

# “Decadence and Revival” in Cambodian Arts and the Role of George Groslier (1887–1945)

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**Abstract** This paper focuses on the work of George Groslier (1887–1945), the creator and first curator of the Musée Albert Sarraut in Phnom Penh and the director of the *Service des Arts cambodgiens* from the 1920s to the 1940s. George Groslier was an artist, a painter, and one of the most important individual protagonists in the French initiative to “revive the Khmer arts” in Cambodia during the French Protectorate (1863–1953). In this particular political and cultural context, he sought to “restore Cambodia’s proper cultural identity” by creating an institutionalized programme of “Khmer arts renovation.”

This paper will attempt to consider the “civilizing vision” of George Groslier within two major developmental steps. First, the presentation of Groslier’s work will bring to light his personal values, terms, and writings addressing the pretended decadence of Khmer arts and heritage and its intended revival. This will provide a basis from which to explore, second, the process of how this individual value system imposed upon Khmer cultural heritage and gradually formed the ideological basis for two colonial institutions. These institutions became the core of the “Khmer arts renovation programme” and were led by George Groslier himself: (1) a museum to collect, classify, protect, and display works of art; and (2) a school of arts to re-create, teach, and perpetuate the Khmer artistic “tradition.” They were instrumental in the establishment of a canon of Cambodian heritage within French colonial politics, a canon that has retained its dominance to this day.

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## George Groslier: An Individual Cultural Broker with a Vision to Civilize<sup>1</sup>

### *George Groslier, a French artist in Cambodia*

Born on February 4, 1887, George Groslier (Fig. 1) was the first French citizen born in Cambodia. In 1885 his parents, Antoine and Angelina Groslier, arrived in Cambodia, where his father worked as a civil servant. In 1889 Groslier went to France with his mother while his father stayed behind in Indochina; he travelled back to Cambodia twenty years later. In Paris George Groslier received a classical training as a painter at the *École des Beaux-Arts* where, notably, he studied under Albert Maignan. In 1910, after winning the *Second Prix de Rome*, he decided to visit his father who was then *Résident de France* (Protectorate's chief administrator in the provinces) in Ban Me Thuot in the south of Annam province. He travelled through Annam and Cambodia for more than a year painting and drawing, and devoted the last six months of his travels to Angkor where he studied Khmer art.

When he returned to Europe he organized a series of conferences, which took place between 1912 and 1913 (both in France and Belgium), and were based on his own field observations on art and archaeology in Cambodia and Khmer. Upon his return to France, George Groslier published his first book *Danseuses cambodgiennes anciennes et modernes* (Groslier 1913), which was also illustrated with many of his drawings.

In 1913, Groslier returned to Indochina when the *Ministère de l'Instruction Publique et des Beaux-Arts* (minister of public instruction and fine arts), and soon after the *Société Asiatique* also put him in charge of an “archaeological and artistic study” in Cambodia. This mission included the study and survey of “the most remote monuments of Cambodia.”<sup>2</sup> Throughout his missions and travels Groslier continued to collect material for his writings on Khmer arts and Khmer traditions, and he began to formulate a notion of their progressive disappearance. In 1914 George Groslier was mobilized for war. He took part in the Romanian campaign in October 1916 before being called back to Indochina by Albert Sarraut, the *Gouverneur général de l'Indochine* (French representative for Indochina, including Cambodia, Annam, Cochinchina, Tonkin, and Laos), in 1917. From that point he lived in Cambodia almost exclusively, returning to France only for holidays or special missions. During these years he focused all of his knowledge and artistic talent (while holding the position of director of the museum) on the establishment

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<sup>1</sup> This research forms part of my doctoral research project “La France et les arts Khmers, du Protectorat à l'Indépendance du Cambodge” at the University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, within the U.M.R IRICE and the C.H.A.C (Centre d'histoire de l'Asie contemporaine). This research is ongoing and at this point focuses on George Groslier (1887–1945). All English quotations from original French sources are my translations unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. biographical note (no date, after 1931), no author, National Archives of Cambodia (N.A.C.), R.S.C. file n°8338 C/2.



**Fig. 1** Portrait of George Groslier, curator of the Musée Albert Sarraut. No date (Private collection)

of a *Service des Arts cambodgiens* (Khmer arts service). He also carried out his own personal studies, notably on Khmer dance, which formed the subject of his first book.<sup>3</sup> Although he was not a trained architect, he used his numerous architectural surveys and sketches of Khmer architecture to design the *Musée Albert Sarraut* in Phnom Penh, which he later re-visited on a smaller scale in an ephemeral reconstitution as the “Cambodian Pavilion” during the 1931 International Colonial Exhibition in Paris.<sup>4</sup>

### ***A general presentation of George Groslier’s works— main themes***

George Groslier was a man with a wide range of skills: he was a draughtsman, a designer, a painter, an architect, a photographer, a curator, and a writer all at once. The vast quantity of drawings and texts that he left after his death bear witness to his numerous activities. However, the aim of this paper is not to analyse his skills as a draughtsman, but rather to explore Groslier’s central cultural vision of establishing an urgent “renovation programme for Khmer arts,” which he developed in the late 1910s. As the head of the *Musée Albert Sarraut* and the *Service des Arts* or the *Ballet Royal* (Royal Ballet of Cambodia), Groslier had one goal: to lift Khmer arts from oblivion and to revive local artistic traditions. He also worked actively to

<sup>3</sup> George Groslier took more than 2,000 negatives of dancers, a selection of which were displayed in 2012 at the National Museum of Cambodia in Phnom Penh.

<sup>4</sup> In fact, Groslier had already participated in the 1922 National Colonial Exhibition in Marseille where he contributed sketches of the entry doors to the main Cambodian pavilion.

publicize and ensure the spread of Khmer arts within Indochina and abroad. Groslier's writings seek simultaneously to reveal his vision, declare his programme, and justify his actions. One of the main topics of his writings was the notion of "decadence" and the need to "safeguard" Khmer traditions. Since the 1910s, when he released his first publications and communications, Groslier continually described what he identified as the progressive disappearance of artistic activities in Cambodia. In 1913 his book *Danseuses Cambodgiennes anciennes et modernes* deplored the decline of traditional Khmer dance and theatre through the depiction of the dancers' lives and art; he described an art practice that had deep roots in the culture but had grown decadent (cf. Falser 2014a). This theme was taken up again in his 1916 publication entitled *A l'ombre d'Angkor* (Groslier 1916) where he simultaneously evoked artistic traditions and denounced their neglect. Two main themes were recurrent in Groslier's work and were ultimately formulated in his 1917 "renovation programme": the first involved the permanence of Khmer arts and the continuity between ancestral artistic traditions and their contemporary manifestations. The second deplored the decline of Khmer arts and underlined the need to work for their preservation.

