

KHMER ART AND THE WORK OF THE ECOLE FRANCAISE
D'EXTREME-ORIENT.¹

by

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Translated from French by W. H. Mundie, M. A.

French Indochina is situated to the south of China, bordering on both the China Sea and the Gulf of Siam. Its position between the Indian Ocean to the west and the Pacific Ocean to the east has made of it a passage way much associated with seafaring people, merchants, monks, etc., coming from opposite directions and from countries that were often far distant.

It has been proved to-day by the skeletal remains found in the subsoil that the first inhabitants of Indochina, at a somewhat distant period, were Melanesians. That Negroid element has almost completely disappeared in our days, but one can still find traces of it in certain types of natives.

A first wave of Indonesians, with their somewhat fair skin, then came to drive out and replace these first Melanesian inhabitants, and to establish themselves on the soil of Indochina. These Indonesians were in turn, in the course of centuries, driven into the mountainous regions of Annam and Laos, where one still finds them to-day. These are the tribes designated under the general name of Mois. They present many resemblances with the Battak of Sumatra and the Dayak of Borneo.

This Indonesian or Oceanian element—for it came very probably from the islands of Oceania—has left quite strong traces of its

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culture and its civilisation in the arts and customs of the present natives of Indochina.

Khmer art in particular shows examples in its ornamentation, its architecture, and its *bas-reliefs*. In order to understand this art fully one must take count of its substratum, on which there came later a Hindu contribution to graft itself. But this Hindu contribution, to which in my opinion there has been given much too important a place in Khmer architecture, was gradually blended with and melted into the Oceanian elements of the aboriginal population. Then again new influences, brought from the West and introduced by way either of the land or the sea by the many travellers who came to Indochina, gave to this art of Cambodia a character and an individuality that are not to be found anywhere else.

The Hindu contribution made itself felt in Indochina, especially in the 6th and 7th centuries, in the first Khmer monuments of Cambodia and on the coast of Annam, in the art of Champa. Hinduized Malays had established that kingdom of Champa, which was for a long time the enemy and the rival of the Khmer kingdom.

The art of Champa has left traces—monuments, sculptures and inscriptions—which disclose a civilization that was highly advanced, but very strongly Hinduized. The Chams were not able, like their neighbours the Khmers, to free themselves from the Hindu imprint and to create a personality of their own.

The first Hindu inscription found in Indochina is a tablet worded in Sanskrit, the stela of Vocandh, which dates from the second century of our era. That stela, found in the vicinity of Nhatrang, proves that there was already at that period an Indian culture there.

The Cham monuments are made up of brick towers, of superimposed tiers, and with a raised ground-floor and decorated with pilasters on which sculptured ornaments stand out. Cham architecture, which offers some analogy with the earliest Khmer monuments also of brick, had as its principal centres the ancient town of Simhapura, which was the capital of the kingdom from the 7th to the 9th century, and Vijaya, near Binh Dinh. The decline of Cham art began at the end of the 13th century, although the tower of Po Klong Garay, which belongs to that period, still shows real excellence of decoration and architecture.

According to Mr. Przyluski one should find Chinese elements in the art of Champa, which disappeared completely in the 15th century.

Certain temples, like the ivory towers, also show a very visible Khmer influence. These likenesses can be explained by the frequent intercourse between these different countries.

Cambodia, or the Khmer Kingdom, begins to come into history in the 6th century of our era. It followed Funan, a great Hinduized kingdom, which certainly had a very advanced civilization, but about which the only information we have is in the statements of the Chinese ambassadors who visited the country. Funan occupied the whole of the present Cambodia and CochinChina, as well as a large part of Siam and Laos. The inhabitants, according to the Chinese accounts, had walled towns and palaces. There is often mention in these narratives of artistic articles in ivory or in engraved silver. The well-to-do wore fabrics of brocade. Their boats were decorated with the carved heads of monsters. But the inhabitants of Funan were first of all carpenters, skilled in working on timber. Their houses and even their temples must have been of timber, which explains why we do not any longer find anything of those structures.

