Curating the Return: What Happens after Restitution – A Case Study from Thailand

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Abstract

This paper examines the curatorial strategies employed in the wake of the restitution of two lintels from the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco (AAMSF) to Thailand in 2021. Much of the debate and analysis on restitution focuses on the process itself. However, far less attention has been given to analysing what happens after objects are returned. For example, where are returned objects being displayed? What types of curatorial narratives are being told? Whose voices are being represented and whose voices are absent? This paper provides one such case study and explores the possibilities and potential that restitution may offer. It first analyses the lintels' initial display at the Bangkok National Museum and then moves on to look at the subsequent exhibitions in museums in proximity to the respective temples from which they originally came.

Keywords: restitution, Thailand, Bangkok National Museum, looting, Khmer temples.

Introduction

Cases of restitution have increased dramatically in recent years. Debates in academia and public discourse – in both print and social media – have also intensified (Tythacott and Arvanitis 2014; Hicks 2020; Tythacott and Ardiyansyah 2021).[1] However, much of this coverage focuses on the return itself and processes and events leading up to it. Once the restitution ceremonies are completed and the media spotlight fades, little attention is given to what happens next.[2] Where do the objects end up in their source countries? If in museums, how have curators tackled issues surrounding returned objects, and which narratives have they chosen to tell? Whose voices are heard and what is the role, if any, of the local communities from which the objects originate from?

In an attempt to answer some of these questions, I will focus on one specific case study, namely the return in 2021 of two lintels from the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco (AAMSF) to the Kingdom of Thailand. In doing so, I will analyse the curatorial strategies employed by the Bangkok National Museum (BNM). This involved carrying out interviews with the relevant curator, Disapong Netlomwong (Office of National Museums of Thailand), and Tanongsak Hanwong, an archaeologist and independent academic who has been directly involved in the restitution process.[3] I also visited the exhibitions and temple sites in question in East and Northeast Thailand to analyse the curatorial strategies firsthand.

In contrast to many museums worldwide which choose to slot objects back into their historical or archaeological frameworks with little to no mention of the returns process, Netlomwong instead focused on the object biographies of the lintels and the restitution process itself. In doing so, he did not shy away from certain uncomfortable realities and provided the museum-going public with a detailed account of the pernicious effects of looting and the transnational efforts needed to secure the return of objects.

This curation, however, takes place within a highly politicized space. As Maurizio Peleggi (2017: 85-99) points out, the origins of the BNM are closely linked to the Thai monarchy and the emergence of the modern Thai nation. In its genesis, and its current form, the museum functions very much as an apparatus of the state. Critics of restitution such as James Cuno

(2008) have argued that claims should be resisted due to their overtly nationalistic character and objectives. Peleggi (2002) has also demonstrated the close links between heritage and nationalism in Thailand. To what extent then, is this the case with this example?

A helpful way to approach this issue is provided by Laurajane Smith's concept of "authorized heritage discourse". For Smith, 'heritage can be usefully understood as a subjective political negotiation of identity, place and memory; that it is a "moment" or a process of re/constructing and negotiating cultural and social values and meanings' (2012: 1). How then has Netlomwong, and by extension the BNM, negotiated ideas of identity and place within the exhibition. What are the shortcomings of this authorized heritage discourse and what are its strengths?

As discussed below, one major shortcoming has been the downplaying of the contributions of non-state actors while at the same time spotlighting the central role played by official state heritage bodies such as the Fine Arts Department (FAD), BNM, and regional national museums and historical parks. At no point in the curation process was consideration given to local forms of knowledge or the potential meanings these lintels could have for the communities. These shortcomings aside, this article will argue that the Thai example serves, by and large, to counter arguments such as Cuno's. The relocation of the lintels from Bangkok to the provinces does indicate a growing degree of awareness by state authorities of local issues and concerns. And while more sustained and equitable engagement could have taken place, this article argues that the return of the two lintels illustrates the opportunities that can arise from the restitution process which could be emulated by other countries engaged in successful claims, albeit with the above caveats in mind.[4]

