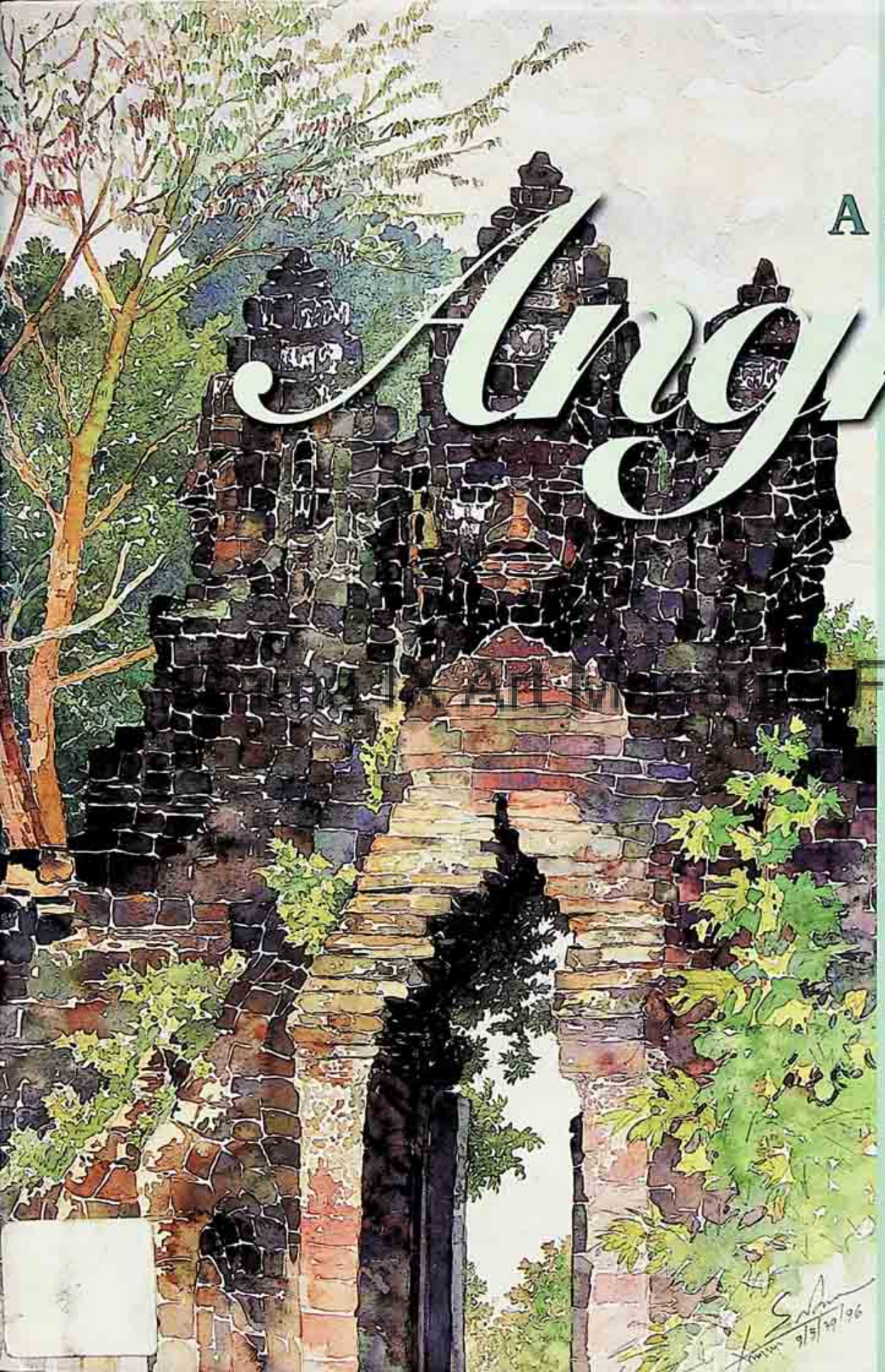

An Artist at Angkor

Somboon Phuangdorkmai

Foundation

With an Introduction by

John Hoskin

Capital of the ancient Khmer Empire, from the 9th to the 15th century, Angkor is one of the world's greatest historical wonders. Standing in majestic isolation and surrounded by the dense tropical vegetation of western Cambodia, the ruined temple city survives as a glorious testament to the achievement of the Khmer civilization. With their grandiose, monumental forms and mass of decorative detail, the fantastic creations of the Kings of Angkor comprise the largest integrated complex of architecture and sculpture ever built. In An Artist at Angkor the beauty of the ruins is seen through the eyes of Somboon Phuangdorkmai, a talented Thai painter whose watercolours and sketches brilliantly evoke the majesty and awe that Angkor continues to inspire.

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The central complex of Angkor Wat (76 x 55 cm).

Previous pages: Banteay Srei, watercolour (75 x 55 cm, detail), sketch of Chau Say Tevoda.

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Jungle vegetation surrounds the evocative ruins of Ta Prohm (75 x 55 cm).

Overleaf: the stone causeway leading to the South Gate of Angkor Thom.

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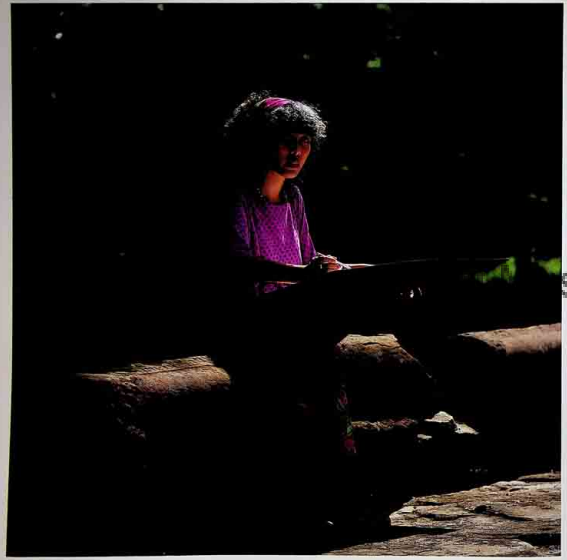