However, some learned people and archæologists are astonished that the Khmer, who followed the people of Funan, were able to construct their first temples in stone and of so perfect an art without any preparation. They have asked themselves if certain ancient buildings in stone, hitherto attributed to the first appearance of the Khmer art, could not be taken back to the Funan period. In an article published in the *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient* in 1933, Mr. Parmentier succeeded in detecting the probable style of the Funan monuments. In his very thorough research regarding the first Khmer art, the art of the primitive Khmer, he recognised in that epoch between the 7th and the 8th centuries two distinct types of architecture. The first type comprised low, dumpy towers, simple cells of cubic form, surmounted by decreasing tiers, very numerous but very low. The second comprised towers of less numerous but much higher tiers, with a more gracefully shaped outline.

Taking his stand on the fact that the first type was much less widely distributed than the second, and that it disappeared completely in the following period of the Khmer art, Mr. Parmentier was able to draw the conclusion that it was a relic of the art of Funan, which seems very probable. In fact the low towers disclose a very pronounced Hindu origin; and the evolution of the Khmer art

shows that the Hindu contribution disappeared gradually, changing into a completely new art.

To this art of Funan, which took its position prior to the 6th century, succeeded the first Khmer art, termed the primitive or pre-Angkor art of the Khmer, when King Bhavavarman, a vassal of Funan, revolted and seized the power.

In that period the Hindu, Buddhist and Brahmin religions shared Cambodia between them, and the kings erected temples sometimes to Buddha, sometimes to Śiva; sometimes even the two creeds were held in reverence in the same temples. Buddhism was then the creed of the Great Vehicle (Mahayana), and a certain confusion has sometimes existed between the image of the Bodhisattva Lokeśvara and the God Śiva, Maheśvara.

Khmer art, at the outset, like Cham art, did not comprise great comprehensive designs. It is represented by simple towers, almost always in brick, grouped more or less in proximity to one another. Only the decorative elements are in sandstone. The Asram Moha Rosei, which has just been completely reconstructed in accordance with the new process called *anastylose*, is the type of this low construction which presents a close analogy with the Pallava architecture of India. The towers of Sambor Prei Kuk, an ancient capital of the 7th century, show on the contrary an outline more gracefully shaped, which already presages the great classical architecture of the Khmers.

To the primitive Khmer art succeeded the Khmer art properly so called, or classic art. From the beginning of the 9th century Cambodia regained its unity. As a result of public disturbances it had for a time been divided into two kingdoms, that of land to the north and of water to the south. A king, Jayavarman II, who came from Jaya according to the inscriptions, founded several capitals and inaugurated the cult of the Deva-rajā, the King-God, the royal power being represented under a divine form, the *linga*, emblem of Shiva. The first temples of the classic art present a style a little different from that of the beginning of Khmer art. For a long time it was believed that there had existed an interruption, a sort of gap between the Khmer art of the 7th century and the classic art which commenced in the 9th century. That is not so, and it is due to Mr. Philippe Stern, assistant curator of the Guimet Museum and a specialist in Khmer art, that one owes its being proved that Khmer art developed gradually without any interruption. Coming on a mission

to Cambodia in 1936, he discovered, on the sites of two ancient capitals, monuments which reveal an art hitherto unknown that constitutes the link which was missing between the art of the 7th century and the art of the 9th century. The imitation of the art of India still makes itself felt in the statuary, but the ornamental decoration, notably on the lintels above doors, presents a variety and a richness that was unknown before then.

At the end of the 9th century King Yaśovarman transferred his capital to Angkor, to the north of the great Lake. The Bakheng, and not the Bayon as was believed for a long time, became the centre of the new royal town. It is due to Mr. Goloubew that we owe this identification. The work of Mr. Stern and Mr. Cœdès had already shown that the Bayon did not date from the beginning of the period of classical art, but from the end, that is to say from the 13th century.

The investigations made on the spot by Mr. Goloubew caused it to be recognized that the site of the first town of Angkor does not coincide with that of the town now known under the name of Angkor Thom. The first town, much bigger in area, has its boundaries, still quite recognizable, to the west and to the south. Photographs taken from an aeroplane, as well as surveys made by the Geographical Service, have enabled one to reconstitute the exact site, and to specify the main roadways which start from the central monument on the Bakheng Phnom.