However, Groslier was not the only one speaking out against the rapid disappearance of Khmer arts at that time. In an article published in 1913 Henri Marchal, the architect and later Conservator General of the Angkor Archaeological Park, also deplored the situation (Marchal 1913). Like Groslier, Marchal came to the conclusion that Chinese and Annam influences were mostly responsible for the decline of Khmer art and culture. George Groslier paid tribute to his predecessor in an article published under the pseudonym S.-G. Nécoli in the journal *Arts et Archéologie Khmers*. Referring to a veritable "opinion movement" that was developing at the beginning of the twentieth century "among few rare amateurs and specialists in favour of indigenous arts," he named Henri Marchal as one of the first "perceptive men of the time" (Necoli 1921a, 84). In 1917 Groslier described Khmer arts as "endangered" and "denatured" and he asked: "In this moribund art, [that has grown] suddenly mixed, where to find and how to use the seeds likely to flourish, the fresh drops of blood?"<sup>5</sup> (Groslier 1931, 1) He presented his assessment as a kind of medical diagnosis, and used words like "fever" or "quinine" to underscore this. In mentioning the "forms of art infected" by foreign influences, he pointed out the necessity of going back to "healthy pieces of art," by making a "diagnosis," finding "cures," and prescribing "treatment" (Groslier 1931, 8–9).

Decadence in this case was clearly intended to mean deviations from something original and pure. For Groslier, the "pure" form of Khmer art had become endangered as a result of the encounter between the primitive local context and the influences of Chinese and Indian arts. In his 1918 article "La tradition cambodgienne," he declared that traditional Khmer ancient art had suffered under the influences of the kingdom's neighbours since the fall of Angkor in 1431

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<sup>5</sup>Original text: "Chez ce moribond brusquement métissé, où trouver et comment utiliser les germes encore susceptibles de fleurir, les gouttes de sang pur?"

(Groslier 1918a, 466–467). This was especially true of Siam—which in Groslier’s time was under the heavy influence of Great Britain, France’s major colonial competitor in the region. For Groslier, foreign influences couldn’t be seen as a factor of enrichment, exchange, or development, but only as an attack on the integrity of this pure art (Groslier 1918b). In various texts Groslier listed three main reasons for this decadence (compare Groslier 1918d). The first was the nature of Khmer art as he defined it: it comprised of objects for daily use that could be easily damaged. Furthermore, this art was dependent upon the sensitive relationship between student and teacher, a circumstance that made its transmission especially fragile. Groslier conceptualized a standardized form of Khmer art that was based almost entirely on copying, with no space for creativity and an inability to adapt itself to changes. The second reason was linked to the special characteristics of Cambodian artists and craftsmen. Using a classifying approach, he categorized and generalized, defining craftsmen as lacking in initiative, trained to copy, and therefore vulnerable to foreign influences: “A Cambodian artist is not one of those visionary people who, being oppressed, will go underground to celebrate his worship. He is the opposite of an innovator. To imitate his past qualifies him to imitate any other example” (Groslier 1918b, 553). But the factors that he held most responsible for the decadence of Khmer art were historical ones. For instance, Groslier often brought up the influence of Siam in ancient times and suggested that Siamese influences were imposed by force and that artists did not have the freedom to choose to assimilate. According to Groslier, Siam had drawn its artistic inspiration from Khmer tradition, absorbed it, and then reintroduced it to Khmer culture. He spoke of all the loans that Siamese culture had made to Cambodia and of the stylistic migration of the *mokhot* or *naga*’s (mythological snake) head pattern. For Groslier, these exchanges between Siam and Cambodia had thrown the Khmer people and artists, who attributed many things from their own traditional culture to Siam, into confusion (Groslier 1918a, 467).

However, for Groslier it was not just Siam but also other important historical aspects of colonization that formed a part of these destructive dynamics. He pointed out that Western colonial (in this case, European) influences had been so abrupt that they had deeply destabilized Khmer art. In 1918, when Europe entered the last phase of World War I, he declared, “[b]y a very miserable fate, Cambodian traditions seem to be called to disappear all the more quickly given that, after ten centuries of decadence, they have now been subjected to the deep and overwhelming influence of the West for [the past] fifty years”<sup>6</sup> (Groslier 1918a, 459). In 1931, when anti-colonial movements began to spring up in the French *métropole*,

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<sup>6</sup> Original text: “Par un sort vraiment malheureux, les traditions cambodgiennes semblent appelées à disparaître d’autant plus vite qu’après une décadence de dix siècles, elles sont soumises depuis cinquante ans à l’influence prédominante et profonde de l’Occident.”

Groslier continued with this notion: “If Cambodian art was still holding out, it was worm-eaten, it had no resistance left. Western influences, arising with incredible strength and speed, destroyed it all at once”<sup>7</sup> (Groslier 1931, 5). Returning to the theme of decline and decadence, he described Cambodia as a victim that could only wait for help from the French Protectorate to survive. And indeed, the protection of Khmer arts was an essential field of action for the French colonial government, which included George Groslier. Within the domain of cultural action, heritage preservation was a key means of legitimating the colonial presence in Cambodia. This vision perfectly suited Groslier’s doctrine of a Cambodian arts renovation plan.

