the first in our country.

I leave the more authorized voices than mine the task of properly thanking Miss Giteau, the real master mind of this resurrection, and of informing the friendly nations\* which helped in this task how much the entire Lao people appreciate their disinterested gesture. Is there indeed anything of less "strategic importance," yielding less "economic return" than a museum? But is there anything that more truly "pays off" in the long run? I don't think so! Of what use to us tomorrow will be our roads and our dams, our factories and our railroads, our schools and our Army, if our people have lost their soul and their faith? H.E. Nhouy Abhay once thought that there was danger of just that. Long ago I became sure of the contrary, and the rearrangement of the interior of the Wat Phra Keo has justified my belief. I had the good luck to be able to follow the work closely.

It would have been too bad, in my opinion, if the rearrangement had been carried out by coolies paid by the day, for whom the cleaning of the Wat Phra Keo would have been no different from the drudgery of cleaning the city's sewers! Fortunately it didn't happen that way. Instead, in response to the call of their teachers, dozens of students from the Teacher Training College at Dong Dok came on Saturday afternoons and Sundays and lent their labor not only to move, clean, arrange, and classify the relics of our national patrimony, but also to sweep, brush, and scrape the dust and dirt collected through the years. I know of few museums which can claim communal labor of such quality!

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\*Especially UNESCO and France.

Most of these young people had never set foot inside a museum. You should have seen how avidly they questioned Miss Giteau about the origin of this piece or the history of that. You should have seen their astonishment upon deciphering famous names in our history on old steles. And that is why they never lacked enthusiasm: for perhaps the first time in their lives, they really felt that they were doing something for their country, and doing it for free. So they did it with all the fire and all the gaiety of their twenty years. The soul of our country is not dead, and to listen to our boys is proof enough. This event in the lives of all these future teachers will remain deep in their memories. I am sure that later, when they bring their students to visit the Wat Phra Keo, they will be proud to say, "I put that Buddha there . . . . This stele weighs 300 kilograms and six of us carried it."

This intelligent participation is continuing and increasing through the museographic work to which our students are being introduced little by little, especially those of the Royal Institute of Law and Administration: translation of the catalog, preparation of cards and labels, tracing of inscriptions, and later, under the direction of our Mahas, the translation of the steles, the deciphering of the texts . . . . years of work, no doubt--and so much the better!

HISTORY OF THE MUSEUM

The Wat Phra Keo--the Temple of the Emerald Buddha--dates from the 16th century; until the end of the reign of His Majesty Anouroutharath ("Chao Anou"), it was the Royal Temple. It owes its name to the statue of the Buddha in green jade (not emerald!) which H. M. Setthathirath had brought from Xieng May in 1548. Two centuries later, in an early pillaging of Vientiane, the Siamese seized the precious statue to install it in their country, where it still remains: in the Wat Phra Keo of . . . Bangkok!

The reign of bold Chao Anou was ended by the disaster with which all are familiar: the sack of Vientiane by the Siamese in 1828. The Wat Phra Keo was pillaged, like all the other temples of the city; the city itself disappeared, invaded little by little by the jungle to the point where less than a half century later Francis Garnier<sup>1</sup> was hard put to discover it in the forest, in ruins and deserted.

But with the return of peace in the latter years of the 19th century, Vientiane began to return to life, and little by little the temples were restored. Only the Wat Phra Keo, the Royal Temple, remained a pile of rubble. Its neighbor, the temple of Wat Kang, --or what remained of it--was razed to construct the French Club<sup>2</sup>; its other neighbor, Wat Sisaket, less damaged, was restored for the Colonial Exposition of Paris in 1931. But in the case of the Wat Phra Keo, the task was immense!

However, the French School of the Far East (Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient) attacked the job a few years before the Second World War, and in 1942, under the direction of His Highness the Prince Souvanna Phouma, then Public Works Engineer of Vientiane, the work of rebuilding was completed. And it was decided that instead of returning it to worship, it would be made into a museum.

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<sup>1</sup>French naval officer and explorer (1839-73).

<sup>2</sup>The Club was in its turn razed in 1962 to construct the Hotel Lane Xang; but at the initiative of some of the oldest families of the capital, it was decided to preserve the memory of the vanished Wat Kang. That is why you can now admire, in the hotel garden, a lovely little modern pagoda in which the Ministry of Religious Affairs has had installed a very handsome bronze Buddha of the 18th century which comes from the old temple of Wat Kang.

But in the meantime, many Lao works of art had been carefully transported to the Louis Finot museum in Hanoi by the French School, with the laudable object of safeguarding them, and it now became necessary to get them back. It was not until 1953-54 that the last of them were brought back to Vientiane, where they now form the basis of our collection. This explains why some of the pieces in the Wat Phra Keo are inscribed "Hanoi No. \_\_\_\_" or "E.F.E.O. No. \_\_\_\_"

Alas, the vicissitudes of politics caused the museum to be forgotten bit by bit. An attempt was made in 1961 to reorganize the collections, an attempt doomed to checkmate because it never undertook a selection of pieces; everything remained in a jumble on shelves or in cabinets! Thus it was that it was necessary to wait until the beginning of 1969 to see our country finally granted a museum worthy of its past.