We have now reached the 10th century which prepares the way for the grand epoch of Khmer art, that of the 11th and 12th centuries, the epoch when this art reached its complete development, and when the architect, in full possession of his resources, affirmed his mastery. But before attaining that perfection Khmer art was going to develop gradually. Starting from towers more or less isolated at first, by successive improvements Khmer architecture developed its design, an aggregate of galleries grouped round the central temple, and arranged for the arrival of the faithful in the principal sanctuary by a series of courtyards, of avenues and of porticoes. If one remembers that the Holy of Holies, which encloses the image of the God-King, the symbol of the supreme power, was most often placed on a mountain, or, failing that, on an artificial pyramid, the realisation of this symbol in stone, increasing the height of the central tower over the temple as a whole, has led the architect to produce a work of splendid majesty. Angkor Wat (12th century) is the most representa-

tive type of the zenith of Khmer art. The vista of the central temple with its five towers, which one sees at first in the distance, and the details of which come out more and more as one approaches, is an unforgettable sight. The sculptures and bas-reliefs in the galleries that one passes through, combine to make of the whole a unique masterpiece of its kind. It is with this temple that Khmer art can, in the history of art, rival the monuments that are the most famous and of the highest repute in Egypt, in India, or in Greece.

Towards the end of the 12th century, a period of wars soaked the land with blood and greatly upset the Khmer kingdom. The warlike neighbours of the Khmer people, the Chams, invaded the country and seized the capital, which was pillaged and destroyed. King Jayavarman VII, then mounted the throne, drove out the Chams and re-established good order. He had a new town constructed on the site of an ancient town which Mr. Goloubew is studying at present, and of which he has found certain pieces of work, ponds, trenches, highways, etc., in the sub-soil.

The new town was fortified, defended by a substantial rampart in masonry against aggression from outside, and monumental gates gave access to the interior. It is the town now termed Angkor Thom, the Grand City, with the celebrated temple of the Bayon, which stands just at the centre. But with King Jayavarman VII, a great constructor of temples, the architectural style was modified; it lost its purity and its harmony. The design becomes complicated; the towers and the sanctuaries are multiplied and form a somewhat confused whole. It is to this King that we owe those terrifying conceptions of towers decorated with immense countenances, and bridge balustrades decorated with giants bearing the serpent Naga.

A curious thing which I have noted, but am unable to explain, was produced at this epoch: a return towards the elements that came from India, but of which one had seen the gradual elimination in the preceding centuries. This return to Indian art, at the end of the 12th century, is shown by new subjects which make their appearance in Khmer art, and among which one may name in architecture the invasion of sculptured decoration in *altorelievo*. The most typical example is to be found in the towers of Bayon, which set off statuary more than architecture. Another example is to be found in the gates of the town of Angkor Thom, where one sees elephants drawn half-length into the masonry, a subject which recalls the temples of Karli

and Dhanli, in India, and which one finds again in the celebrated terrace of the elephants which leads to the entrance to the Royal Palace. It seems that at this period, Khmer architecture was invaded by a mystic symbolism which transposes into stone the most spiritual conceptions of the Hindu religions.

And still, even at that period, which marks the decline of the Khmer architecture, one can note a revival of the primitive native elements, which were referred to at the beginning of this paper.

If the Court and the advisers of the King still remained faithful to the creeds and traditions received from India, in the mass of the people there still lived survivals of the primitive pre-Hindu civilisations. One can see the proof of this in the bas-reliefs which the image-makers have carved on the walls of the Bayon. If the internal galleries show mythological episodes, the external ones represent the very life of the Cambodians at that period. Scenes of hunting, of battles, of games, of open-air markets give us information about the costumes, the arms, the tools, and the musical instruments which were then in use. I may add besides that to-day the same instruments are still seen in the hands of the people of Cambodia. And also, it is interesting to note great similarities with the peoples of the island in southern Oceania and with the Moi tribes in Central Annam. The people in their daily life had then preserved the morals and the ways of living of the Indonesian races who were the former inhabitants of Indochina. In architecture and in ornamental painting I have also been able to discover designs and forms, unknown in India, which are to be found in the ancient civilisations of Mexico and Peru.

To sum up, one may say then that Khmer art is one composed of very multifarious elements and influences. This is explained by the very position of Cambodia, which, as I have said, was the meeting place of people travelling as well from the West as from the East.