Part of this plan was to ensure the success of Khmer arts’ propaganda. In 1921, with this aim in view, Groslier launched a review called *Arts et archéologie khmers*. With the help of André Silice (director of the *École des Arts* between 1922 and 1938) he wrote most of the articles for the review himself, and the two men placed their sketching talents at the service of their scientific studies. This review served Groslier both as a means of imparting his ideas and vision for Khmer arts and as a tool for their diffusion. The two issues published between 1921 and 1926 included scientific studies on Khmer temples, general dissertations about Khmer arts and craftsmanship, the history and timeline of the museum, and even a presentation of George Groslier’s *Service des Arts*. Lastly, in addition to all his other duties, Groslier published several novels in which his singular vision for Cambodia was made clear. The 1928 novel *Le retour à l’argile*, for instance—which, incidentally, earned him the *Grand Prix de littérature coloniale* in 1929—tells of a French engineer posted in Cambodia who is slowly affected by the grace of the country and is finally submerged in it.

### ***George Groslier’s doctrine and programme***

In 1916 the Gouverneur general, Albert Sarraut, decided to create a new school of art in Phnom Penh. He wanted to replace the art section of the *École professionnelle* with a school dedicated to arts that was separate from technique. He called on George Groslier, who had all the qualifications, to develop and lead the school. Groslier knew Cambodia very well, he spoke the language, and had been studying Khmer art for a long time; furthermore, as a painter he was particularly qualified to draw up a programme for teaching art. In addition, George Groslier also enjoyed the influential support of his father-in-law, Jules Poujade, who was an editor of the newspaper *La Lanterne* and a good friend of the *Gouverneur général*. The *Gouverneur général de l’Indochine* and the *Résident supérieur du Cambodge*

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<sup>7</sup>Original text: “Si l’art cambodgien tenait encore, il était vermoulu, à bout de résistance. Les influences occidentales, survenant avec une force et une rapidité inouïes, l’achevèrent d’un seul coup.”

(France’s chief administrator in the Protectorate) decided to put Groslier in charge of a six-month exploratory study of “the organization of a school of applied arts”<sup>8</sup> in Cambodia, the purpose of which was to “study on the premises various questions raised by the intended creation and to propose a plan, drawing its inspiration from the guidelines given by the Résident supérieur and the Gouverneur général.” At the end of his mission, George Groslier was required to write a report “about the situation of arts in Cambodia and the set-up of an organization to keep them intact, and to revive those tending to disappear.”<sup>9</sup> This report was submitted on July 7, 1917. Not surprisingly, it concluded that traditional Khmer arts were disappearing and that the Protectorate had to act quickly in order to ensure their conservation (Groslier 1925). Groslier advised the Protectorate not only to create a new school of art, but also a new museum and a *Direction des Arts* (Arts’ Supervision) that would be in charge of selling and advertising local handicrafts. The three institutions would be united within the *Service des Arts*. As summarized in the *Revue indochinoise*, the “renovation plan” imagined by Groslier and Baudoin (the *Résident supérieur*) in 1917 aimed to help Cambodia regain its proper cultural identity and regional importance by protecting it from the influence of neighbouring countries.

Based on these observations, Groslier drew up a “doctrine” establishing his Cambodian arts’ “renovation plan” (Groslier 1931, 7) that was based on three points: (1) he recommended developing teaching in order to prevent the disappearance of traditional artistic practices (see below in the section on the *École des Arts*). (2) He recommended the creation of a museum, assigned to the preservation and the display of artistic testimonies from the past. The museum was conceived as a resource for visitors and researchers, but most importantly as a working tool for the students of the *École des Arts*. To secure their education in accordance with what Groslier called “tradition,” he proposed that they have access to concrete examples. To better facilitate this access he suggested uniting the museum and the *École des Arts* in an architectural ensemble called the *Bloc des arts* (the block of the arts). (3) Groslier recommended fostering artistic commissions as a means of boosting art production. He proposed the creation of an organization that would be responsible for putting artisans and customers in touch with one another, for controlling the production, and for ensuring that it was promoted publically. As a direct result of this recommendation the *Direction des Arts* was created in 1919<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Baudoin, François-Marius, *Résident supérieur du Cambodge to Gouverneur général* in Hanoi, June 9, 1917. Official telegram. N.A.C. (R.S.C.), file n° 17663.

<sup>9</sup> *Rapport du Résident supérieur au Cambodge à Monsieur le Gouverneur Général*, April 13, 1922, N.A.C. (R.S.C.) file n° 11886.

<sup>10</sup> Royal Ordinance of December 31, 1919, founding the *Direction des Arts Cambodgiens*. See: *Arts et Archéologie Khmers I* (1921-3), 114–115.

and was led during its early years by George Groslier himself while he was already the director of the *École des Arts* and curator of the *Musée Albert Sarraut*.<sup>11</sup> The *Direction des Arts* was responsible for

the implementation and propaganda of Arts and art industries of the country, [...] establishing a close and constant link between the *École des Arts* and artisans of the country, [...] creating and maintaining an economic movement to indigenous artists and artisans' benefit, [...] looking for, noting, and fixing all objects, works of art, interesting monuments, practices, traditions, and evolution of arts from Cambodia, [and] lastly, ensuring the conservation of those arts, by teaching, photography, casting, if need be publication, local exhibition, or contribution to exhibitions abroad.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, the *Direction des Arts* was put in charge of the “protection and control of Cambodian artists and artisans.”<sup>13</sup> When students from the *École des Arts* became artisans, they were given the opportunity to enter one of the *Corporations* (founded in 1920) and thus to benefit from the commissions and commercial opportunities it offered. In order to further regulate and control artistic production, Groslier also envisaged using the *Direction des Arts* as the centre for orders and deliveries, as well as a place to sell copied and original art objects in the *Office des ventes* (Sales office). Additionally, direct contact between clients and artisans would be limited in order to reduce the risk that artistic creation would be influenced and “distorted” by the clients’ tastes, which might not properly understand or adequately respect the Khmer “tradition.” The *Direction des Arts* not only regulated supply and demand, but also guaranteed the so-called authenticity of the merchandise (Groslier 1918c, 261). Although this project was more ambitious than the initial one, it was accepted without restrictions by the *Gouverneur général* and the *Résident supérieur*. In 1917 both gave Groslier a *carte blanche* for its realization.