The esthetic value of the monument is clear, for the reconstruction faithfully followed the original plans; but its archeological value is much less. To reconstruct the building, it was necessary to raze the old one completely. Nothing is left of the original Wat Phra Keo except a few rare vestiges which were judged to be in a sufficiently satisfactory state of preservation to be used. Such is the case, in particular, of the two main doors:

--The East Door. It dates from the original construction of the monument--that is, from the middle of the 16th century. Once the principal door, now walled up, it is of gilded wood. Each of the two panels "contains two stems of foliage, opposed and interlaced, each strand being terminated by the upper part of the body of an Apsara in prayer. Birds play at random among the strands."<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately vandals have not failed to apply their vicious talents to it. One can still, however, admire the surprising richness of the half-plant, half-human decoration on the upper part of the door. It had a good place in the Paris Colonial Exposition of 1931 in the Indochina Section, managed by Prince Phetsarath.

--The West Door. It is doubtless of later origin than the east door, for it is of a style much akin to that of the north door of the Wat Sisaket, which dates from 1820. A false door since the beginning, its two panels are of stucco. "Their antiquity confers a value upon them as well as providing evidence of the ancient art of Laos; one notes the hieratic and stylized side of the figures,"<sup>4</sup> each of which represents a divinity in a niche, supported by a squatting "ogre" (yak).

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<sup>3</sup>H. Parmentier, L'art du Laos.

<sup>4</sup>H. Marchal, L'art décoratif du Laos [attributing to the west door a greater age than it is now thought to have/.

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There is still no "Guide" published by the museum. However, two catalogs in manuscript exist in the Wat Phra Keo; one is in French and was prepared in 1952-54 by our eminent compatriot Thao Phouvang Phimmasonne, former member of the French School. The other is in Lao and was prepared more recently, in 1967-68, under the guidance of the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

Miss Madeleine Giteau, of the E.F.E.O., is now preparing a new edition of this catalog as well as a Guide; the Guide is to be bilingual and amply illustrated.

I invite the attention of art lovers to an "Inventory" of the museum which is available to the public for consultation. If you know the number of a piece, it will quickly enable you to determine its location in the museum.

In addition, I might point out that it is not forbidden to photograph the museum's pieces; quite the contrary. But inside the building, flash is needed.

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THE COLLECTIONS OF THE WAT PHRA KEO

The pieces in the Wat Phra Keo can be divided into three large groups according to their origins:

1. The Mon pieces (6th-8th centuries).
2. The Khmer pieces (9th-13th centuries).
3. The Lao pieces (14th-20th centuries).

The Lao pieces are obviously the most numerous and the most interesting. The Khmer pieces come from either the region of Bassac (South Laos) or Say Fong (Province of Vientiane); they are few but of good quality.

The Mon (or Burmese) pieces are of exceptional interest. Their very recent discovery (October 1968) is likely to bring about a review of all or part of the ancient history--so poorly known--of the northern part of the Indochina peninsula.

THE MON PIECES  
6th-8th Centuries

The discovery at the end of 1968 at Ban Thalats<sup>5</sup> of a stone Buddha and an inscribed stele did not go unnoticed at the time. The Ministry of Religious Affairs was informed, and the two pieces were placed in a temporary shelter along the road and guarded by the Armed Forces, who had discovered them.<sup>6</sup>

Unable to decipher the inscription myself, I thought then that they were Khmer pieces probably dating from the 11th-12th century, in a rather late Dvaravati "provincial" style. However, I made drawings, photos, and a tracing of the inscription.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Village in the muong of Phone Hong, Province of Vientiane, on the Nam Ngum River about 65 kilometers north-northwest of Vientiane.

<sup>6</sup>These two pieces were transferred to the Wat Phra Keo in July 1969. They are now in the east peristyle.

<sup>7</sup>For lack of anything else at the beginning, but later because experience showed it conclusively superior, I used local paper made at Houei Say from Bamboo pulp for my tracings.

My friends of the French School of the Far East in Phnom Penh, whom I had asked kindly to try to translate the inscription, could only admit their impotence. The inscription was not in "old Khmer" nor in Sanskrit, but seemed to be in archaic Mon--that is, in the language of ancient Burma--which put back the date of the vestiges of Ban Thalot to the 6th-8th centuries C.E.! Then I remembered that the museum of Phnom Penh possesses a sandstone Buddha (No. B 10,8)<sup>8</sup> which is almost a replica of that of Thalot and which was dated as from the beginning of the 6th century.

The study of the Buddha and the stele is continuing, and I hope that the results can soon be published. I think the historians will not fail to be interested by these remains which, if confirmed, could bring into question many things, especially those concerning the ancient population of Laos and the introduction of Buddhism into this part of the Indochina peninsula.

THE KHMER PIECES  
9th-13th Centuries

These are not very numerous but they are of good quality. Almost all are displayed in the southwest corner of the great hall of the Wat Phra Keo. First of all, honor where honor is due: the famous stele of Say Fong (No. 449). Discovered in 1903 near the village of Say Fong, some 10 kilometers southeast of Vientiane, it commemorates the establishment in that place of a hospital by Jayavarman VII, King of Ankor, the immortal builder of the Bayon (1181-1218?). It is written in Sanskrit and informs us that the hospital was open to all, that its personnel consisted of about 100 persons including "two doctors, two pharmacists, eight nurses, . . . two cooks, two rice millers," etc. The medicines used there are actually listed. Altogether, it is the real "founding charter" of this Khmer hospital. But this stele, translated by Louis Finot,<sup>9</sup> raises a serious problem: "No architectural vestige seems to exist at present in the Say Fong region. How did this city disappear, and why? So many questions, to which perhaps excavations will someday bring us an answer."<sup>10</sup>

Among the other Khmer pieces we should note

--The statue of Ganesh (No. 436). Elephant-headed Hindu deity, Ganesh is the son of Siva and Parvati and is generally considered to be the patron of arts and letters. This piece, of pre-Ankor manufacture, doubtless dates from the 7th century A.D.<sup>11</sup>; it comes from Khong Island (Sithandone Province).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Madeleine Giteau, "Guide du Musée National," Vol. I, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> B.E.F.E.O. 1903, Volume I, pages 29-33.