In conclusion I have still to say a few words on the main works of the Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient in Cambodia. All these temples, having been devastated, pillaged and abandoned in the jungle, appeared as simple heaps of stones more or less covered with vegetation, when the first conservator of Angkor undertook to repair them in 1908. After the trees, which had overrun cloisters and galleries, had been cleared away, and the stones which incumbered the sanctuaries and obstructed circulation, had been removed the parts of edifices still standing were consolidated, by putting props bound

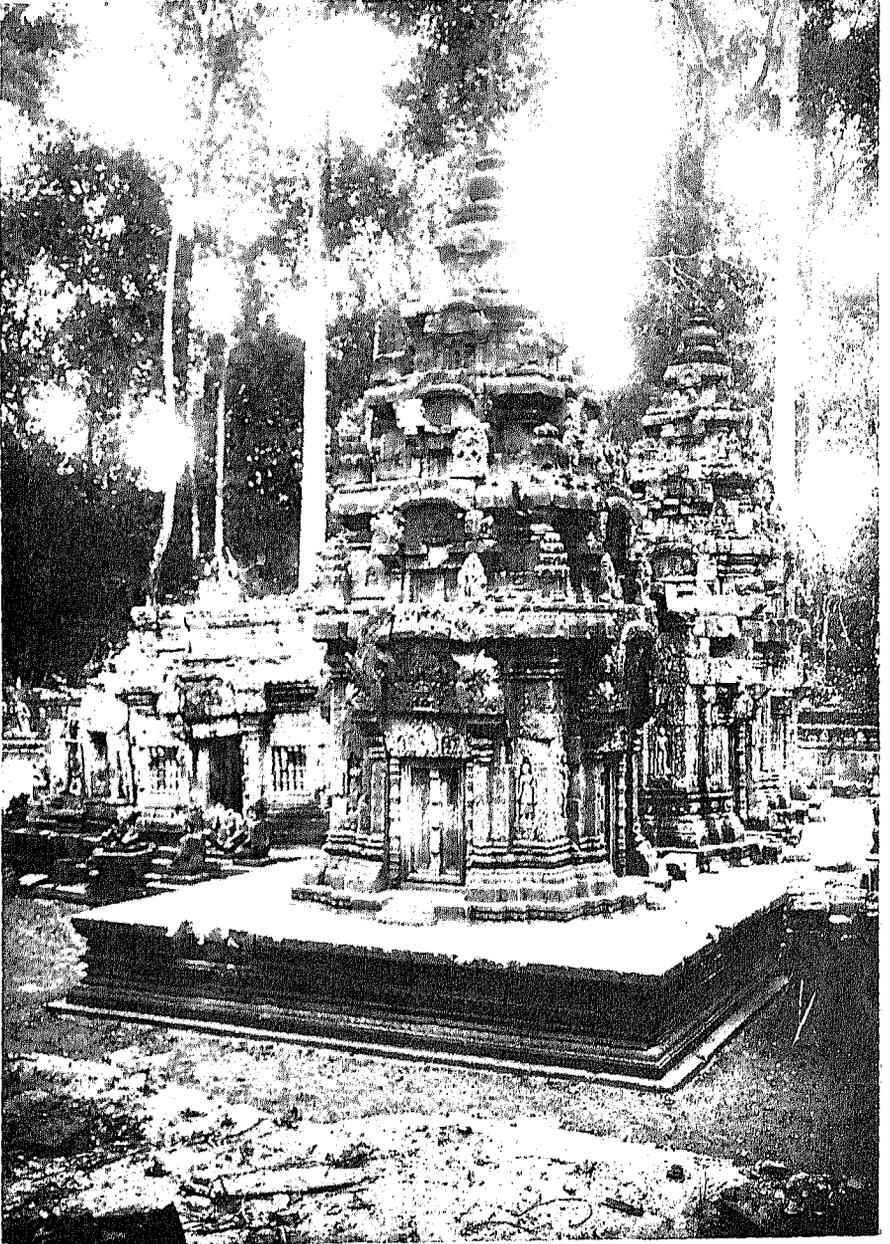
with ferro-concrete in the places necessary to stop their falling to ruins. As the outcome of a mission to Java, where I had been to study on the spot the reconstruction processes of the archaeological service of the Netherlands Indies, I commenced the application of these new methods at a little temple, Banteay Srei, situated to the north and a little to the east of Angkor. After designs, statements, photos, and drawings had been taken of what was still in place, all the walls were taken down, course by course, and then put up again on a concreted surface serving as the foundation. All the elements which had fallen down from the upper parts, after having been carefully collected and put together on the ground, were placed again in their proper place; and that temple, specially remarkable for the wealth of its sculptured decoration, presents to-day its reconstituted central part such as it was in the glorious epoch of Angkor.