## **Institutionalizing Groslier’s Vision: A Museum and an Art School**

### ***Collect, classify, protect, and display: A museum for Cambodia’s antiquity***

In his report for the *Gouvernement général* in 1917, George Groslier underscored the need to replace the *Musée Khmer*, a *dépôt-musée* (museum depot) created in

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<sup>11</sup> Groslier was director of the *École des Arts* from 1920 to 1922 and curator of the *Musée Albert Sarraut* from 1920 to 1944.

<sup>12</sup> Royal Ordinance of 31 December 1919, art. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Decree by the *Gouverneur général de l’Indochine*, August 9, 1922, formalizing the *Service des Arts*.



1905, with a new museum. A brief history of this first museum is required in order to understand why Groslier felt that it had to be replaced.

### Historical context

When it first became an important part of the Indochinese Union, initially Cambodia was neglected by the French colonial administration, which focused on the more geographically auspicious territories of Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina. Before 1907 and the retrocession of the three provinces of Battambang, Sisophon, and Siem Reap (which had been incorporated into Siam in 1794), Cambodia was used as a buffer state between Cochinchina and Siam, which was under British influence. This retrocession had a strong symbolic impact, since Angkor, capital of the ancient Khmer Empire that once ruled the region, now fell under the control of the French colonial government. From that moment, Cambodia acquired specific importance in the eyes of both scientists and the colonial government who were increasingly focusing their efforts on developing this “heritage” of antiquity as a showcase for France’s cultural action in Indochina.

The cultural field has always been a major battleground for political action and competition between European powers, notably abroad and during the era of colonial competition. Cultural influence was often used as a means of establishing political influence over other countries, and cultural actions were seen as a form of diplomatic action. During the colonial period, France, Great Britain, and the Netherlands competed in South and Southeast Asia through scientific expeditions, the creation of scientific societies and museums, and through restoration campaigns. Particularly, in Cambodia the French colonial government wanted to demonstrate that it was worthy of the *patrimoine* (heritage) placed under its protection, especially while its British and Dutch neighbours were promoting and improving the heritage of India and the Dutch East Indies. But as Baudoin, the *Résident supérieur du Cambodge*, confirmed in 1917, France also wanted to restore Cambodia’s cultural identity and sense of its own regional importance within the Indochinese Union in order to protect it from the “corrupting influence” of neighbouring countries: “You know the importance I attach to the conservation and the renovation of Khmer art, which I consider [as] being the only means of preserving for Cambodia a personality of its own.”<sup>14</sup>

European researchers were interested in Southeast Asian artistic heritage even before the nineteenth century. Scientific explorative missions from Europe usually returned home with artworks that were intended to enrich museum collections in the colonial mother countries.<sup>15</sup> The idea soon developed of displaying the pieces from

<sup>14</sup> Baudoin, François-Marius, *Résident supérieur du Cambodge*, in a letter to all *Résidents*, July 13, 1917, N.A.C. (R.S.C.), file n° 15200.

<sup>15</sup> In 1866 the scientific *Mission d’exploration du Mékong* led by Ernest Doudart de Lagrée arrived and brought plaster casts and several original Khmer art pieces back to France. These were

these expeditions in the colonized Asian countries themselves. Under this new impetus, several museum projects took shape within the Indochinese Union as well as in different European colonies in the area (Delobel 2005).<sup>16</sup> Europeans, of course, conceived these projects, mostly colonial civil servants who were a class of foreigner that had shown an interest in the study of the history, languages, and arts of Indochina since the nineteenth century. Thanks to the initiative of an official institution, the first museum was created in Indochina. Founded in 1898 by the French colonial government, the *Mission Archéologique Permanente de l'Indochine*<sup>17</sup> (Permanent archaeological mission of Indochina) was responsible for studying and preserving Indochina's religious, written, architectural, and archaeological heritage. Converted in 1900 into the *École française d'Extrême-Orient* (French School of Asian Studies, EFEO),<sup>18</sup> this institution had many tasks, one of the most important of which was to create a museum dedicated to the study, the preservation, and the display of arts from Indochina. The museum of the EFEO was founded in 1901 in Saigon (in the province of Cochinchina), the administrative capital of the Indochinese Union. Named the *Musée de l'Indo-Chine*, it not only united and displayed pieces from different cultures on the Indochinese peninsula but also those from other countries in the larger Asian context (e.g. India, China, Indonesia). In 1902, when the capital was transferred to Hanoi (in the province of Tonkin), most of the museum collections also migrated to the new capital. If the idea of a unique museum representing all of Indochina seemed justified in Saigon because of its central position, the installation in Hanoi, a remote capital, was by no means unanimously accepted. Moreover, after 1903 the museum encountered great difficulties. At the insistence of several influential personalities and the determination of the *Résident supérieur*, Jules Morel, the EFEO was finally convinced of the need to create local museums in each of the Indochinese territories. This is how the *Musée Khmer* was created in Phnom Penh in 1905.

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displayed at the 1867 *Exposition Universelle* (World's Fair) and the *Exposition permanente des colonies*. A few years later, Louis Delaporte (1842–1925) asked the French government permission to undertake a mission to Angkor. From this mission he brought plaster casts, sculptures, and architectural pieces back for display outside Paris in the Compiègne castle and later at the Trocadéro museum where they formed the collection of the *Musée indo-chinois* (cf. Falser 2013). In 1887–1888 the architect Lucien Fourmureau brought many drawings, plans, and sections of Khmer temples, as well as casts and original pieces back from his mission. These plaster casts and drawings served as the basis for future “Khmer pavilions” in colonial and universal exhibitions from 1889 until 1937. See Falser 2014b, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Some examples of the museums created in Southeast Asia by colonial powers include: Great Britain in Calcutta by the Asiatic Society on February 2, 1914, in Madras by the Madras Society Library in 1851, and in Colombo in 1877 from a collection united by the Royal Asiatic Society in Colombo since 1847. Museums were also created by the Netherlands: the Batavia Society for Arts and Science united artworks and opened a museum in 1868 in Batavia (now Jakarta).

<sup>17</sup> Decree by the *Gouverneur général* of December 15, 1898.

<sup>18</sup> EFEO's organization decree, February 26, 1901. *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient (BEFEO)* 1 (1901): 289.

