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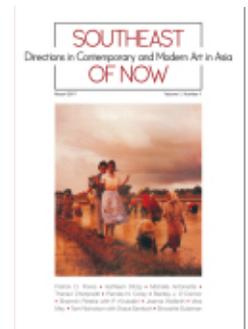
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Hol Pidan:

Cambodian Traditional Pictorial Silk Textile Preservation and Development, at the National Museum of Cambodia, 2016

JOANNA WOLFARTH

The first temporary exhibition of 2016 at the National Museum of Cambodia (NMC) was a collection of 11 new silk textiles, *hol pidan* (ហ្លូលពីតាន). All were produced since 2012 by Cambodian weavers working under the umbrella of a Japanese non-governmental organisation—Caring for Young Khmer (CYK). This was the third such collaborative exhibition at the NMC, with the express aims of promoting this unique weaving culture and supporting the preservation, revitalisation and development of this textile heritage.¹ The beautifully curated show gave a welcome focus to Cambodian textiles and their present-day manufacture within an institution chiefly dedicated to the display of exceptional historic sculptural work.

Anthropologist and art historian Siyonn Sophearith has thoroughly researched the functions and historical antecedents of the various types of *pidan* (ពីតាន), a term which generally refers to the wooden or concrete ceiling of a Buddhist worship hall.² Often a tiered cloth structure is hung above a Buddha statue instead, called a *pidan preah* (ពីតានព្រះ), which acts as a parasol

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to “protect” the Buddha.³ *Hol pidan*, such as those in the exhibition, are also placed as permanent parasols above a Buddha statue, although they are also installed in temporary religious structures during specific ceremonies and, on occasion, are hung vertically. *Hol* is a resist-dyed silk textile, commonly worn as clothing in Cambodia. *Hol pidan* fabric differs in that it usually features religious motifs and maintains a ritual function, hung in religious buildings and never worn as attire.

Historically *hol pidan* were commissioned as “high-value” donations for the “protection” of a statue in a *wat* (វត្ត) Theravada Buddhist temple complex) or for use during religious ceremonies such as funerals. Such an expensive donation provided karmic merit for the donor. The practice of weaving them was and remains an important source of livelihood for women.⁴ But by the early 1990s, *hol pidan* manufacture was at risk of disappearing in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge genocide (1975–79), which targeted artists and attempted to eradicate religious and cultural traditions. Those who survived this period and the subsequent decades of upheaval tended not to pass on their expert knowledge to younger generations. Not only was the technique itself on the precipice of extinction, but surviving examples of *hol pidan* were scattered and in a fragile state.⁵ Textiles do not last long in a tropical climate and the majority of antique *hol pidan* are found in museum collections outside of Cambodia. This situation led CYK to introduce the technique to its advanced weaving practitioners. Harumi Sekiguchi, the director of CYK, believes that by the 1990s the practice of donors commissioning *hol pidan* for *wats* had all but ended; the majority of their *hol pidan* are sold to tourists, with only a handful commissioned for villages or as gifts.⁶ According to Gillian Green, this production of *hol pidan* exclusively for artistic value and the tourist trade began in the 1960s, although the purchase of these fabrics by foreigners would have almost certainly begun earlier, when European tourists arrived in Cambodia in ever greater numbers in the first decades of the 20th century.⁷ Furthermore, as museums around the world focused their attention on collecting textiles, these pictorial fabrics gained popularity with international dealers, who provide weavers with photographs of antique textiles to be replicated. Although overseas interest in these textiles increased, *hol pidan* continued to be produced for a domestic market and can still be found in situ in *wats* across Cambodia.⁸ This complex and dynamic situation is illuminated by this exhibition and its attempts to weave contemporary aesthetic appreciation with the preservation of cultural heritage.

The 11 *hol pidan* in this NMC exhibition have been produced in the last three years by *pidan*-master Soung Mech and a cohort of his female students. These exquisitely detailed textiles float gently against the white gallery walls,

appearing to be presented as artworks that are firmly of the present time. It is an effective curatorial technique, directing the viewer to consider the formal qualities of the work. The same can be said of the other pieces housed within the NMC, removed from their original, multifaceted context, very often for their own protection and preservation. However, the museum collection largely consists of historic works from before, during and after the Angkorian period, most produced between 500 and 1,000 years ago; these textiles emerge from a present-day context. Nevertheless, there is the paradoxical temptation, standing within the custodian of ancient Cambodian art, to focus on the historical status of the *hol pidan* tradition, as a practice which belongs to Cambodia's past, much like an 11th-century statue of Visnu or a middle-period Buddha.⁹