<sup>10</sup> H. Deydier, Introduction à la connaissance du Laos.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

--The very beautiful head of Vishnu (No. 450) of gray sandstone, which seems to date from the 12th century. It comes from the Wat Simuong of Vientiane. Prof. Jean Filliozat, Director of the French School of the Far East, who examined it again quite recently, thinks that this Vishnu, Hindu deity, is probably a Lokevara, a Bodhisattva of the Buddhism of the Greater Vehicle, of which the hair has been redone to eliminate the hair dress of the Amitabha Buddha, which is normally found, thus making it conform to the Vishnuite "tiara."

--An Avalokitesvara of brown sandstone (No. 416) and a Buddha on a naga (No. 520) which are displayed in the north peristyle. The Buddha is remarkable because, although originally a Khmer piece, it was later transformed into a Laotian Buddha; the face is quite roughly redone and one still sees traces of black lacquer. Besides, a piece no doubt very similar, but not thus transformed, is found immediately to its right (No. 412).

#### THE LAOTIAN PIECES 14th-20th Centuries

These are naturally the most numerous and most varied. It is difficult to present them in chronological order because the chronology of the Laotian Buddhas is far from being established with any certainty. Consequently I shall present them according to the position which they occupy in the museum.

##### 1. The Bronze Buddhas of the Gallery

They constitute a magnificent series of pieces, among which are

--The Buddhas seated in the bhūmiparsa mudra position; that is, with the right hand dropped downward, in a gesture of "calling the Earth to witness."

--The standing Buddhas, almost all in the abhaya mudra position, palms forward in a gesture that may be interpreted either as the absence of fear, or as intended to calm human wrath.

Most of these pieces date from the 16th to the 18th century. Their exact places of origin are unknown, but the nature of their fabrication leaves no doubt as to their Laotian origin. Many of them were mutilated by the pillagers of the 19th century; most of the cabechons<sup>12</sup> of precious stones, the silver parts, and the flame tips

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<sup>12</sup>Translator's Note: Stones cut in convex form, polished but not faceted.

of the usnisa have disappeared<sup>13</sup>. All of them have that aquiline profile that so scandalized Henri Parmentier, who came from Cambodia and Vietnam. The fact is that Parmentier stayed too short a time in Laos, for this ethnic type is frequent among us, especially in the northern provinces. The magnificent Buddha of the Wat Manorum of Luang Prabang, which dates from the 14th century, also has this type of profile. The ethnic type of Laotian Buddha is therefore not foreign, as so many of our old teachers thought; it is, on the contrary, typically autochthonous,<sup>14</sup> and very logically so.

Neither can one fail to be struck by the extremely "modern" form of some of these ancient Buddhas. The Laotian artist did not choose, as Parmentier wrote, "the design born most easily from the tool." On the contrary, he sought, through a remarkably studied stylization, to make us in some degree sense in a very real fashion the transcendence of the Divine Master; and that seeking bears witness not to a decadent art as some have thought, but rather to an art which is extremely powerful because it was deeply lived by the artist himself.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs received the transfer of the collection called "2,500th Anniversary of the Buddha," composed of pieces offered to the Royal Government by various foreign countries in 1957 C.E. (2,500 B.E.). Without these you could not here compare the powerful art of our fathers with the pseudorealistic dainties<sup>15</sup> of contemporary religious art among certain of our neighbors and even, alas, here at home whence so many artists go abroad to borrow the worst of foreign art, disdaining or ignoring our national art.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>The painted cement flames which had been made and put in place in recent years on the heads of all of the Buddhas of the Wat Phra Keo were removed in March 1969. They might be praiseworthy in a temple but are inadmissible in a museum, which should exhibit only that which is authentic.

<sup>14</sup>In addition, Mr. Pierre Marie Gagneux recently published a study of Lao art in which he offers a somewhat revolutionary theory regarding this matter.

<sup>15</sup>It seems to me really impossible to have a respectful religious attitude toward certain of these Buddhas with their frizzy hair, flabby lips, vicious smiles--veritable caricatures of Bangkok "chicos."

<sup>16</sup>A very handsome bronze Buddha, in the same style as those of the Wat Phra Keo gallery, was discovered in 1908 near the ancient city wall (Phone Xay Road). It was first installed in front of the Wat Sisaket; but in 1952, in compensation for certain damages caused to the village of Wat Tat Noy (P.K.4 on the Luang Prabang Road) by the establishment of the Wat Tay military camp, this magnificent Buddha was transferred by the French authorities to the temple of Wat Tay Noy (on the left on the road to the airport, just before the entrance to the French Military Mission). I cannot too strongly advise you to go there and admire it. Its magnificent red bronze reflections (it was thoroughly cleaned up before its transfer) are well worth a color photo.

## 2. The Stone Buddhas of the Peristyle

Rather interesting pieces but again extremely difficult to classify, given the present state of our knowledge. Apart from the pieces already mentioned (Nos. 412, 416, and 520), other pieces of Khmer manufacture figure among these Laotian pieces (Nos. 434 and 438 in particular).

