« Decadence » and revival in Cambodian arts: the work of George Groslier (1887-1945).

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Abstract

In 1917, the Gouverneur général de l’Indochine Albert Sarraut, wishing to create a new school of art in Phnom Penh, put the painter George Groslier in charge of a six months study into “the organization of a school of applied arts” in Cambodia. At the end of his mission, in July 1917, George Groslier writes a report «about the situation of arts in Cambodia and the set-up of an organisation likely to keep them intact, and revive those tending to disappear”. This report reaches the conclusion that traditional Khmer arts are disappearing and that the Protectorate must act fast to ensure their conservation. George Groslier advises the Protectorate to create not only a new school of art, but also a new museum and an organisation in charge of selling and advertising local handicrafts, the Direction des Arts (Arts’ Supervision). This proposition is accepted and George Groslier is responsible for carrying it out as early as the end of 1917.

From then on, George Groslier will never stop trying to ‘save’ Khmer arts from ‘decadence’. Mapping out a program of “renovation” of Khmer arts, he will unite the museum, the school of art and the Direction des Arts within the “Service des Arts” (Arts’ Service), within which he will play the leading role.

This paper will examine George Groslier’s discourse about Khmer arts’ supposed “decadence” and their necessary “revival”. Beyond the facts, we will see how, by underlining the importance of the past and its links to contemporary Cambodia, George Groslier’s program might have contributed to establishing a certain notion of “cultural heritage” in Cambodia.
Biographical information
After a first cycle in archaeology and history of art at the École du Louvre and a Masters Degree in History, Gabrielle Abbe is now a Ph.D. candidate at the University Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne, affiliated to the C.H.A.C., Centre d'Histoire de l'Asie contemporaine. Her work focuses on the role and the importance of Khmer arts in the relationships between France and Cambodia in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Publications
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