This brings us to the familiar discursive dichotomy of “traditional” against “modern” or “contemporary”. Do we categorise these textiles as belonging to the past? Can they be considered as contemporary artworks? And what is at stake when suggesting such delineations? The *hol pidan* in question may be considered “traditional” in terms of the processes used to produce them and in their interaction with forms from the past. Yet contextually, the framework in which these contemporary textiles are produced—under the auspices of a foreign organisation—varies greatly from earlier contexts of manufacture. This points to the possibility of grounding these works in a neo-traditional and/or contemporary framework, freed from the static connotations implied by the idea of a “traditional” art form.¹⁰ Furthermore, the NMC permanent collection demonstrates the fluidity and innovation of “traditional” ancient Khmer art over the centuries, already thwarting any notions of fixity in historic cultural forms; citation, recuperation or preservation of the past is not always a sign of lack of imagination nor a symbol of an unhealthy preoccupation with the past, but rather a testament to the power inherent in the copy.

To complicate matters or, rather, to remind us of the inherent complexity at hand in such an exhibition, a number of the *hol pidan* included in this exhibition are “revitalisations”: new productions painstakingly copied from earlier, antique textiles found in the museum's photographic archive. The effort involved in this act of preservation-via-reproduction is enormous, especially given the complex formal compositions; the weavers meticulously count the dots from enlarged reference photographs in order to recreate the design. This stage of production alone can take months. The final reproductions match the original in both motif and colour combination. This process of conservation through replication enables the lifespan of earlier designs to be extended, while also remaining faithful to the original techniques and materials. Other *hol pidan* on exhibition are new works, although they still

consist of common, codified motifs. CYK weavers also use indigo dyes, not historically used in Cambodian *hol pidan*, which allow for a muted palette of blue tones, contrasting with more traditional brown, red and orange hues.

Ship (2013), a “revitalisation” of an antique *hol pidan* by Pech Phally, consists of four horizontal registers; registers one and three depict sailing ships attached to tugboats, each boat separated by flower mounds. Registers two and four comprise four pavilions, surrounded by dragons, fish, trees of life and birds perched on the backs of lions. These are common themes, with five of the textiles in this show featuring ships. The repetition of the same scene, from left to right, is common to all *hol pidan* and the number of repetitions is determined by the size of the textile and the number of spools. The majority of the *hol pidan* in the exhibition share a combination of the ship, *naga* (នាគ, serpent), animals and *preah vihear* (ព្រះវិហារ, religious pavilion) motifs. These motifs are highly symbolic, and particular configurations often relate to a particular season or festival in the Khmer calendar or an event such as a funeral, wedding or ordination ceremony.¹¹ Ships are often metaphors for transition, either to another realm or the passage through life to death, while birds and *naga* represent the duality of sky and ocean, sun and moon, light and dark.¹²

Foreign audiences comprise a substantial portion of visitors to the NMC—although familiarity with the content is not contingent on nationality—and to a viewer not initiated in the symbolism of *hol pidan* design some of these textiles at first glance look like decorative abstraction, until one starts to discern the individual motifs repeated across the field of vision.¹³ For example, an intriguing dark and dense *hol pidan* by Pech Kim looks like complete abstraction of colour and pattern. However, on further examination, there is the replication of ritual objects, such as incense sticks, candles and tree-shaped offerings which are sometimes decorated with leaves of money.¹⁴ These objects are commonly used in village ceremonies and this *hol pidan* is therefore rich with meaning to viewers who are familiar with the subject. A singularly abstract work, *Wave Pattern*, 2014 by Seam Sona, is an intricate flow of indigo-hued chevron patterns zig-zagging across the floating, lightweight silk like a rippling body of water.

The sole anthropomorphic *hol pidan*, designed and produced by Soung Mech, depicts the Buddha’s birth. The scene is repeated five times, with a cast of dynamic and brightly attired gods and attendants scattered across three horizontal registers. The Buddha’s mother, Maya, clutches the branch that supported her through the miraculous labour, shielded, although not from a viewer’s eyes, by a red cloth held by three attendants; her son, his first seven footsteps already marked by lotus flowers, stands with his left hand raised

to the heavens. While impressively detailed, the method of knotting and tie-dyeing the silk thread results in a retro-modern computer graphic effect, the pixellated figures a wry reminder of the problems of untangling the modern from the traditional.