The Laotian pieces proper show rather clearly the influence of a very late Dvaravati art. We are dealing here, it seems, with a provincial school following models which were already distant in time and space. Particularly does this seem to be so in the case of the three Buddha heads shown together on the same pedestal (Nos. 422, 425, and 427). At the foot of this pedestal are two fragments of bas relief of a quite similar style, coming from the site of Dane Soung (25 kilometers northwest of Vientiane) which came to the museum quite recently.

## 3. The Stone Steles of the Peristyle

Very interesting pieces. The systematic study of them will no doubt produce useful data concerning our history.

Three quarters of them are written in Lao, some of them being lettered extremely carefully. The others are written in tham Pali. Seven steles are dated, almost all from the 10th century of the Culla Era (Little Era)<sup>17</sup>; that is, from the 16th century of the Christian Era. Four of them include horoscopes---often, unfortunately, incomplete because, no doubt by reason of the ignorance of the engraver, many of these horoscopes (circles divided into 12 "houses") do not mention the horakhune (Sanskrit-Pali: ahargana, the total number of days passed since the beginning of the era).

Many of these steles come from the region of Vientiane, among them stele No. 529, which comes from Ban Vieng Kham (on the Nam Ngum 45 km. north of Vientiane). Dated 943 L.E. (1581 C.E.), it was brought to the museum in 1966 by Maha Sila Viravong.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Translator's Note: The Lao-Indian "Little Era" (L.E.) began in 638 C.E.

<sup>18</sup>In 1968 I also saw in Ban Vieng Kham another stele of the same epoch bearing simply a date, "The 5th day of the waxing moon of the first month of the year 923" (1561 C.E.). Local tradition also has it that it was in this village that Fa Ngum temporarily left the Phra Bang when, in the 14th century, he left to conquer the city of Luang Prabang.

The famous stele of Dane Say<sup>19</sup> (No. 351) must be mentioned here, even though it is not found in the Peristyle but in the interior of the museum, at the center of the north wall. Discovered in 1914 by Maha Oupahat Boun Khong, Viceroy of Luang Prabang, it commemorates the treaty of 1560 which marked the frontier between the Siamese Kingdom of Ayuthia and the Lao Kingdom of Lane Xang. It is written in Laotian on one side and in Khmer on the other, which would tend to prove that even that recently Khmer was still the "diplomatic language" of the Thai kingdoms. In very bad condition when discovered, it was very badly restored (in Hanoi?). Furthermore, during the recent reorganization of the museum, the workman who fastened it to its pedestal turned the Lao inscription toward the wall! It is therefore desirable to give it a half turn as soon as possible, and later to submit it to a good re-restoration.

#### 4. The Pieces of the South Gallery

--Two wooden posts in quite poor condition which come from the old close of the Wat Chanh of Vientiane (Nos. 374 and 375).

--A series of stucco decorations which came from the Wat Yot Keo, a temple which once stood on the site of the present Royal School of Medicine. Probably 18th century.

#### 5. The Altar Pieces

Dominating the whole interior of the Museum by its imposing mass, the great modern Buddha<sup>20</sup> of stuccoed brick (No. 31) has the head turned toward the west, contrary to the Buddhas of all of the other temples along the river. This is due to the fact that at the time of the reconstruction of the monument (1936-42), the temple was to face Pavie Square, which was then located where the Royal Palace gardens are now. To this end the former east central door was walled up and the altar was erected against it. However, no central door was cut in the west wall, which explains why the Wat Phra Keo now has both its central doors, east and west, walled up.

Around the main Buddha have been placed some 20 pieces of good quality, of which, starting from the entrance to the Museum, we may note the following:

--An octagonal pedestal in bronze (No. 66) with an inscription in Lao dating it 1653 C.E. The Buddha (No. 688) on it does not seem to be of the same period.

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<sup>19</sup>Village in Loey Province, Thailand.

<sup>20</sup>This Buddha dates from the reconstruction of the Wat Phra Keo (1940), and its ancient style is explained by the fact that it was inspired in large measure by the Buddha of Wat Tay Noy (see Note 16 on page 7) and the great Buddha of the Wat Ong Tu in Vientiane.

--An inscribed bronze Buddha (No. 177) unfortunately covered with a thin layer of very recent gilt paint. 1615 C.E. This statue, as well as four smaller ones (not displayed) were found on November 8, 1967, near Ban Kham, in a grotto in the Nam Lik valley (about 80 kilometers north-northeast of Vientiane) by a fisherman who had taken shelter there from a storm--a fine example of honesty for all of us, on the part of one of our most humble fellow citizens.

--A "Phra Kat Chay"<sup>21</sup> in bronze (No. 333), seated on a pedestal bearing a rather long inscription in tham, and dating from 1844 C.E. From San Neua province.

--A magnificent candelabra of gilded wood (No. 373), which is a replica of the one in the Wat Sisaket. This piece, which can be taken completely apart (and is at the moment partially dismantled for repairs), is recent but remarkable. It was exhibited in the Laotian section, directed by Prince Phetsarath, of the Indochina pavilion in the Colonial Exposition of 1931 in Paris.

--A very curious panel of silk with gold embroidery (No. 391), shown somewhat like a folding screen on a sculptured wooden frame (in the process of restoration). This piece, dating from 1265 L.E. (1913 C.E.) was offered to the Wat Sisaket by Prince Maha Ouphat Boun Khong (1856-1920), father of their Highnesses the Princes Phetsarath, Souvanna Phouma, and Souphanouvong. It represents a standing Buddha flanked by two persons at prayer.

