



Khmer Life and Art

By Cynthia O. Valdes

Oriental architecture reached its peak during the Angkorean Era in Cambodian history. This period is best remembered today for its temples, temple-mausoleums, libraries that stored heraldic and ritual paraphernalia, rest houses by the roadside, and its Hindu-Buddhistic sculpture. These structures were built by a succession of god-kings (*devaraja*) who believed themselves to have been divinely ordained.

That they succeeded in constructing such great monuments and on such a grand scale, the Cambodian people, also known as *Khmer*, must have had prodigious talent and boundless energy. They were a deeply religious people, tracing their lineages and dynasties to gods or demigods through legendary couples such as the Indian prince *Kaundinya* and the *Nagini Soma* and their later counterparts *Kambu* and *Mera*.

They must also have been quite prosperous. At its zenith, the borders of the empire (in addition to modern-day Cambodia), stretched across mainland Southeast Asia into major parts of what is now Laos, northeastern Thailand, and western Vietnam.

The *Khmer* inhabited a place of rich alluvial plains they called *Yasodharapura*. It is also known as “*Angkor*” a word from Sanskrit that means “capital”. Indian influence went beyond language. Inscriptions on stone “speak” to us of many things Indian: Brahmin priests, sacred texts, planets and constellations, gods and goddesses.

Chinese junks must have come up the *Tonle Sap* lake to trade at Angkor but as in most of Southeast Asia, the Chinese were interested mainly in commerce. Chinese influence is less palpable in Angkor except for the tons of ceramic debris (Chinese ceramics) excavated by archaeologists from temple sites.

To unlock the key to their wealth and reconstruct their way of life, we have to “read” meaning into the ancient walls, moats, canals and foundations the *Khmer* people left behind.

Together with the rest of mainland Southeast Asia, the land of the *Khmer* known to the outside world as *Kambujadesa*, experienced periods of heavy rainfall as well as months of drought. With superb engineering skills, the *Khmer* devised an ingenious system of canals, dikes, reservoirs (*baray*) and waterways to harness available water. Its efficient management enabled them to plant and harvest rice several times a year. The lake and even the *Western Baray* teemed with fishes. Within the kingdom, coconuts, oranges, mangoes and other tropical fruit were plentiful. All these ensured a bountiful food supply for the people of Angkor and their dominions.

In the mid-fifteenth century (a mere 6 and a half centuries after its founding in 802 AD), the *Khmer* were a spent force. They abandoned their gods, embraced a new, less flamboyant faith known as *Hinayana Buddhism*, the lesser vehicle. The capital moved south to Phnom Penh. It was the end of a glorious era. The jungle crept up on the monuments and it slept. Angkor awakened again only in the late 18th century.

What artifacts are there today other than its temples and monuments to remind us of the Angkorean civilization and the *Khmer* people?

The *Khmer* have produced pottery for at least two thousand years. Their first pots were of

coarse earthenware intended for cooking and other domestic use. Their pottery was never an industry but merely an activity engaged in by the women when their services were not required in the fields and elsewhere.

It must have been sometime in the 9th or 10th century that the Khmer potter learned how to construct a “*kiln*”. The pots could now be glazed successfully and fired to higher temperatures. These pots, harder than earthenware are called stoneware. Glazing made the vessel smoother to the touch, more attractive as well as non-porous.

Glazes used by the Khmer were of two types: an iron-rich brown which resulted in a dark brown to almost black glaze; an ash or lime glaze which burned white, creamish-white, buff or light green; Sometimes, they combined two types of glazes in one vessel.

The bodies of large vessels were thrown in a spinning wheel. Smaller pots were modeled by hand. Additional features such as rounded eyes, rabbit ears, elephant trunks, bird beaks and tails, arms and legs were applied to a formed body afterward.

A blunt or a sharp tool was utilized either to gouge grooves or incise finer lines on the still damp clay before sun-drying and eventual placement in the kiln.

Zhao Dagan, a Chinese visitor to the 13th century Cambodian court who wrote the only extant account of the period, thought the natives, “coarse and ugly”.

Khmer pots, at first glance, may indeed leave something to be desired. They are dark, somber, somewhat gloomy. With a second look, we may discover that larger vessels are solidly potted and thus strong, sturdy and robust; smaller vessels especially those of animal shapes are charming, even playful and whimsical.

Khmer ceramics were made for religious rituals, each one had a specific purpose. Bottles were filled with holy water and fragrant oils, vases with flower offerings. Oil lamps and scented candles light up altars as heady perfume from incense fill the air...

Epilogue:

On a moonlit night, walk with me across the causeway over the moat into the Angkor Wat. Together let us gaze upon the hundred faces of Jayavarman VII at the Bayon and try to figure out that enigmatic smile. Ponder upon the giant azuras and devas holding on to a naga...Why is the “churning of the sea of milk” a recurring theme not just in Angkor but in all of Southeast Asia? As hand in hand, we admire the voluptuous figures of the apsaras, celestial maidens and guardians of the temples...