In addition to highlighting the importance of “revitalisation” and preservation via reproduction, the exhibition organisers are at pains to demonstrate their fidelity to the labour-intensive process of resist-dye weft. A vitrine stands in the centre of the room, filled with the raw materials, including dyes such as indigo and ebony, all of which come from natural sources. This display also includes two examples of patterned *hol* cloth more commonly used for clothing. Two photograph displays show the techniques of production, including the process of indigo dyeing and the weaving itself. Despite the curatorial focus on present-day manufacture and preservation, the exhibition nevertheless lacks grounding in the history of the *hol pidan* and their religious function. In addition, the archival photographs used in the reproductions are excluded.¹⁵ The lack of this reference material—I was also hoping for fragments of antique textiles—was surprising given the equally emphatic curatorial stress on preserving the past. Reference to these earlier textiles and the archive from which the modern-day weavers were working would have strengthened the exhibition, especially for audiences unfamiliar with the specific history of the *hol pidan* and Cambodian textile production. Just one photograph in the exhibition shows the textiles installed in a *wat*. Perhaps this was a curatorial strategy: to work towards preserving this historic material process and visual language by situating it in a contemporary landscape. Yet, foregrounding the textiles’ broader socio-religious function would have enlivened the intangible heritage aspect of the tradition, alerting audiences to the broader history of these textiles and their unique role in Khmer culture.

Siyonn has already noted this problem in conserving Khmer culture.¹⁶ He argues that the initiative to preserve the processes and motifs of the *hol pidan* are highly important and admirable, yet the textiles themselves remain disconnected from the religious ritual sphere from which they originated. In my mind, Siyonn’s observation is at the crux of both this exhibition and the broader project of preserving “vanishing” artistic forms. Although the production of *hol pidan* for solely aesthetic reasons began in the 20th century, the cruel hand dealt to Cambodia in the 1970s, with civil war across the country from 1970 onwards and genocide at the hands of the Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge from 1975–79, as well as the post-war cultural and societal disruptions, means that production largely survives as an art practice supported by internationally-led cultural institutions and presented at a remove from the textiles’ religious function. In this sense, preservation can only ever be partial,

limited to the material manufacture of new and copied *hol pidan*, distanced from their amorphous ritual and historical context.

Each *hol pidan* literally contains its own frame, simple patterns woven into the borders of the tapestry. In the context of this exhibition, the textile functions well as a contained and delineated work, with its own internal logic and symbolism. One can only imagine, in this exhibition space, how the *hol pidan* functioned when they exceeded their borders within a multifaceted aesthetic and performative context, laden with symbolism and embedded within complex belief systems. And this is where greater contextual material within the exhibition space would have been illuminating.

Despite the limitations arising from the omission of old photographs and contextual materials that highlight the textiles' ritual context, this absence also opens up the possibility for the audience to view these *hol pidan* as contemporary pieces, bestowing relevance to the textiles beyond the ritual borders of Cambodian Buddhist practices. Here again is the inevitable bind of the necessary work of preserving traditional forms: these are objects rescued and resurrected from a largely vanishing past, but this backward-looking practice is, in fact, forward-thinking. The aim is to restore and situate the *hol pidan* in the present and for the future. Such endeavours must be applauded and this exhibition provided a wonderful opportunity to admire the intricate beauty of these varied textiles.

BIOGRAPHY

Joanna Wolfarth is an art historian specialising in Buddhist and Cambodian art and culture. She completed her PhD at the University of Leeds in 2014. Her thesis critically examined the royal-Buddhist portrait and the faces of the 12th-century Bayon temple at Angkor. She recently spent six months co-coordinating a collaborative project focused on Banteay Chhmar temple with SOAS University (UK) and the Cambodian Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts and currently lectures at Sotheby's Institute of Art in London.



FIGURE 1: *Ship Cloth*, Chhay Sreyneth, 2015, Khmer silk and indigo, 95 cm by 193 cm. Image courtesy of National Museum of Cambodia and Caring for Young Khmer