--To the right of the altar: a large empty place. It is to be filled by the Buddha and stele of Ban Thalot of which I have already written. In the meantime, the Ministry of Religious Affairs has placed there some 10 bronze Buddhas belonging to the temple of Phya Wat.<sup>22</sup> Some of these Buddhas are magnificent and could not fail to tempt some daring collectors; hence the need to protect them.

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<sup>21</sup>"Phra Kat Chay": a monk of formidable stomach in a meditative pose, considered by some to represent Kaccayana, the Indian grammarian, and by others, the future Buddha, Maitreya. (Henri Marchal, *op cit.*)

<sup>22</sup>Phya Wat is the great temple under reconstruction on the bank of the Mekong beyond the hospital on the east side of the city.

## 6. The Wooden Pieces (Display Cases I and II) <sup>23</sup>

One of the masterpieces of the museum is the Buddha in carved wood, gilded and encrusted, solitary throne, in Case I (No. 354). Unique for its size and workmanship, it was studied by Bernard-Philippe Groslier,<sup>24</sup> who dates it as 18th (?) century. Its exact origin is unknown: Muong Sing? in any case, northern Laos. It too was a victim of the pillages of the last century before finally finding here a dignified and worthy place.

Case II contains a very lovely sampling of Laotian wooden pieces:

--Decorated standing Buddha in abhaya mudra position (No. 355) in the Ayuthia style (17th-18th century);

--Seated Buddhas of the Luang Prabang style (Nos. 405 and 409), 1820 C.E.;

--Curious twin Buddhas on pedestals (Nos. 397 and 398);

--Decoration from a pulpit or cabinet, in gilded wood encrusted with glass (No. 404);

--Carved wooden panel (No. 400) from the Vientiane region.

A little farther along, on the north wall of the museum, are two other wooden panels of the same style (Nos. 371 and 377), also from temples in the Vientiane region; the latter was studied by Henri Marchal.<sup>25</sup>

--Terminal flame of the usnisa of a Buddha that has disappeared-- very lovely piece in polychrome wood from the Say Fong temple (No. 7/SF).

--Above the display case there is a four-sided lantern (No. 378) with a carved Buddha in a niche on each side. It comes from Ban Sithan Tay (on the bank of the Mekong 12 km. southeast of Vientiane).

Besides the two panels of carved wood mentioned above, there are some other wooden pieces in the Museum. In the northwest corner, in particular, one notes

--A very curious carved post (No. 376), representing two little deities, one perched on the shoulders of the other, from the former close of Wat Chanh in Vientiane;

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<sup>23</sup>The display cases of the Museum are numbered from I to IX starting from the central case in front of the altar and going counter-clockwise.

<sup>24</sup>Indochine, Carrefour des arts, p. 227

<sup>25</sup>Op. cit.

--A magnificent "begging Buddha" (No. 401) in polychrome wood. One can still see a fragment of the offering bowl which he holds between his hands. From Wat Inpeng, Vientiane, date unknown.

On the northwest wall, between display cases V and VI, has been placed a door (No. 372) from the That In Hang of Ban That (15 km. east of Savannakhet on the Seno road). Very beautiful piece of Lao manufacture but of Indian inspiration: the two uprights of this door are decorated, indeed, with little erotic-religious scenes, something extremely rare in Southeast Asian art but very common in India. This door was once covered with a red and gold plaster of which one can still see some traces. The decor of the two halves is surprisingly rich and of typically Laotian inspiration. 16th century?

7. The Pottery and Stuccoes (Display Case III)

The pottery shown in this display case has no specifically religious character. The pieces were placed there by Miss Giteau simply to underscore the curiously "modern" sobriety of ancient Laotian art in all its forms. Admire the curve of the big vase at the right (No. 540), and compare that purity of line with the head of the stucco figure at the left (No. 530); as I emphasized earlier, one is truly in the presence of an art which is complete in the fullness of its means of expression.<sup>26</sup> Compare it also, for example, with the three little phrapatims<sup>27</sup> of varnished sandstone (No. 682) on the bottom of the display case at the extreme right; some characteristics in the relief are enough to suggest with surprising forcefulness the presence of the Divine Master seated on his throne.

The other pieces are likewise beautiful but more classical. No. 471 is a fragment of stucco decoration from the original Wat Phra Keo;

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<sup>26</sup>Since the end of May 1969, the other pieces of non-religious nature which are part of the museum's holdings are being exhibited at the Center for the Promotion of Handicrafts (Luang Prabang Road, Houa Muong section of Vientiane), where they constitute the embryo of the future "Museum of Popular Arts and Traditions." (See p. 19.)

<sup>27</sup>Phrapatims: holy images of the Buddha, small, generally flat and made of bronze, stone, or baked earth. They play an intermediate role between votive offering and amulet.

it represents Rahu,<sup>28</sup> a motif often repeated in Laotian decoration, especially in temple foundations.

Besides some pieces already mentioned in the south gallery, there are also, in the interior of the Museum, along the south wall, on boxes of varnished wood, two fragments of stucco decoration from the Wat Yot Keo (Nos. 430 and 431) representing two apsaras, beautiful pieces which probably date from the 18th century.

#### 8. The Gold and Silver Pieces (Display Cases IV and VII)

Interesting series of Buddhas which seemingly date from the 18th and 19th centuries, a period of impoverishment and schism for the Kingdom of Lane Xang. The fact is these pieces are of neither solid gold nor solid silver, but, except for No. 245, of baked earth coated with a thin layer of metal. I know that in the 16th and 17th centuries--centuries of greatness-- pieces of solid gold and solid silver were cast; the Royal Collection in Luang Prabang contains magnificent specimens. But the pillagers passed by, and few temple treasures escaped their searches!