The same method, termed *anastylose*, has been applied by Mr. Mauger, archaeological inspector of the Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient, at the temple of the primitive Khmer art, Asram Moha Rosei. I have already mentioned the researches made by Mr. Goloubew and Mr. Stern, researches crowned with success, in order to find sites of ancient Khmer capitals. The air service of Indochina has contributed effective co-operation in these researches, by flights of aeroplanes which have enabled enclosures, earth-banks, trenches and tanks to be located in places where they were not known before, these being related to the ancient Khmer works.

Finally I shall mention two more works proceeding on the lines of the Conservancy of Angkor, and from which much may be expected. The first is the clearance with reconstruction of the temple of Banteay Samre, to the east of Angkor. There have already been found there terraces of a very interesting art buried under the ground and vegetation.

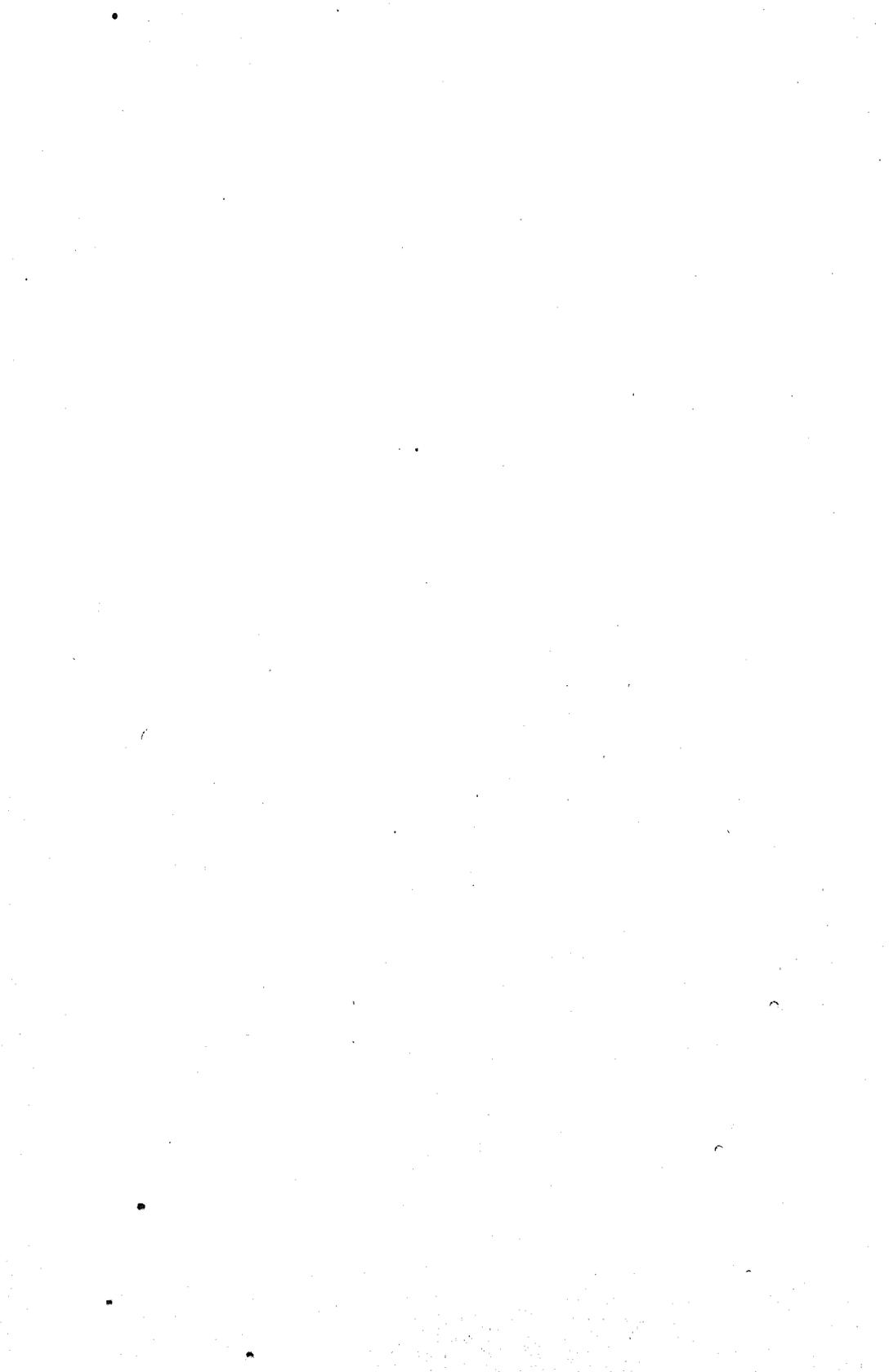
The second is the reconstruction of a temple all the stones of which had been utilized by the monks for other works; this is the central sanctuary which was erected formerly on the pyramid of Bakong, some 20 kilometers to the south of Angkor. It has been possible to reconstitute the ground floor with all the elements which were found, and work on the first floor has just been begun.