The Lintels and their Return

On 10 February 2021 the AAMSF issued a press release stating it was returning two sandstone lintels to Thailand.[5] On the same day, the US Attorney's Office, Northern District of California, also issued a press release stating that AAMSF had agreed to forfeit and return the two lintels to Thailand.[6] This press release explained that in 2017 the US had been made aware of the illegal exportation from Thailand of these lintels. This followed evidence supplied by the Thai government, by academics, and by local activists indicating that the objects had been looted in the late 1960s from two temples – Prasat Nong Hong in Buriram province (fig. 1), and Prasat Khao Lon in Sa Kaeo province (fig. 2) respectively (see below). This led to the initiation of an investigation by the Department of Homeland Security and the filing of a complaint on 27 October 2020 by the US Department of Justice against AAMSF to forfeit the two lintels. The AAMSF argued in their press release that the complaint was unjustified, stating it had already planned to return the lintels on 22 September 2020 and was in the process of deaccessioning them when it was filed.[7] The objects subsequently arrived in Thailand on 28 May 2021.

Before discussing what happened next, this paper will first provide a short overview of the lintels themselves and their historical and cultural context. It then moves to an account of the restitution process and some key issues regarding the growth of local heritage movements. The article then moves on to an analysis of the exhibitions and the curatorial strategies employed.

Khmer Art in Thailand

The place of Khmer heritage in discourse about historical Thai art is complex and multifaceted, and is usually referred to as belonging to the Lopburi Period or art style, named after the eponymous city that was the centre of Khmer power in Thailand in the eleventh to thirteenth century (Peleggi 2002: 58). A full discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. However, an overview of the salient points is given below to provide context on some of the larger issues at play regarding the return of the two lintels.

Figure 1: Prasat Nong Hong Temple as it stands today. Author's photograph.

Figure 2: Prasat Khao Lon Temple as it stands today. Author's photograph.

The founding of the Khmer Empire in the vicinity of Angkor, in what is today modern Cambodia, is traditionally dated to the year 802 CE (Cœdès 1968: 97-100). At the height of its power, the extent of its empire reached into most of what is today Central and Northeast Thailand, as well as southern and central Vietnam. Khmer presence began to be felt in the southern regions of northeast Thailand from as early as the sixth century. Here it competed with a burgeoning Buddhist culture based along the Chi River system in particular (Murphy 2024a). The earliest temples, such as Prasat Phumphon in Surin province, were built in the seventh century (Siribhadra and Moore 1992: 25). However, direct Khmer political control of the region does not occur until the late-ninth to early-tenth century under the reign of the Khmer King Rājendravarman II (944-968 CE). It was from this period onward that many of the Khmer temples in Northeast Thailand were built.[8] By the eleventh century Central and Eastern Thailand had also fallen under the sway of the Khmer Empire (Hall 1975).

Northeast Thailand is one of the country's six regions.[9] Also known as Isan, it borders Cambodia to the south and Laos to the north and east. In contrast to the rest of the country where the majority language is Thai, it is a culturally diverse region and is home to a number of different ethno-linguistic groups. Its southern provinces of Buriram, Surin, and Si Sa Ket contain considerable Khmer-speaking populations, while large parts of the region overall are ethnically Lao (Premsrirat 2007; Vail 2007). Thai speakers are thus in the minority. Northeast Thailand also stands apart from the rest of the country regarding the scale of surviving Khmer architectural remains. Temples built in laterite, brick, and sandstone dot the landscape.

Meanwhile, Angkor had become the central image of a newly-imagined Khmer National Heritage in 1950s post-independent Cambodia (Keyes 1991: 265). In Thailand, on the other hand, the focus was primarily on monuments associated with the earliest Thai Kingdoms such as Sukhothai and Ayutthaya (Peleggi 2002: 37-46). However, the legacy of Angkor also had a powerful resonance with Thai monarchs past and present (Keyes 1991: 266; Peleggi 2002: 50-4). The kingdom of Ayutthaya received many of its concepts of statecraft from Angkor (Wyatt 1984: 71-2), and both King Mongkut (r. 1851–1868) and his son, Damrong Rajanubhab, recognized the foundational role that it played in Thai history and culture (Keyes 1991: 264-7).