Certain of these pieces (Nos. 212 to 215), however, are from the temple of Si Damdouane (in the northern part of Vientiane); others (Nos. 196, 197, 199, 201), from Phya Wat; and still others (Nos. 256 to 259), from Phone Hong (70 km north of Vientiane). Note No. 205 (Display Case IV): from Dong Na Sok, Vientiane province, it bears an inscription in tham with a horoscope dating it as 1566 C.E. It is an amulet ordinarily worn rolled in a cylinder and tied by a chain around the neck, a little like the St. Christopher or St. Theresa medals in Europe.

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<sup>28</sup>Rahu: the head of Kala, personified in Indian mythology by a dragon which travels in the sky following the ecliptic. Rahu represents the "ascending node" of the lunar orbit; the "descending node" is called Ketu and is the tail of the dragon. Kala once drank the liquor of immortality which the gods prepared in great secrecy; cut in two by Vishnu with a stroke of the solar disc, Rahu always follows Ketu during the eclipse, and in passing, tries each time to avenge itself on Vishnu by swallowing the sun. It succeeds from time to time, and then there is an eclipse of the sun. An imaginative explanation of the very real fact that an eclipse of the sun can take place only in the immediate vicinity of the ascending node of the lunar orbit, and when, of course, the sun and moon are in conjunction (new moon).

9. The Bronzes (Display Cases V, VI, VIII, and IX)

The bronzes constitute the real base of the collections of the Wat Phra Keo. There are about 70 bronzes exhibited, but the museum has more than 200 in storage. Some day the systematic and comparative study of these pieces will yield a valuable chronology of Lao art, no longer based on stories and legends but on historic facts scientifically established. Meanwhile, there is nothing to keep us from taking a simple esthetic pleasure in admiring the works of our fathers.

--In Display Case V: A magnificent ornamented Buddha, standing in the abhaya mudra position (No. 148). Remarkable state of preservation. Doubtless of the 16th-17th century. The Director of the French School of the Far East quite recently found it one of the most beautiful pieces in the museum. A little in the style of U Thong, it is nevertheless a piece of typically Lao fabrication, and comes from Say Fong.

--A reclining Buddha (No. 49), unfortunately in poor condition. It must be quite old: 15th-16th century?

--A Buddha seated on a pedestal which bears a rather long inscription in tham (No. 309); origin: northern Laos.

--An interesting series of phrapatima in bronze from quite different periods.

--In Display Case VI: A magnificent standing Buddha (18th century?) (No. 53) in the attitude of "Founding the Community."

--Piece No. 108, which is interesting for several reasons. First, it is the usnisa flame of an unknown Buddha; you will not have failed to notice that these flames, nearly always present--at least on rather large Buddha images--have almost disappeared. Second, by the paint, which leads one to think that during certain periods polychrome bronzes were perhaps made in Laos. It would be an interesting problem to clarify.

--In Display Case VIII: One of the key pieces of the museum: the walking Buddha (No. 295). It has been so badly restored that to show it, it has been necessary to secure it by copper wires to the bottom of its showcase--not pretty, but absolutely essential. It might be sent to France for restoration, for besides its obvious esthetic value, this Buddha is one of the rare ancient examples of the Buddha walking, an attitude quite unknown except in Laos and northern Thailand. 17th century (?), from Say Fong.

--A very handsome left forearm of a Buddha (No. 176) which allows us to admire from close up the delicate and skilled treatment of the design of the fingers.

--A piece unique in the museum's collections: the little figure kneeling in prayer (No. 166).<sup>29</sup> 17th century? Of a truly extraordinary naive realism. One can sense both meditation and--who knows? --maybe also an expression of a little amusement towards "something else."

--In Display Case IX: A very handsome decorated standing Buddha (No. 45), 17th-18th century, origin unknown.

--A little standing Buddha (No. 608) which must be displayed here not for its artistic value, which is quite mediocre, but for the material of which it is made, which seems to be an alloy of lead and tin. Date and place of origin unknown.

--A decorated seated Buddha (No. 51) of which the head is missing, either by reason of an accident in affixing it or some subsequent event (lightning?), but which is certainly interesting because of the excellent condition of the various elements of adornment of the Buddha.

#### 10. The Stone and Miscellaneous Pieces.

We should say a few words about the stone pieces gathered at the right of the altar along the south wall of the museum. They were placed there, close to the Buddha and to the Ban Thalot stele, to show the relationship which seems to exist between the "pre-" or "proto-" Lao art and strictly Lao art, through the medium of Dvaravati art.

--No. 448. Quite realistic head of a figure in sandstone, with bits of black lacquer still visible. From the That Luang of Vientiane, date unknown.

--No. 446. Head of Buddha in sandstone in Dvaravati style (very late). This piece is part of the same "school" as the three heads exhibited in the north peristyle of the museum (Nos. 422, 425, and 427) already mentioned on page 8.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>In the Royal Collection in Luang Prabang there are four little statuettes of comparable style which it would be extremely interesting to be able to date. One of them represents a woman with a LUANG Prabang-style chignon and a rather curious skirt of a style halfway between the Cambodian skirt and the Lao sin.