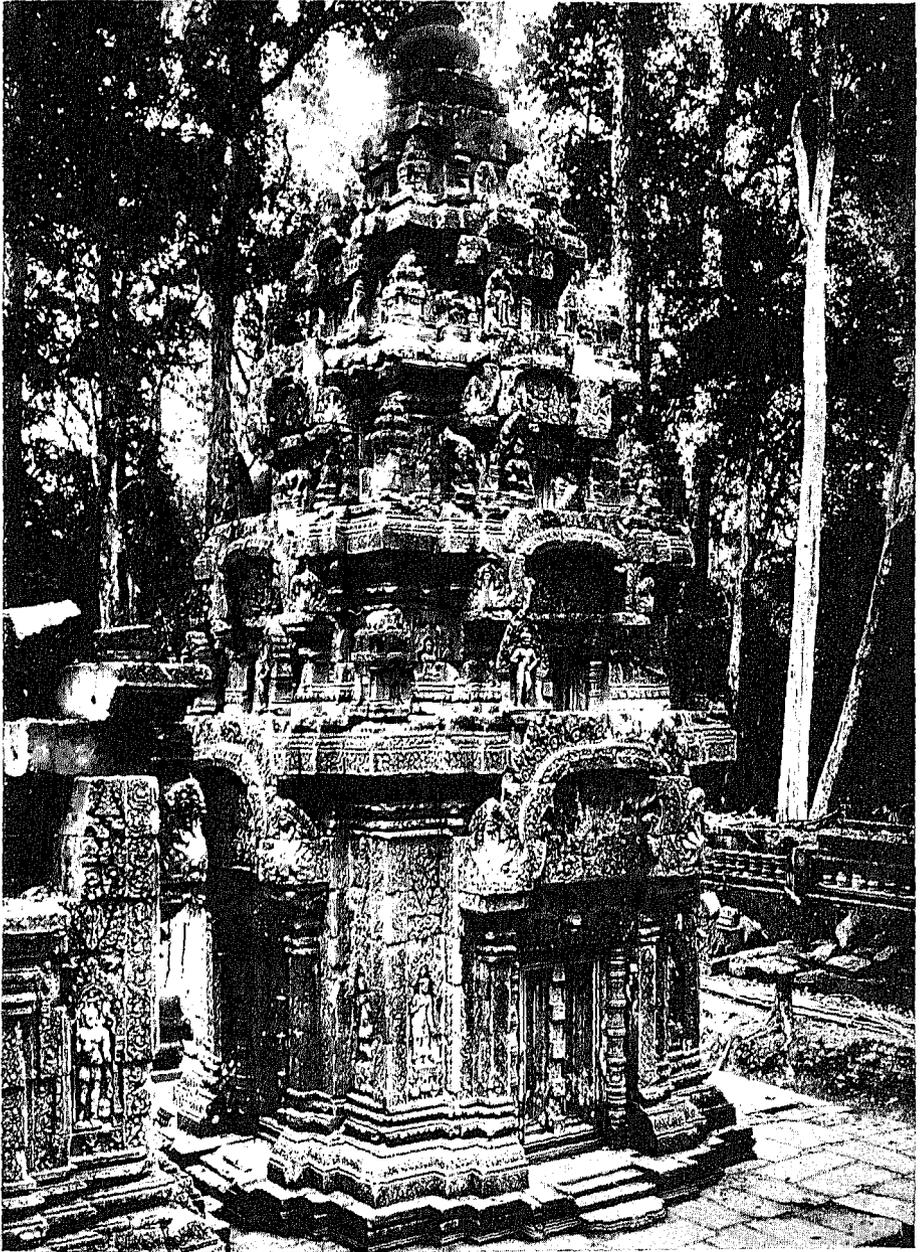
Further M. Glaize, the Conservator of Angkor, is shortly going to add to these important works the *anastylose* of the small sanctuary known as the Neak Pean. The fall of the tree which covered it



Panteai Srei,—North Sanctuary, seen from N. W.