By the 1980s there was also an economic (viz. tourism) incentive for Thais to engage with the Khmer art and archaeology located within the boundaries of their nation state and absorb it into the larger framework of Thai national heritage (Peleggi 2002: 48-50, 61-5). Investing in Khmer monuments was seen as a way of integrating this region into the larger Thai nation-state project. This crystallized around the Khmer temple of Phanom Rung in Buriram province when a restitution dispute broke out between Thailand and the Art Institute Chicago (Keyes 1991). The largely derelict structure was undergoing restoration work under the aegis of H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, the second oldest daughter of the then king of Thailand, Bhumibol Adulyadej (r, 1946–2016), when it came to light that the US museum was in possession of an important lintel from the temple stolen in the 1960s (Keyes 1991). The subsequent controversy and return of this lintel points towards the success of the Thai state in shaping the public consciousness of its citizens towards recognizing the important place of Khmer cultural heritage within Thai historiography and cultural memory.

Returning to the AAMSF case of 2021, both Prasat Khao Lon and Prasat Nong Hong are still extant and have been subject to restoration work over the years under the auspices of the FAD. In this way, they too have been gradually subsumed into the Thai state's authorized heritage discourse regarding Khmer ruins. These temples and their lintels are thus part of a larger continually negotiated heritage of Khmer art in Thailand.

The Act of Looting

A short discussion on the looting of the two lintels is now given herein. Archaeological surveys conducted by the FAD and a publication by a prominent Thai art historian (Diskul 1967) indicate they were still in situ as late as 1960. However, between 1966 and 1968 they went missing, and by 1977 had turned up in the collection of the AAMSF by way of donation from Avery Brundage (Asian Art Museum San Francisco 1977: 162). Brundage (1887–1975), was a Chicago industrialist and major collector of Asian art. In 1957 he agreed to donate his collection to the city of San Francisco on the condition that they built a museum to accommodate it. A new

wing of the de Young Museum of San Francisco was opened in 1966 to accommodate his request. The AAMSF remained at this location until 2003 when it moved to its own premises in the newly renovated Civic Center. Given the origins of the majority of its initial holdings, the AASFM has long been intimately connected with Brundage and his collecting practices.[10]

The FAD was already aware that another lintel from Northeast Thailand that had gone missing in 1964 and had ended up in the Brundage collection (Lefebvre d'Argencé 1966). It came from Prasat Koo Suan Taeng temple, and the Director-General of the FAD at the time, Mr Dhanit Yupho, had written a letter to Brundage in 1967 informing him that he had acquired a smuggled antiquity and asked for its return.[11] Brundage replied soon afterward, expressing his shock. Despite this he did not initially agree to return the lintel. However, he eventually gave the lintel back to the dealer he acquired it from who in turn handed it over to Thai authorities.[12] This is one of the very few instances from this period in which objects were in fact returned.

Ongoing research into smuggling networks in Thailand and Cambodia has recently revealed a fuller picture of the extent of activity, as well as the key players involved (Mackenzie and Davis 2014; Hanwong et al. 2024). It is now clear that the late Douglas Latchford, who at his death in August 2020 was facing federal charges in the US for the key role he played in the looting and trafficking of Southeast-Asian antiquities, was at the heart of this network. Archives and files handed over to US law enforcement agencies and the Cambodian government by his daughter, as well as work carried out in Thailand by Tanongsak Hanwong, indicate that Latchford began his illicit activities in Northeast Thailand in the mid-1960s.[13] He has been connected with the looting of the so-called Prakhon Chai hoard which took place circa 1964 (Hanwong et al. 2024). After this he began to establish a sophisticated network that spanned both Thailand and Cambodia.[14]

Written accounts from this period are unclear about whether Latchford was involved in the looting of the lintels from Prasat Khao Lon, Prasat Nong Hong, Prasat Koo Suan Taeng, and Prasat Phanom Rung. While circumstantial, the evidence does however make this very likely. This is further strengthened by the fact that he donated two lintels to the British Museum in 1971 (acc. nos. 1971,0924.1 and 1971,0924.2). Both are without clear provenance; nor is the British Museum able to furnish export certificates. These artefacts, and three other objects donated by Latchford, are currently the subject of a restitution claim by the Thai government.[15]

Since the 1960s Thailand has been plagued by looting and illicit trafficking of antiquities. Many objects have ended up in museums in the West and are now under investigation by the Thai government Committee on Repatriation of Stolen Artefacts established in 2017 (see below). The two lintels from AAMSF were one of the first welcome success stories in this regard for Thailand. In the four years since their return there have been a string of other major returns to not only Thailand, but also Cambodia and Indonesia.[16]