<sup>30</sup>More recent stone statues of the Buddha are rare and nearly always of "provincial"--not to say worse--fabrication. The (continued)

--No. 428. Buddha in sandstone, quite mutilated, from the Wat Sene of Luang Prabang. It is most interesting to compare this with its neighbor from Ban Thalat: here we have two "autochthonous" statues, executed in the same material, representing the same person, but separated in time by at least five centuries! The kinship of the two pieces is quite striking; but whereas the one, the Ban Thalat Buddha, seems to attest a style that had already matured, the other, No. 428, is witness to a style which has not yet achieved its fullness, a style that we could call more "primitive" than the other although of a later date. This apparent historical contradiction can be explained by the arrival of our ancestors, the T'ai, who at first were no doubt more warriors than sculptors and, from the 12th-13th centuries, had to learn from the local artists before they themselves became capable of producing the masterpieces of the 15th and 16th centuries.

Along the south wall, on one side and the other of Display Case VIII, you can see two rather interesting that points. One (No. 41-42) is of metal; the other (No. 92-93), of stone and bronze. The latter, furthermore, strikingly resembles the pinnacles of the That Luang of Vientiane.

Finally, near the entrance, a very handsome manuscript box in lacquered and gilded wood. (No. 384).

#### 11. The Pieces in the Center of the Room.

I have kept for the last the pieces in the center of the room, which are naturally almost all unique. Besides, together they constitute a sort of review of the principal attitudes of the Lao Buddha:

--The "Walking Buddha" in gilded bronze (No. 294), a remarkable piece dating no doubt from the 18th century. Should be compared with the walking Buddha of Say Fong (Display Case VIII, No. 295).

--The bronze Buddha "seated in European style" (No. 60), a very rare attitude in Buddhist iconography. 17th century? Origin unknown.

--The bronze seated Buddha "calling the Earth to witness" (No. 24/PV of Phya Wat). A piece of remarkable fabrication and admirably preserved. I should like to use it to put people on guard against hasty decipherings of ancient inscriptions. The pedestal of this Buddha bears a horoscopic circle and a short inscription in tham which, translated word for word, yields the following:

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collections of the museum are significant in this respect. However, I have seen in the collection of the School of Fine Arts an absolutely remarkable stone head of the Buddha, lacquered and gilded. From Say Fong, probably 17th-18th century. It is not at all in the Dvaravati style, but rather in that of Ayuthia, although indubitably of Lao manufacture.

"The year 2 of the Little Era, the year kot sy,  
Thursday the 8th day of the waning moon of the 2nd month  
at the morning's first light."

The unwarned decipherer immediately calculates:

$$2 \text{ (L.E.)} + 638 = 640 \text{ (C.E.)}$$

and concludes that the piece is from the 7th century of the Christian Era,<sup>31</sup> which is not consistent with the style of this Buddha!

It is important to know that almost always, only the last or the last two figures of the number of the year are shown in the inscriptions. In the case of our Buddha, one immediately verifies this rule by noting that the years kot sy in each 60-year cycle are defined mathematically in the Little Era by the congruence  $x \equiv 02 \pmod{60}$ , which gives the possible dates of 702, 1002, and 1302 L.E. The first and last may be discarded, leaving 1002 L.E.: that is, 1640 C.E.

--The bronze Buddha (No. 4) in the attitude called "calling the rain" (17th-18th century?). Place of origin unknown. This magnificent piece<sup>32</sup> was formerly in the north peristyle. Miss Giteau had it moved in February 1969 to the interior of the museum. It is the one which I personally find the most beautiful of all in the Wat Phra Keo. One might think it sculptured by Maillol. It shows us how soberly yet forcefully our fathers managed to suggest that the Buddha did not belong to our material world, and to suggest at the same time his infinite compassion for mankind. One need not be a great expert in matters of art to see the difference between this pure masterpiece and the sorry "neo-naturalism" of so many of the later pieces which clutter our temples!

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<sup>31</sup>And this really happened! A little typewritten label glued to the statue made out that this Buddha was 13 centuries old; happily the label was removed! I wouldn't be mean enough to try to find out who was the author . . . .

<sup>32</sup>Note to philatelists: This Buddha, in a design by the master Marc Leguay, appears on the 9-kip emerald green stamp of the air mail series of 1953 (No. 9, Yvert & Tellier). For that matter, there is the possibility of a whole philatelic-artistic study, for numerous other pieces from the Wat Phra Keo appear on our Lao stamps.

--The standing Buddha in black-lacquered wood (No. 352), collected by H. Parmentier in 1911 in the ruins of the Wat Phra Keo.

--The magnificent throne of the Buddha in bronze, in the form of the naga (No. 299). This piece, absolutely unique in the whole Indochina peninsula, comes from Xieng Khouang (16th-17th century?). It was studied by Henri Marchal, who says, "this motif, from a decorative point of view, achieves a richness unknown in all the other countries."<sup>33</sup> The original Buddha has disappeared.

--Finally, in the center of the room, the full-size reproduction in gilded wood of the Phra Bang (No. 353). The Buddha is standing in the abhaya mudra position and is placed in a "shrine" similar to that which so recently sheltered it in the Wat May of Luang Prabang and which still shelters it today in the interior of the Royal Palace where it was placed to await the completion of the construction of the Ho Phra Bang, a special little temple which Their Majesties are having constructed on the Palace grounds to welcome the Palladium of the Kingdom.

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<sup>33</sup> Op. cit., p. 15.

POPULAR ARTS AND TRADITIONS

The press reported the inauguration on Thursday, May 29, 1969, under the High Presidency of His Highness Prince Souvanna Phouma, of the Center for the Promotion of Handicraft, Luang Prabang Road, in the Houa Muong Quarter of Vientiane.