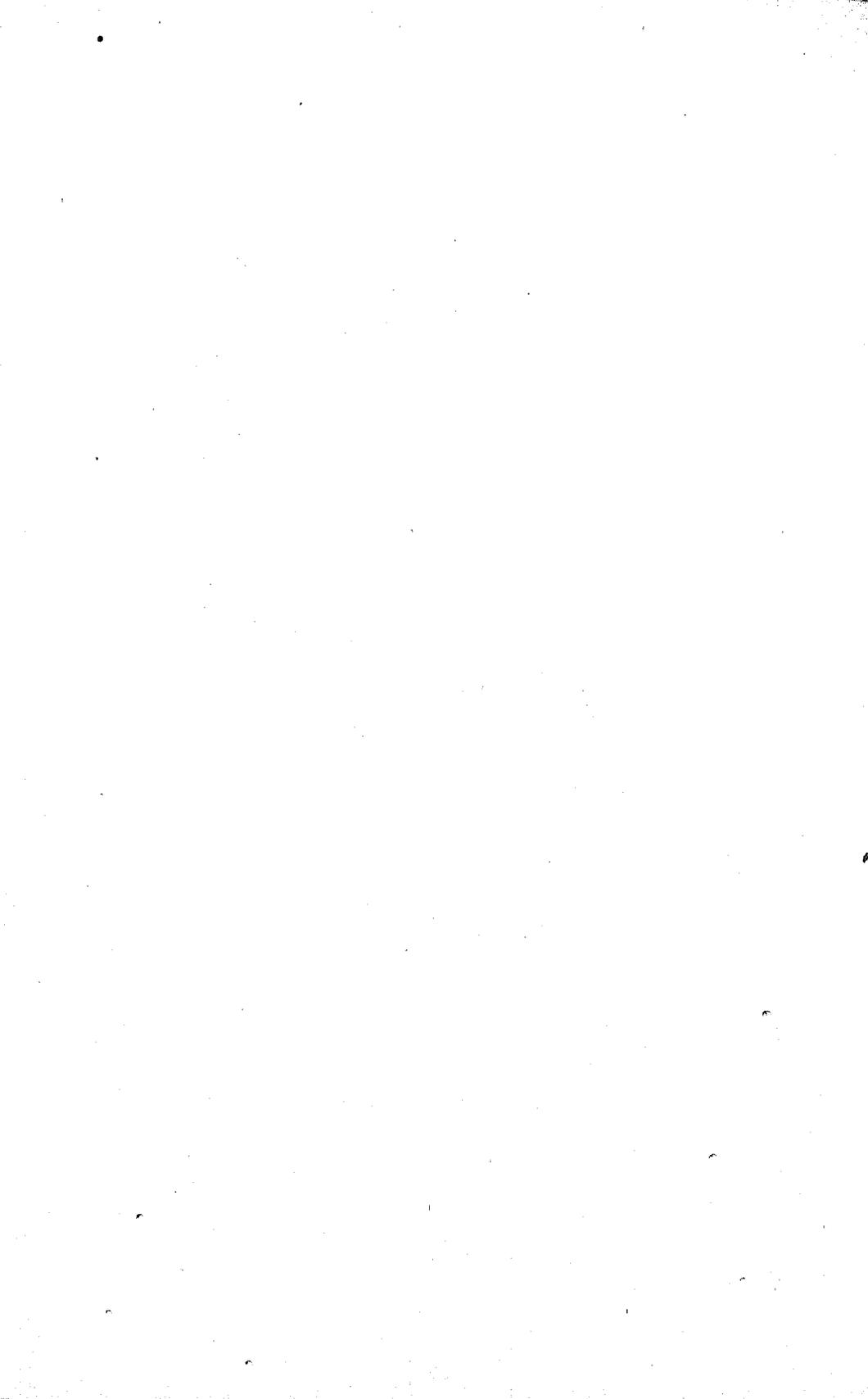
Photo by courtesy of the Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient.





Banteai Srei,—South Sanctuary, seen from N. W.