Foreword

The ancient Khmer architects, stonemasons and sculptors who fashioned the majestic monuments of Angkor have recently acquired a modern colleague, Thai artist Somboon Phuangdorkmai. An extremely talented young painter, Khun Somboon has produced a now famous series of watercolours and sketches of the temple ruins. Presented in this book are the finest of her works, sensitive renditions of the fantastic creations of the Kings of Angkor which capture the beauty of ancient forms in a fresh modern style.

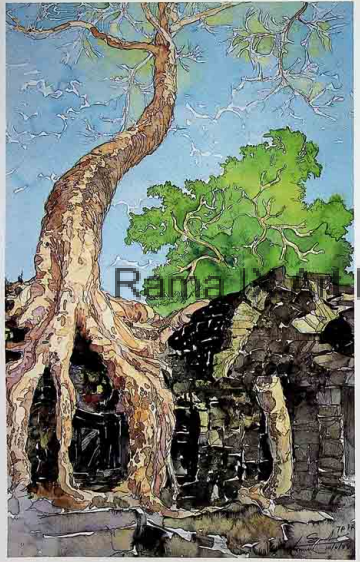
Somboon has already shared her artistic talent with many people through exhibitions, the success of which has led to this permanent record of her achievement. The paintings and sketches which follow not only portray the grandeur of the ancient Khmer civilization, but also, more importantly, symbolize the shared heritage and the unique relationship which exists between the kingdoms of Thailand and Cambodia.

Those who have already visited Angkor will find in this book memories recalled with the vividness of dreams. Those who have yet to see the monuments will undoubtedly find compelling reasons to go and experience their wonder in person. The form and meaning of these stunning sights humble the mind, lift the spirit and touch the soul. In short, as Khun Somboon's marvellous works richly attest, the magic is still there!