### A precedent: the *Musée Khmer* (1905)

The decree of August 17, 1905 created the *Section des antiquités khmères du Musée de l'Indo-Chine* (Khmer antiquities section of the Museum of Indo-China)—an institution that was responsible for the centralizing of all ancient artefacts found in Cambodia and deemed untenable in situ.<sup>19</sup> Placed under the EFEO's scientific control, it functioned as a local branch in the chain of the Indochinese museums. Henri Parmentier, chief of the Archaeological service of the EFEO, was appointed its curator<sup>20</sup> and was supported by an assistant curator who was chosen from among the civil servants in Indochina's Phnom Penh-based colonial administration.

To understand why George Groslier and the colonial government wanted to replace this museum in 1917, we must first investigate the problems that the *Musée* had encountered since its foundation. Due to a lack of space it was first installed within the confines of the Royal Palace. King Sisowath (r. 1904–1927) placed part of the Silver Pagoda galleries at the EFEO's disposal, as well as a pavilion located in the palace courtyard. This is where the art pieces were stored for several months until the construction of an appropriate building was effected in 1907. The new building, designed by Mr. Khuon, the director of building constructions inside the palace,<sup>21</sup> was built on the Phnom Penh High School site located to the north of the city (Fig. 2). Construction started in March 1908 and was finalized in February 1909. This project was criticized by George Groslier (Necoli 1921b), among others, for its building plan, and it was felt that the small size of the area did not give visitors enough room to view the artworks properly and would lead to a very rapid overload of the museum (Fig. 3).

Groslier also denounced the location choice for the museum as too far from the city centre and too difficult to access within a school site. The first collection of the museum consisted of Khmer pieces from the former museum in Saigon. Thanks to the donations made by collectors and the pieces sent by *Résidents* of the provinces, it grew rapidly. Even King Sisowath donated part of his jewellery collection. It was soon clear that the *Musée Khmer* was too small to accommodate all the collections, and constructing a new building was quickly decided upon. In taking up this new project George Groslier did not simply seek to create a new building, he also wanted to redefine its role in the preservation of art objects.

<sup>19</sup> Decree of August 17, 1905, see *BEFEO* 5 (1905): 508–9.

<sup>20</sup> Decree of August 17, 1905, art. 4.

<sup>21</sup> M. Khuon, the *Directeur des travaux du Palais*, worked from a project designed previously by Henri Parmentier, see *BEFEO* 7 (1907): 422.

**Fig. 2** The Musée Khmer, after 1909 (EFEO)



**Fig. 3** The Musée Khmer, interior view, after 1909 (EFEO)



### **1919: the Musée Albert Sarraut**

The museum was the keystone of Groslier's plan and civilizing vision and thus it held a privileged place within the *Service des Arts*. It was conceived of not only as a place to preserve ancient art pieces and display them for a wider audience, but also as the “keeper of the tradition.” In Groslier's system the museum guaranteed the authenticity on which the teachers, who were responsible for the education of the new artisans, must rely. In 1919 the museum planned by Groslier was finally realized, first as the *Musée du Cambodge*, and later the *Musée Albert Sarraut*.



**Fig. 4** Inauguration of the *Musée du Cambodge*. Inaugural speech of the *Résident supérieur* Baudoin, February 13, 1920 (National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Penh)

It was inaugurated in February 1920 and opened its doors to the public in April of the same year<sup>22</sup> (Fig. 4).

The building reflected Groslier’s vision of a pure “Khmer style” (Fig. 5) in its floor and elevation plans, which were based on traditional Khmer architecture.<sup>23</sup> As Groslier stated in 1917: “The plan that I propose is a plan from Prah Vihear and parts of Angkor Vat; it was slightly modified for its new destination” (Groslier 1917). Groslier also chose the craftsmen for the building, which measured 66 metres in length and 38 metres in maximal height at its central spire (Necoli 1921c). Committed to the idea that only Khmer craftsmen could execute traditional Khmer patterns, Groslier made sure that only native Cambodians worked on the decoration (Necoli 1921c; Groslier 1931). Learning from the failures of the *Musée Khmer*, he created a museum whose exhibition surface (originally 550 square metres) could be extended to accommodate future demands.

He also chose, along with the colonial authorities, a central location in the city for the new museum. Placed at the corner of Ohier’s street, north of the Royal Palace, the museum was situated in a dominant spot and was therefore accessible to

<sup>22</sup> Foundation decree by the *Gouverneur général*, creating the *Musée du Cambodge*, August 12, 1919, renamed Musée Albert Sarraut by Royal Ordinance, April 10, 1920.

<sup>23</sup> Although those plans could not be located during our research, nevertheless, many sources attribute them to George Groslier.



**Fig. 5** The Musée Albert Sarraut. General view from northeast, after 1923 (National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Penh)

all visitors. The decree of August 12, 1919 outlined its function as a “museum of art, history, and archaeology,” whose purpose was to “centralize all ancient objects that present artistic and documentary nature.” Placed under the control of the EFEO, it was designed to “receive the materials found due to excavation or any work on Cambodia territory, and whose conservation would be of artistic, historical, or ethnographic interest, or would not be properly maintained on the original site.”<sup>24</sup> The *Musée Albert Sarraut* was a place for preservation and display, it was to receive art objects from all over Cambodia and thus prevent them from being scattered across the museums of the French *métropole* or of other colonies in the area. Conforming to the remit to save Khmer art from extinction, Groslier declared the museum a “vast rescue ship” (*un vaste vaisseau de sauvetage*) (Groslier 1931, 12).

The core of the archaeological collections came from the former *Musée Khmer*, which were donated by EFEO and transferred in March 1920. From the very beginning the museum largely benefited from donations from the royal collections.<sup>25</sup> Objects sent by several *Résidents* and additional purchases soon increased this core collection. Wishing to display the most complete collection of Khmer art, Groslier also managed to gather many valuable pieces that had been kept previously in Buddhist pagodas in exchange for mentioning the name of the pagoda on the

<sup>24</sup> Decree by the *Gouverneur général*, creating the *Musée du Cambodge*, August 12, 1919.