Grassroots activism and the call for the lintels' return

Like many nation states, Thailand's national museums come under a centralized administrational structure, or more specifically, the Fine Arts Department [Krom Sinlapakon]. The FAD was founded in 1912 and was at first primarily concerned with the protection of Buddhist monuments. In 1926 the department was merged with the Museums Department and Archaeology Department. Today, both latter departments are administered by the FAD, which in turn sits within the Ministry of Culture. The BNM has its origins in the royal collections of King Mongkut (Rama IV, r. 1851-1868) and was opened in 1874 (Peleggi 2017: 87-8). In 1926 it was revamped and named the Bangkok Museum, under the directorship of George Coedès, who worked in close collaboration with Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (Peleggi 2013: 1520-1524). In 1934 it was renamed the Bangkok National Museum. As of today, there are 43 regional national museum branches in existence. Government-run museums thus have a strong presence throughout the country. As Koanantakool notes, 'from the outset [Thai] national museums were designed to be an instrument of cultural nationalism that affirms the civilizing process of the nation'.[17]

However, unlike neighbouring Cambodia where calls for restitution have largely been state-driven initiatives, the situation in Thailand is more complex. Much of the initial impetus

over the past decade has come from grassroots activists and academics as opposed to the BNM or officials in the FAD. It is within this context that we can situate the work of the "Sam-Nuk Sam-Roi Ong [Reminiscing the 300 Buddhas]" (SSO) movement and their role in the return of the lintels. Led by Thai archaeologist and independent scholar, Tanongsak Hanwong, and academic Damrong Leenanurak, this loose grouping of grassroots activists originally organised around the return of the so-called "Prakhon Chai" bronzes.[18] This corpus of seventh- to ninth-century bronzes were looted from the site of Plai Bat II in Buriram province in 1964, and were quickly smuggled abroad (Hanwong et al 2024). The finest pieces ended up in several high-profile museums including AASFM, The Metropolitan Museum of Art New York, Asia Society, New York, and the Kimball Art Museum, Fort Worth Texas amongst others. Leveraging social media, the SSO managed to garner widespread conventional media (print and television) attention within Thailand, and demands steadily grew from the public for the return of these objects (Phanomvan 2021). However, Hanwong revealed that the FAD was reticent at first to get involved. In the end however, Hanwong and the SSO were able to contact high-ranking government officials and make their case. Subsequently, in May 2017 the Ministry of Culture authorized the FAD to begin investigations into Thai antiquities that had potentially been smuggled abroad. The following month, the Thai Prime Minister authorized the establishment of the Committee on Repatriation of Stolen Artefacts, chaired by the Minister of Culture. It was made up of 32 committee members including the Dean of Silpakorn University, the Director General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Director General of Police and so forth. However, Tanongsak Hanwong and Damrong Leenanurak were not initially invited to be members as they were not government officials but after some further negotiations, they were both included.

As there was clear evidence for the looting of the two lintels at the AAMSF, the committee thus decided to pursue them first. Investigations into the "Prakhon Chai" hoard are still ongoing, and the committee has drafted a list of the bronzes and made repatriation requests to various museums.[19] At the time of publication the AAMSF had deaccessioned its four sculptures from this hoard and mounted an exhibition in its gallery discussing them.[20] No other museums to date have made similar announcements in relation to this hoard.

The Bangkok Exhibition

After their return on 28 May 2021, the lintels were displayed at the BNM from June – September 2021 (fig. 3). The exhibition was called *The Return of the Lintels from Prasat Nong Hong and Prasat Khao Lon to Thailand* and took place in the Issara Vinijchai Throne Hall of the museum, a large open plan space used for temporary exhibitions. The exhibition was bilingual, with all texts written in both Thai and English. Instead of following a more traditional curatorial method that would focus on the art historical and archaeological significance and context of the objects, the curator, Disapong Netlomwong, employed an object biography approach in order to take the opportunity to tell the story of how the lintels were returned.[21] Object biographies can be described as the tracing of the various stages in the life of the object (Kopytoff 1986). In his study of the social life things, Arjun Appadurai (1986: 41) opines that 'if we regard some commodities as having "life histories" or "careers" in a meaningful sense, then it becomes useful to look at the distribution of knowledge at various points in their careers'. Thus, as an object passes through different phases, its meaning and function may shift in accordance with the context it finds itself within.