H.E. Roland Eng

Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of The Kingdom of Cambodia to The Kingdom of Thailand

seum Bangkok



Untouched by archaeologists, much of Ta Prohm remains in the grip of huge trees (27 x 37 cm).

Facing page: detail of stone gateway between Phimeanakas and the Elephant Terrace.

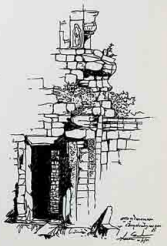
Previous pages: left, the artist at Angkor and, right, detail of stone carving at Ta Som.

An Introduction

There is a popular belief that Angkor was rediscovered in 1860 by French naturalist Henri Mouhot. But although what had been the capital of the ancient Khmer empire was abandoned in the 15th century and left to the ravages of the tropical forest, the city was never lost or forgotten. It remained a site of religious pilgrimage and its existence was known, in fact or rumour, to a long line of European adventurers and missionaries. What Mouhot did achieve, through his posthumously published travel diaries, was to fire the imagination of a Western audience.

But if Mouhot did not strictly rediscover Angkor — and he never made any such claim for himself — his story does highlight the extraordinary power of the ruins to inspire wonder. Although we know far more facts about Angkor today, we still half want to believe in some miraculous discovery. So vast in extent and so evocative in appearance are the monuments that, in a sense, each of us rediscovers Angkor anew and cannot help but marvel at the sight.

Visiting Angkor Wat in 1962, English writer Sacheverell Sitwell recorded: "This is what we think in the first moment of seeing the five towers rising before our eyes; that some being of Pharaonic importance whose very name has been forgotten lived here, that he reigned here, or came here to be buried… Just the approach to Angkor Wat is on a grander scale than anything in the living world."



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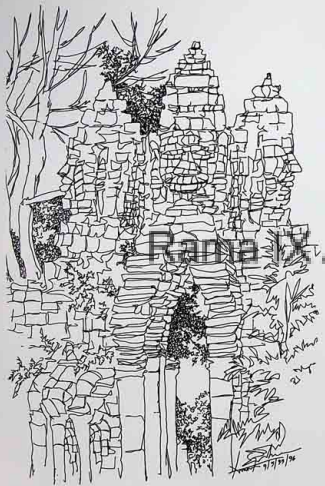

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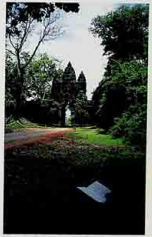
Today, Thai artist Somboon Phuangdorkmai, even though familiar with ancient oriental architecture in her own country, responds with similar amazement. She describes her first impressions of Angkor as, "Wow! I was just wide-eyed from the first moment. I was surprised at the vastness of the site and the huge scale of the monuments. How, I wondered, did man manage to build such marvels in stone?" Her amazement was all the greater for Angkor being a totally unexpected experience — she simply had never planned to visit the ruins.

It was while Somboon was in Phnom Penh to open an exhibition in January, 1994, that a friend told the then 34-year-old artist that she ought to make a side trip to Angkor. She took the advice, expecting to spend just two or three days among the ruins before returning to her studio in Bangkok. But such was the impact of Angkor on the artist's imagination that what was intended as a brief holiday turned into a three-and-a-half-month stay, broken only by two quick trips back to Thailand to replenish stocks of paper and paints. It proved to be a highly productive period yielding more than 100 paintings and three full sketch-books.

"I felt possessed by a desire to capture my feelings," Somboon remarks. "Every day I'd walk and stop and sketch and paint, walk, sketch and paint." The passion Somboon felt for Angkor was reflected in her work, and she painted entirely on location with remarkable speed and complete assurance.

Following a long tradition of travellers who have attempted to capture Angkor on paper — Mouhot had sketched the ruins, as did Louis Delaporte, the official artist attached to the 1860s French Mekong expedition — Somboon became thoroughly immersed in a sense of discovery. The visual impact of the



Above: the artist sketching the North Gate of Angkor Thom.

Facing page: the finished work.