<sup>25</sup> See: N.A.C. (R.S.C.), file n° 9076.



label and providing in exchange plaster casts or small bronze statues made by *École des Arts*’ students (Groslier 1918e). Groslier also brought pieces back from his numerous campaigns in the Indo-Chinese provinces and managed to display some of the most important pieces from the *Conservation d’Angkor*. His insistence on collecting the country’s most beautiful Khmer art in the *Musée Albert Sarraut* was not to everyone’s liking, particularly those who had hoped to see a museum located near the Angkor temples (Delobel 2005; Abbe 2012). As the collection grew, Groslier began to think about an extension and redevelopment of the museum, and as a result the display surface was extended in 1923, 1928, 1930, and in 1938.

The museum was not just a place for the conservation and display of Khmer art pieces, but also a scientific resource for artisans and researchers and an economical enterprise serving the Protectorate. As an art “conservatory,” Groslier saw it as the “guardian” of the tradition and “purity” of Khmer art. In this role the museum was meant as a tool for apprentice artisans who were encouraged to find inspiration in the collection and were trained through direct contact with the pieces. Through the display of these collections Groslier also sought to emphasize the importance of French colonial action in Cambodia. He wanted the museum to be an emblem of French intervention in the cultural field. In his view, the museum had to be a showcase for “the renaissance of a country, revealing the protective action from France” to visitors (Groslier 1918e) as well as a place of study for researchers. There were several working tools available for public use; one was a library that by 1924 housed 651 books about Cambodia and its adjoining countries. There was also a photographic laboratory and a plaster cast workshop at the museum; both were exceptional in Indochina at the time. This system was used not only for scientific purposes; it also had an economic aim: the plaster casts, photographs, postcards, and pieces made by artisans from the *Corporations* were sold in the museum shop (the *Office des Ventes*) (Figs. 6 and 7).

The production belonged to the *Direction des Arts* and was an important element of a wider propaganda campaign (Abbe 2011). Foreign visitors spent money for the entrance ticket, but Groslier hoped that they would also purchase souvenirs and reproductions or photographs of the pieces they saw at the museum to take home. Groslier’s plan was to encourage the tourists (who would no doubt be impressed by the artisans’ work) who visited the *École des Arts* nearby, to also buy items at the *Office des Ventes* in the museum.<sup>26</sup> He also believed that the presence of this museum would encourage visitors to stay a bit longer in the capital and would thus boost all the other industries in the city. Indeed, after it opened the museum drew large numbers of visitors. It benefited from the flow of tourists travelling to Angkor who also came to Phnom Penh to visit the Royal Palace. Examining the number of visitors recorded by the museum’s administration throughout this period,

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<sup>26</sup> As a reference, we can give some figures for the items sold at the *Office des Ventes*, including commands: 68 in 1918, 360 in 1920, 1,479 in 1922, 2,273 in 1924, 6,937 in 1926, 4,434 in 1930 (Groslier 1931, 24).



**Fig. 6** The *Office des Ventes*, inside the museum, September 1923 (National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Penh)



**Fig. 7** The *Office des Ventes*, inside the museum. No date (1930s?) (National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Penh)



it is clear that it enjoyed a steady stream of European visitors as well as an increased number of Asian visitors.

Although Groslier was also supervisor of the *Direction des Arts*, he remained at the helm of the *Musée Albert Sarraut* until 1944 when he passed his duties on to Pierre Dupont. During his two decades guiding the museum, Groslier enriched its collections and publicized Khmer heritage both in Indochina and abroad. He also remained at his post and continued with his duties during World War II and the museum’s reduced activity. During the war he tried to gather together in the museum all the pieces kept in various depots around the country and, in 1941, he even acquired new, interesting pieces from the Vat Po Veal pagoda in Battambang before the province fell back under Siam’s rule. Even when the political situation intensified Groslier never lost sight of his goal. In December 1941 he was handling a difficult conflict situation, but nevertheless stood firm on everything that concerned the museum. For example, after the requisitioning of the *École professionnelle* by Japanese troops, the local Chief of Education asked Groslier to clear a museum wing in order to relocate the school’s dormitories. Groslier refused this request because it endangered the museum’s night-watch schedule. Instead, with the agreement of the EFEO’s director, he proposed relocating the dormitories of the *École professionnelle* in part of the *École des Arts*’ premises and to move the latter under the museum’s verandas (Groslier 1942). Groslier did not leave Cambodia after his retirement in 1944. He was arrested in 1945 by the *Kampetai* (the military Japanese police) and died on May 8, 1945 shortly after his interrogation. After Groslier’s departure, the head of the museum succeeded to a string of French curators: Pierre Dupont, Solange Thierry, Jean Boisselier, and Madeleine Giteau (1956–1966). It was only in 1966 that the first Cambodian curator, Chea Thay Seng, was given charge of the museum.

## ***The École des Arts***

### **Art teaching: George Groslier’s vision**

As he detailed in 1922, the *École des Arts* answered George Groslier’s vision for instruction in Khmer arts: “The aim of this school is to place models of classical Khmer art in front of the eyes of the students, and to have them reproduced. It is out of the question, of course, to have them copy servilely and perpetually as models of Angkorian art, but to provide the student with elements of work, identifying as much as possible with his atavistic mentality, and thus to prepare contemporary art, in the light of classical art” (Groslier 1922). One of Groslier’s and the colonial administration’s main concerns when creating the *École des Arts*, was to how to encourage and allow Cambodian craftsmen to renew their artistic past, which had been, according to Groslier, contested and monopolized by the neighbouring countries. Furthermore, art was to be used as a calling card for Cambodia and Indochina. In a report to the *Gouverneur général* in 1919, Baudoin described the



**Fig. 8** *École des Arts cambodgiens*, traditional mask making. Application of cut leathers on the mask, October 1930 (National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Penh)

*École des Arts* as “the innovation meant to give all its glitter back to Khmer art’s ancient splendour” (Baudoin 1919). Groslier wished to recreate and teach a “national art” that was free of Siamese and Chinese influences. In order to give the students “classical” instruction in revived and forgotten techniques, he proposed an exclusively Cambodian programme for the new school of art.<sup>27</sup> He banished all Western influences in pedagogy, techniques, and models in an attempt to realize his goal to “make nothing but Cambodian art, and to make it in Cambodia” (Groslier 1918c, 253). In order to achieve this he rejected technical innovations and recommended that all the school’s teachers be Cambodian (Fig. 8). Thus, the first teachers and foremen were confirmed craftsmen (some of them from the Royal Palace) and placed at the school’s disposal by King Sisowath (Groslier 1931, 14).