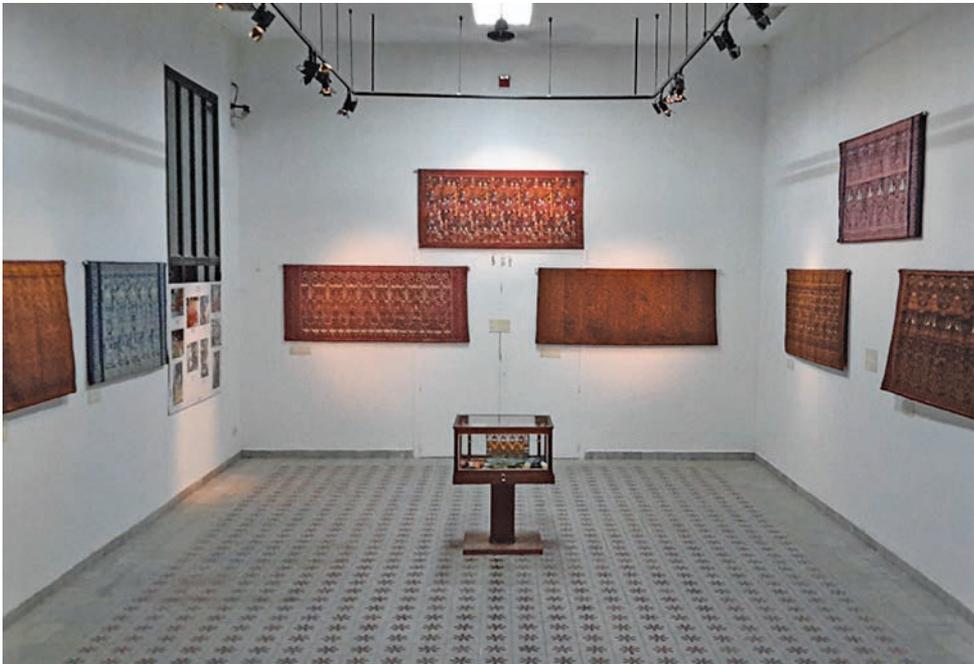


FIGURE 2: The exhibition. Image courtesy of National Museum of Cambodia and Caring for Young Khmer

NOTES

- ¹ The last exhibition of *hol pidan* at the National Museum took place in 2014, entitled Revitalizing Khmer Treasure. This followed an exhibition in 2010 called Old Stories Revived – New Cambodian Pidan. Both featured textiles produced by weavers from Caring for Young Khmer and had the express aim of promoting the practice to new audiences. See the National Museum website for more information, http://www.cambodiamuseum.info/en_exhibition/national_exhibition/Current.html [accessed 21 Aug. 2016].
- ² Siyonn Sophearith, *Pidan (Bitān) in Khmer Culture* (Phnom Penh: Reyum Publishing, 2008).
- ³ *Ibid.*, pp. 42–4.
- ⁴ Weaving and femaleness have long been intertwined in Southeast Asia and the economic and sometimes ritual centrality of textiles meant it was viewed as valuable work. Barbara Waton Andaya, *The Flaming Womb: Repositioning Women in Early Modern Southeast Asia* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), pp. 115–7.
- ⁵ Author interview with Harumi Sekiguchi, Phnom Penh, Mar. 2016. This article draws upon this interview for information relating to the production of these textiles.
- ⁶ Interview with author, Phnom Penh, Mar. 2016.
- ⁷ Gillian Green, *Traditional Textiles of Cambodia* (Bangkok, River Books, 2003), p. 262.
- ⁸ Gillian Green, *Pictorial Cambodian Textiles* (Bangkok: River Books, 2008), p. 23; Siyonn, *Pidan (Bitān) in Khmer Culture*, p. 16.
- ⁹ The “middle period” refers to a period of Cambodian history approximately between the late 14th century and the mid-19th century. The term was first used by linguist Saveros Pou in 1970 and later championed by cultural historian Ashley Thompson as an alternative to the term “post-Angkorian”. “Middle period” avoids suggestions that there was a complete break with Angkor and an absence of continuity between the “end” of Angkor and the centuries which followed. The term “post-Angkor” also implicitly privileges Angkor, a hierarchy that is expressed in much of the writing of Cambodia’s history by colonial-era scholars.
- ¹⁰ John Clark, *Modern Asian Art* (Sydney: Craftsman House, 1998).
- ¹¹ Green, *Pictorial Cambodian Textiles*.
- ¹² Green, *Traditional Textiles of Cambodia*, p. 296.
- ¹³ Here, I am using “abstraction” to mean “non-representational”, so that the textile might appear to consist of decorative patterns rather than represent concrete objects. However, one must acknowledge that abstraction or decoration can be rooted in stylised depictions of objects. For example, the *kbach* (ក្បាច់) is a highly codified Khmer scheme of ornamental motifs, which originate and relate to organic forms such as flowers or birds, but which have become stylised to the

point of often appearing non-representational (see Chan Vitharin and Preap Chanmara, *Kbach: A Study of Khmer Ornament*, ed. Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan, trans. Ingrid Muan (Phnom Penh: Reyum, 2005).

¹⁴ Siyonn, *Pidan (Bitān) in Khmer Culture*, pp. 24–5.

¹⁵ Elsewhere in the NMC are examples of *hol* textiles, accompanied by archive photographs of women seated at their looms.

¹⁶ Siyonn, *Pidan (Bitān) in Khmer Culture*, p. 56.

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