Museums often employ an object biography approach in order to weave narratives that focus on the use of the object in its original context, and how it shifts over time. However, these can at times take the form of ownership histories and can in some cases valorize biographies of individual collectors, while at the same time justifying how objects ended up in a museum (see for example Clarke 2013). Anthropologist Dan Hicks (2020: 153) has critiqued these approaches and refers to such object biographies as 'tired tropes'. Hicks takes exception to their use in masking the violence inherent in objects in many Western museums, in particular those that are the result of various forms of colonial collecting and looting. He points out that oftentimes object biographies are deployed as a type of provenance exercise used to justify a museum's possession of an artefact. For Hicks (2020: 153), 'in the context of loot from

punitive expeditions, any understanding that western curators might create adds up to very little if it does not take the ongoing event of loss and dispossession as its primary focus'. He goes on to argue that what is needed is a process of necrography, which he defines as the writing about objects through death and loss.

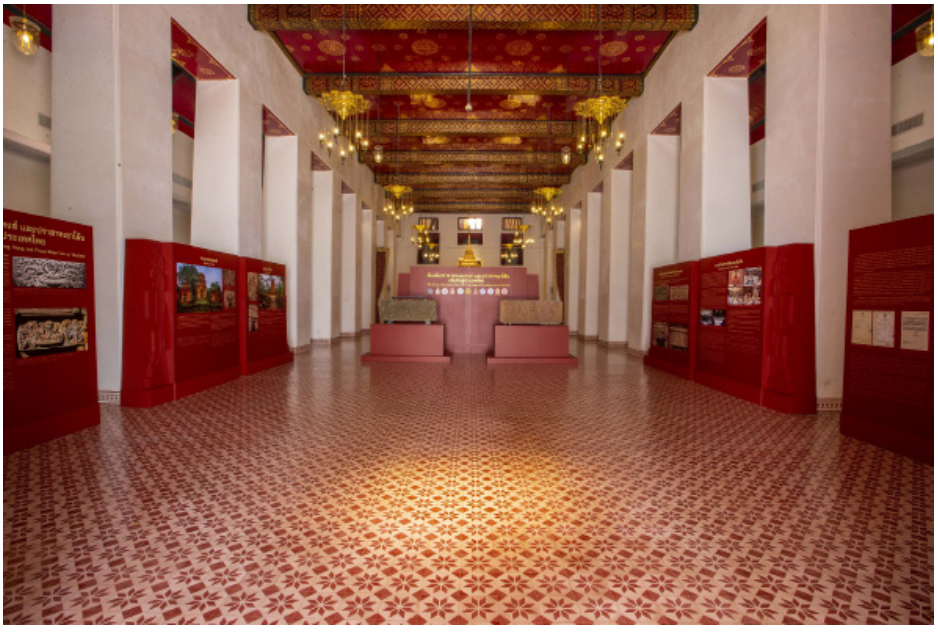

Figure 3: The exhibition in Bangkok National Museum. Courtesy of Disapong Netlomwong.

As will be illustrated below, in the BNM case, Netlomwong begins the exhibition with such an 'event of loss and dispossession'. In his object biography approach, it is the looting and eventual repossession that form the narrative arc. This then is far from a tired trope. And while in his case the moment of plunder is not the result of colonial spoilation, but instead modern looting and illicit trafficking, he in some ways begins to approach the practice of necrography that Hicks advocates. For instance, Netlomwong wished to make audiences, both domestic and international, aware of just how difficult it is to restitute objects, even when definitive evidence is presented to the relevant institutions and law enforcement agencies. When interviewed, he stated that the overall message he wanted to convey is that it is important for everyone to play a role in safeguarding cultural heritage as once it is lost, it can be extremely difficult to recover.[22]

The exhibition was laid out with the lintels placed on plinths at the centre of the hall. They were flanked on either side by three temporary freestanding partition walls (making six in total), upon which the section texts and illustrations were displayed. The intended visitor flow was designed so that one would start at the section text on the left of the hall furthest from the lintels, and then proceed in a clockwise manner. The three section texts on the left provide the historical and archaeological context of the lintels. From here the visitor arrives at the lintels themselves. Progressing onwards to the section texts on the right, the visitor is then presented with the story of the lintels' return. The display technique is straightforward and effective. A brief overview of each section text is now given to provide a clearer and more in-depth analysis of the exhibition context.[23]

The first section of text bears the same name as the exhibition as a whole, 'The Return of the Lintels from Prasat Nong Hong and Prasat Khao Lon to Thailand' (fig. 4). It gives a general introduction to the exhibition, and in its second paragraph introduces the fact that

Thailand has had heritage export laws in place for nearly a century.[24] The text states:

> It was not until 1926, in the reign of King Prajadhipok (Rama VII), that an Act on Export of Antiques and Objects of Art (B.E. 2469) [1926 CE] was promulgated: It is prohibited to export antiques or objects of art out of the Kingdom except when special permission has been granted for each of the objects by the Council or by a committee member assigned to this duty.