The school was not only meant to revive traditions, but also to boost artistic creation by training new craftsmen. In his reports, Groslier had identified the lack of orders as one of the main causes for Khmer art’s decline, and pointed out the necessity of finding new opportunities for craftsmen. To revive Khmer arts it was

<sup>27</sup> We must remember that although the teaching team was Cambodian, the direction of the school and the choice of programme were entirely in the hands of George Groslier’s French team. Art created under these auspices was a sort of “ideal” and encouraged a stereotyped Khmer art that corresponded to a Western vision of it. For a complete study of the influence of George Groslier’s programme of artistic creation in Cambodia, see Muan 2001.

necessary not only to train artisans but also to find new markets and to create an organization that would manage the selling of their products. As a result, the *École des Arts* was closely linked with the *Corporations cambodgiennes*. This institution was in charge of the production and selling of the artefacts, and it gathered together craftsmen and former students from the *École des Arts* (Fig. 9). Tourists and museum visitors were soon identified as new potential customers and the *Office des ventes* was stationed inside the museum to sell products from the *Corporations*.

The School of Arts played an economic role in Groslier’s system. During the opening ceremony of the new school on April 23, 1920, Groslier laid out its economic operations. He underlined the low cost of those traditional industries that “do not get a piaster out of the country”, but result in “a perpetual receipt of foreign funds.” Wood, silver, raw materials used for artistic production all came from the country and thus it was deemed unnecessary to buy anything from abroad. To Groslier “the only value of artistic goods lodges in the fingers and brain of the craftsmen.” To reap all the rewards, the French Protectorate would have to invest in “School and Museum maintenance, that’s all” (Groslier 1920, 103).

Baudoin took Groslier’s part in this issue and declared on the same occasion that “Unlimited opportunities will be brought by tourists’ purchases, sales from the



**Fig. 9** Advertising for the *Corporations cambodgiennes*. No date (National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Penh)

exhibitions, development of local constructions and productions in ancient style: pagodas, palace, bridges, furniture, fabrics etc [...], by the setting up of a staff including architects and artists in charge of the study, the conservation, the supervision of this rich and considerable archaeological domain of Cambodia, that still waits, except for Angkor group, a methodical exploration and the organization of spreading and permanent conservation” (Baudoin 1920, 94).

Another economic advantage of the School of Arts was that it offered an inexpensive and very effective workforce. This workforce was required for the construction and decoration works at the museum, for the making of showcases and pedestals, for the restoration of some museum art pieces, and also for numerous casts and stamps made on behalf of the EFEO. Furthermore, during their training many students from the *École des Arts* also worked for the Protectorate, the king, or the religious authorities. In the early 1930s, for example, students from the school were commissioned to create the murals of Saravan Pagoda (Silice 1933).

### **The *École des Arts*: history and functioning**

There can be no doubt that creating a new school of art in Phnom Penh was a priority for the Gouverneur general, Albert Sarraut, when he called on George Groslier in Indochina. The situation of the arts was a growing concern for the colonial authorities who wanted to initiate a reform in art teaching. In 1907 the palace workshops had been transferred to the *Manufacture Royale* (founded in January 1907 by Royal Ordinance), but their craftsmen worked only for the king and for the royal family (Baudoin 1920, 90). On April 17, 1912 the *École royale des Arts décoratifs cambodgiens* (Royal School for Decorative Arts) was created by Royal Ordinance while the *Manufacture Royale* was maintained under the name of *Magasin central*. From that point on productions were accessible to the public and sold in the palace shop (Groslier 1918b); but none of these two institutions was really a school. Furthermore, the low pay drove many of the best craftsmen to leave, leading to a loss of knowledge.

In 1913 it became a matter of urgency for the authorities to reform the *École royale*, and in July 1913 students joined a section of the *École professionnelle*. This “artistic section of the *École professionnelle*” trained mainly cabinetmakers and foundry workers, giving them a technical rather than an artistic education. As Baudoin admitted a few years later, “the result was a distorted production, more harmful than useful to the protection and continuation of local arts. Works were in an obvious state of regression” (Baudoin 1920, 91). In 1915 there were many who wanted to see a separation between art and manual work, notably Charles Gravelle, president of the *Comité cambodgien de la Société d’Angkor*. He lent his support for a school of arts that would preserve artistic traditions from disappearing (Gravelle 1915, 86). Although this project was postponed during wartime, two years later a new project emerged. After the six-month study mission granted by the *Gouverneur général* and the *Résident supérieur*, George Groslier mapped out his new School of Arts. According to the Royal Ordinance of December 14, 1917, the school was

meant to “research, preserve, and protect the artistic traditions of the Khmer people” and was in charge of the formation “of Cambodian craftsmen, by a technical and practical education.”<sup>28</sup> Between 1918 and 1920 Groslier was in charge of the organization of the school and he assumed its direction until 1922 when André Silice was named director. The role of the director was to “ensure (. . .) artistic education of the teachers, (. . .) to organize the workshops, to establish models, and prepare a catalogue for the exhibition rooms,<sup>29</sup> to set courses programme, to watch over the maintaining of inner discipline and to prepare the budget” (Baudoin 1920, 91). In addition, the native staff included an assistant manager, an accountant, a secretary, workshop supervisors, and teachers. The school was placed under the control of the Ministry of Fine Arts and the *Comité de perfectionnement* chaired by the *Résident-Maire* of Phnom Penh. In 1922 the school was linked to the *Instruction publique de l’Indochine*,<sup>30</sup> but remained under the artistic and technical control of the *Direction des Arts* (Groslier 1921a). From January 1, 1918 it was installed in “a shed of the Palace” that had been used as a warehouse for the “processions and celebrations accessories” (Necoli 1921a). The new buildings opened on April 23, 1920 in the same complex as the museum, a configuration that allowed the students to see the artefacts in the museum galleries and to draw inspiration from them directly.

The school included six workshops “corresponding to the arts practised in Cambodia”: jewellery, cabinet making, foundry, wax and clay modelling, weaving, drawing, and architecture (Groslier 1922) (Figs. 10 and 11).