Photo by courtesy of the Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient.



completely enables this work to be undertaken under favourable conditions.

Although it underwent an eclipse, Khmer art, after having been transformed under foreign influences that came from the North, still exists at the present time, and still sometimes shows reminders of the glorious epoch of Angkor. But alas! the inrush of Chinese designs and above all the annoying influences of modern western art threaten to make this art lose all its charm and its pungency.

And yet I am persuaded that one could maintain this art in its traditions without remaining fixed in the ancient formulas, but by renewing them. I shall venture to take an example from Siam, in Bangkok itself. Wat Benchamabopit, of which I have been able to admire the fine proportions and the purity of the architectural lines, at the same time as the delicacy of the decoration, is evidence that one can make something new by utilising modern methods and materials without betraying the art of one's country, and by remaining faithful to its past.

H. MARCHAL.

The two photographs of the Banteay Srei temples are published by the kind permission of the Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient.—Ed. JSS.

In the paragraphs below are reproduced the speeches with which Major Seidenfaden introduced Monsieur Marchal to the audience as well as his words of welcome extended to Monsieur and Madame Marchal on behalf of the Siam Society:—

“It is my very pleasant duty to introduce to you Monsieur Henri Marchal, until recently for a number of years the distinguished Chief of the Archaeological Service of French Indochina, who will lecture to-night on the art of the Khmer and the work carried out by that admirable institution called the Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient, which has been responsible for the detailed study and careful restoration and preservation of hundreds of magnificent temples and sanctuaries spread over the territories of the ancient kingdoms of Cambodia and Champā.

“M. Marchal is one of the veterans of French Indochina, having arrived as early as in 1905 to serve as an architect in the Department of Public Works in Saigon. He joined the staff of the Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient in 1916, and has thus fully twenty-one years of scientific work to his credit. Most of that time was spent in Cambodia at the group of temples and monuments clustering around Angkor Thom, the former capital of the

Khmer, and Angkor Wat, the world-famous and incomparable temple. The late M. Commaille was the pioneer who cleared Angkor Wat of the more than four hundred and fifty years old jungle, which was on the point of strangling the wonderful fabric of chiselled stone.

"To M. Marchal fell the task of saving the many temples and palaces within the precincts of mighty Angkor Thom, such as Phra Pithu, Bayon and the royal palace, and outside, to the east of the old capital, the extensive temple compounds of Phra Khan, Ta Kaeo and Ta Phrom. M. Marchal did not limit his activities to felling the jungle and cleaning out the ruins of these admirable structures. Nay! he restored them to their original forms and beauty, his masterpiece being the small but exquisite temple called Banteay Srei.

"Out of a shapeless mass of tumbled-down stones M. Marchal like a veritable sorcerer resurrected the elegant and delicate towers all complete with their finely executed sculptures right up to their lotus-shaped pinnacles.

"M. Marchal is a dreamer and poet in stone, who has not only brought back to their original shapes and forms so many splendid fanes of ancient Kampucha Decha, but also traced the motives and aspirations of the unnamed builders of these monuments, besides showing how two currents of ancient civilisations, that of the West coming via India and that of the East from Oceania, met and blended on the Cambodian soil, the outcome and crowning glory of which was beautiful and eternal Angkor Wat. However, M. Marchal himself will tell you all about this and will accompany his narrative by a series of admirable pictures of the foremost temples of the land of the Khmer. I shall therefore now bid M. Marchal welcome in the name of the Siam Society, and thereafter ask him to read his paper.

"Monsieur Marchal.

"Au nom du Comité et des Membres de la Siam Society j'ai l'honneur de vous souhaiter, ainsi qu'à Madame Marchal, la bienvenue ce soir. Nous vous remercions d'avoir bien voulu venir ici pour nous parler au sujet de l'art admirable et de l'architecture grandiose du pays des Khmers et des travaux exécutés sous l'auspice de cette excellente et savante institution appelée l'Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient qui a fait tant pour éclairer l'ancienne histoire et étudier les civilisations de l'Indochine. Vous êtes bien connu comme un maître architecte et savant archéologue et je peux vous assurer que nous sommes venus ce soir avec la ferme intention d'apprendre de vous un peu de cet art exquis et de cette architecture majestueuse que représentent les temples du Cambodge.

"Monsieur Marchal, maintenant je m'excuse d'avoir pris autant de votre temps et je suis heureux de vous passer la parole."