

## The National Museum of Cambodia

The National Museum of Cambodia houses one of the world's greatest collections of Khmer cultural material including sculpture, ceramics and ethnographic objects from the prehistoric, pre-Angkor, Angkor and post-Angkor periods.

The foundation stone for the museum was laid on 15 August 1917. Some two-and-a-half years later, the completed museum was inaugurated during Khmer New Year on 13 April 1920 in the presence of H.M King Sisowath and became known as the Musée du Cambodge in 1919. In 1920, this museum was soon to be officially renamed Musée Albert Sarraut after the then Governor-General of Indochina.

George Groslier (1887-1945), historian, curator and author was the motivating force behind much of the revival of interest in traditional Cambodian arts and crafts, and it was he who designed this quintessential building that is today synonymous with 'traditional Khmer' architecture. It is perhaps better described as a building enlarged from Cambodian temple prototypes seen on ancient bas-reliefs.



The original design of the building was slightly altered in 1924 with extensions that added wings at either end of the eastern façade that made the building even more imposing. The museum building featured the work of many of young Khmer artisans who contributed their talents to the carving of the massive entrance doors and widow shutters and decorated the interior panels with paintings featuring mythological subjects.

Early directors of the museum from the 1920s-1940s contributed greatly to knowledge of the rapidly expanding collection. On current estimates there are 1,877 works of art on display in the museum galleries with a further 12,320 items secured in the basement storeroom. This transposes into a grand total of 14,197 works with a breakdown between works on exhibition (some 15.2%) and those in storage (some 84.8%).

Control of the National Museum and Arts Administration was ceded by the French to the Cambodians on 9 August, 1951 and following Independence in 1953, the then Musée National de Phnom-Penh was the subject of Bilateral accords (7 November 1956). From 1956 to 1966, the museum continued to flourish under the direction of Madeleine Giteau, Conservatrice du Musée National.

1966 marked the appointment of Chea Thay Seng, the first Cambodian Director of the National Museum and Dean of the newly created Department of Archaeology at the Royal University of Fine Arts. This university that from its foundation as the Ecole des Arts Cambodgiens in 1920 was intimately linked with students, artisans and teachers who worked to preserve Cambodian cultural traditions, can still be found to the rear of the museum.

The museum closed between 1975 and 1979, the years of Khmer Rouge control. The museum suffered from neglect during this time and after the liberation of Phnom Penh on 7 January 1979 it was found in disrepair, its roof rotten, collection in disarray and garden overgrown. The Museum was quickly tidied up and reopened to the public on 13 April 1979. Tragically, however, many of

the Museum's employees had lost their lives during the Khmer Rouge regime. The resulting loss of expertise, combined with the deterioration of the Museum building and its collection, have made rehabilitation of the Museum a daunting task.

Despite such obstacles the last decade has seen considerable progress, with generous assistance from individuals, foreign governments and numerous philanthropic organizations. In recent years the Museum has successfully addressed a range of key concerns.

**Address & Information for visitors**

The National Museum of Cambodia is located on Street 13 in central Phnom Penh, next to the Royal Palace. The visitor's entrance to the compound and the admissions ticket booth are at the corner of Streets 13 and 178.