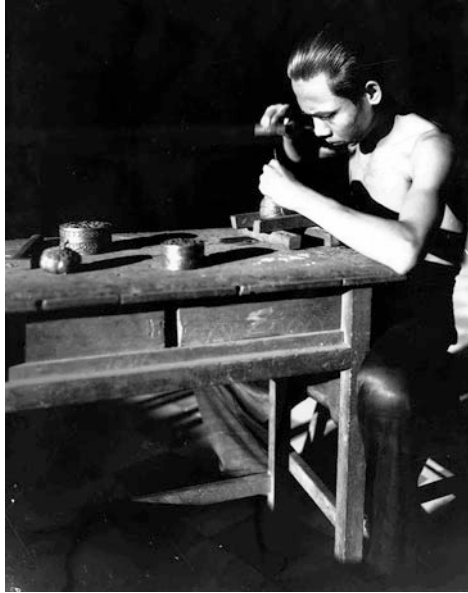
Students had to begin with a three-month training in drawing, which Groslier considered “the alphabet with which the applied arts group the letters” (Groslier 1918c). It is interesting to note that the conditions for admission to the school included knowledge of Khmer language and the traditional stay at the pagoda. According to George Groslier this assisted in the selection and admission of “young people already saturated with tradition and whose Cambodian identity appears unquestionable” (Groslier 1921b).

Although it was located in the *Bloc des Arts* near the museum, the school had its own *musée spécial*, which aimed to present a repertoire of motifs and forms as expressions of contemporary Khmer art. In 1920, in order to decentralize art teaching and allow provinces to benefit from the initiative led in Phnom Penh, two secondary workshops were created in Kompong Chhnang (a ceramic workshop to perpetuate local traditions) and Pursat (marble sculpture workshop near the marble quarry). Although they were independent, these workshops received

<sup>28</sup> Royal ordinance of December 14, 1917 relative to the *École des Arts cambodgiens*.

<sup>29</sup> The third article of the Royal ordinance of December 14, 1917 provided for the creation of exhibition rooms inside the School of Arts.

<sup>30</sup> Decree by the *Gouverneur général de l’Indochine*, August 9, 1922. This decree replaced the Royal ordinance of December 14, 1917 and linked the School of Arts to the *Instruction publique de l’Indochine*.



**Fig. 10** *École des Arts cambodgiens*, apprentice jeweller, chasing. July 1934 (National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Penh)



**Fig. 11** *École des Arts cambodgiens*, modelling and drawing workshop, May 1926 (National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Penh)



teachers and models from the *École des Arts* and were often inspected by its director (Groslier 1931, 16).

The *École des Arts* created by George Groslier was an exception in French Indochina in a period when only two types of teaching coexisted in Indochina, the schools of applied arts (Phnom Penh’s *École des Arts*, Hanoi’s *École professionnelle*, Haiphong’s *École professionnelle*, the schools of Thu Dau Mot, Bien Hoa and Gia Dinh) and Hanoi’s *École des Beaux-Arts*, whose programme was based entirely on the Western model.<sup>31</sup>

In the schools of applied arts, teaching was supposed to take local traditions into consideration and to combine respect for ancient practices and patterns with Western technical innovations. However, it is interesting to observe that the *École des Arts* in Phnom Penh was the only one that did not accept foreign teachers, influences, or models. This particularity is a direct reflection of George Groslier’s belief and his singular vision (that was shared by other French people living and working in Cambodia like Henri Marchal), which diverged from the widespread idea that all Western influences were improvements. At the same time as Victor Tardieu, the founder and first director of Hanoi’s School of Fine Arts, declared, “the study of Antique is absurd, it is as if we began the study of literature with philosophy.” (Silice 1926). George Groslier was fighting for the study of classical ancient Khmer arts.

## Conclusion

George Groslier was both a man of his time and a man with a singular vision. His writings reflected the then widespread—and typically colonial—belief in Khmer decay and in Cambodia’s imminent disappearance, but they also proposed a complete arts renovation programme that was unique in Indochina. Although this initiative corresponded to a strong political purpose (to emphasize French-colonial cultural action in Cambodia, to give Cambodia artistic importance within Indochina, to give Cambodia economic interest, to compete with other European powers on the cultural field etc.) let us also not forget that the French colonial government found in George Groslier a vital cultural broker through which to carry out its policies successfully. Although he was a man of the field and not an academic (like members of the EFEO, for example), he succeeded in imposing his personal vision of ancient and contemporary Khmer arts on the country. For him Khmer arts were seriously endangered and it was the Protectorate’s mission to save them. Groslier’s arts renovation programme materialized in the form of a museum and a school of arts. And the result was that from 1900 to 1917 the vision of what a Khmer museum should be, changed immensely. From a simple depot that was barely open to scholars, under Groslier’s impetus it became one of the main instruments for the

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<sup>31</sup> Compare an overview on the art production in Indochina (André-Pallois 1997).

preservation and knowledge of Khmer heritage. This creation was a key element in the emergence of a wider notion of Khmer cultural identity. The *École des Arts* also answered Groslier's vision and corresponded to the idea he had of Khmer arts and of ancestral knowledge transmission in Cambodia. While highlighting the importance of Khmer artistic heritage and its links with contemporary Cambodia, drawing up legislation to preserve ancient monuments, and using art to introduce Cambodia to the world, George Groslier and the French colonial authorities contributed to the emergence of the notion of "cultural heritage" in this country. And his individual vision to save Khmer culture from degeneration was ultimately institutionalized within the French colonial mission to civilize.

A man with a wide range of skills—draughtsman, painter, architect, photographer, curator, and writer—George Groslier dedicated his life to the renovation and dissemination of Cambodia's artistic heritage. Throughout his work as curator of the museum and director of arts but also through his numerous writings, he tried to share his knowledge of Khmer culture with the world. He was distinguished with several honors in his career. In 1926 he was decorated with the Legion of Honour and the same year received the Duplex Medal of the *Société de Géographie commerciale de Paris* for his life's work. In 1931 he was elected a member of the *Société des Gens de Lettre*, and his book on Angkor won the French Academy Prize.

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