It would not be for me here to report that moving ceremony, except that there were present wounded war veterans who had found there a reason and the means to live. On the other hand, I cannot too strongly urge the friends of Lao art to visit the Center; for in addition to the several workshops (weaving, rug-making, silverwork, ceramics (soon), etc.) where works of art are being created today, the Center has an extremely interesting exhibit hall which one may consider an embryonic "Museum of Popular Arts and Traditions" of the future.

In a charming setting, arranged with exquisite taste on a base of shot materials, several dozen pieces from either the Directorate of Fine Arts or from private collections harmoniously complement some 52 pieces which the Curatorship of the Museum of Religious Arts of the Wat Phra Keo has very obligingly lent to the Center. The pieces, until recently in storage in the museum, are now offered for the admiration of the public. We thank the Ministry of Religious Affairs for this wise example of inter-Ministerial co-operation.

I cannot, unfortunately, describe in detail all of these marvels, but I have selected certain ones:

--Among the works of art coming from the Wat Phra Keo, exhibited at the end of the room in three large display cases, the chief piece is without question that magnificent khan of incised silver (offering cup on a single pedestal, No. 246 VPK) from the Wat Xieng Mieng of Ban Na Hai Diao (in the north of Vientiane), which dates perhaps from the end of the 18th century. Notice also the water receptacle of decorated baked earth, in red (No. 575 VPK), unfortunately missing the top part; not only is this piece memorable for its form and style, but these nam tao of baked earth which one used to buy at Ban Phan Luang (Luang Prabang) have not been made for several years, since the death of the last artisan of the village.

Note also the four ancient bowls (18th century?) in gray faience with blue linear decorations (No. 579 VPK); this typically Lao decor must have been quite common but has disappeared before the invasion of Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Thai and other products.

--Among the pieces from private collections, one may note: a magnificent set of celadon cups which can be dated from the end of the 18th century and which come from the outskirts of Vientiane (P.K. 3 on the Tha Deua Road);

--three stuccoes--two heads of figures and a decorative motif in the form of a rose. From Say Fong, 18th-19th century. The rose is particularly carefully made, and because this motif is rarely used in Laos, it has a certain interest.

--Meo and Yao silver bracelets, some curiously incised in the form of a spiral.

But here I must stop my enumeration. What can we glean from it?

--First, that there exists, whatever some may think of it, a truly Lao art, an art which once knew how to employ the most elaborate techniques--bronze, celadon, etc.

--Next, that this art is not dead but simply sleeping.

--And finally, with the opening of this little museum, there is no excuse for those--decorators, jewelers, painters, or sculptors--who continue their servile copying of foreign models, refusing to find in their own country the materials for their inspiration.

The artist is free to choose this or that pattern for his works, but we, on our side, are free to refuse to use them to ornament our houses, our public buildings, or temples. Independence is not won solely on the field of battle nor around green-covered tables; it is earned every day in the heart of each of our homes!

## CONCLUSION

Now here we are, having summarized in a few pages the riches of the Wat Phra Keo. I may not have brought out much in the way of new facts, but I do think I have contributed a little to the demolition of certain stubborn legends about the non-existence of Lao art--legends which go back to the time of the Protectorate. Indochina then was Angkor, and apart from Angkor there was nothing.

Far be it from me to minimize the role of the Khmer Empire in the Indochinese Peninsula! But this Khmer influence impinged on centers and "proto-civilizations" already well advanced in many fields, especially in art. India through the intermediary of Burma, Siam through the parallel development of the Thai kingdoms, and--less clearly--China, had before, during, and after the Khmer period contributed to the development of our art. What art, indeed, can boast that it owes nothing to any other?

So I do not entirely share the opinion of Jeanine Auboyer, Curator of the Musée Guimet, when she writes of Lao art and particularly of statuary:

"It represents the extreme end of late Indian formulae, come to this country outside of the international routes by successive stages, of which the main ones were Ceylon, Burma, and Thailand."

Our country is perhaps indeed outside of the present international routes; the long paths of Air France and the Cunard ships do not come here. But the old continental routes--those of the river valleys and mountain passes, those by which arts and techniques used to be propagated--cross here. Luang Prabang and Muong Phouan (*i.e.*, the Plain of Jars) have always been active zones of passage. I need no more proof than the very great antiquity of the vestiges already found here.

When it is better known, Lao art will not fail to find recognition of its deep originality, nor of the real quality of its works of art. But for that, this art must become the object of our serious study. Someone must take an interest in our steles, our bronzes, no longer to dwell on old unverifiable legends, but to analyze them scientifically. And the first laboratory for the beginning of such study is properly the Museum of Religious Arts of the Wat Phra Keo. This is why we are loyally and respectfully grateful to Miss Madeleine Giteau for what she has done here for us. We would not have been capable of doing it, we must admit. But now the road has been shown us. It is we who should take the next initiative in the vast and still unexplored domain of the knowledge of Lao art.

That Dam--Vientiane  
July 1969

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Most of these works can be consulted at the library of the French Cultural Center in Vientiane. The magazine "France Asie" is on sale at the "Comité Littéraire," Place du Monument aux Morts, Vientiane; and "La Revue Française" is found in all the good French bookstores in the capital.

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<sup>34</sup>Translator's Note: Also available as a book in English translation under the title Kingdom of Laos, from SOGIMEX, Vientiane. The Lao-American Association will buy this from SOGIMEX on behalf of anyone depositing with it the purchase price (900 kip or US\$1.80 at this writing), and \$.50 for postage if required.

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