The text then lists two more pieces of legislation: the Act on Ancient Monuments, Antiques, Objects of Art and National Museums B.E. 2477 (1934), and the Act on Ancient Monuments, Antiques, Objects of Art and National Museums 1961 (B.E 2504). The message here is unequivocable. For nearly a century now, the removal of antiquities from Thailand has not been permitted without properly obtained export licences from the relevant authorities.

However, the exhibition acknowledges that despite this, looting has taken place at certain times and locations in Thailand. It refers to two previously successful restitution cases (discussed above): the first is a lintel from Prasat Koo Suan Taeng temple, Buriram Province, which was smuggled out of the country in 1964 and subsequently ended up in the collection of Avery Brundage. The second example is the lintel from Prasat Phanom Rung temple which was finally returned in 1988.

Figure 4: The first three section texts of the Bangkok National Museum exhibition. Courtesy of Disapong Netlomwong.

Having introduced the topic and two previous restitution cases, the second and third section texts give details of the two temples from which the current lintels come from. The second panel discusses Prasat Nong Hong temple. After a short description of its geographical location, it states that the temple was first registered as a national monument in the *Royal Gazette* on March 8, 1935. Once again, Netlomwong emphasizes here that laws were in place many decades before the looting occurred. The text then gives a summary of the temple's architectural details, including a description of two lintels extant at the site recorded in 1959 during a survey by the FAD. One of the lintels, 'Yama riding a buffalo', was subsequently looted and ended up in the AAMSF collection. The text panel is supplemented with three photographs: one showing the site today; and more importantly, two images from the 1959

report with the looted lintel still in situ.

The third section text follows on in a similar vein, describing the location of Prasat Khao Lon temple, and how it was first registered in 1935. The text then provides photographic evidence from a book by M.C. Subhadradis Diskul (1967: plate 29), a prominent Thai art historian, showing the lintel in situ.

The historical context and provenance of the two temples and their respective lintels securely established, the exhibition moves on to the objects themselves. Located in the centre of the exhibition, they sit on two waist-high plinths. Here Netlomgwong has resisted the temptation to situate them within an ersatz temple setting, or a setting that subtly evokes their architectural context. There also are no object labels associated with the lintels. Presumably, Netlomwong felt it unnecessary to include these as the viewer would have gained enough requisite information from the section texts by this stage. Instead, displayed against the backdrop of the eleven separate governmental agencies that were involved in the return, he has let their physical presence speak for itself (fig. 5).

Figure 5: The two returned lintels on display at the Bangkok National Museum exhibition. Courtesy of Disapong Netlomwong.

Having viewed the lintels, the visitor moves on to the fourth section in the sequence, "The Discovery of the Lintels in Foreign Museums" (fig. 6). This is located directly to the right of the central display and re-immerses the visitor back into the story of looting. It states that both lintels disappeared around 1966–1968, but their looting was not reported. Later they were found in the catalogue of the AAMSF. Both appear on the same page of the museum's *A Decade of Collecting* publication published ten years later, completely bereft of any provenance information (Asian Art Museum San Francisco 1977: 162). This section places images of the lintels from AAMSF alongside the images of the lintels in situ to clearly illustrate that they are the same objects.

The fifth section, 'The Rally for the Lintels' Return', spans the final two wall partitions. It starts by describing how there was a public outcry in 2016 when a Prakhon Chai bronze was put up for auction, and that following this the Thai public started to discover many more artefacts were on display in museums in Europe and the US. The texts states that by 2017 the outcry had become so vocal that the Ministry of Culture began to investigate. The next

paragraph describes how the ministry met with representatives at the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok, and officers from the Department of Homeland Security. At this meeting, all sides agreed to cooperate, and the FAD handed over a list of 133 suspected artefacts.

However, throughout this entire discussion there is no mention of the SSO and their key role in bringing attention to bear on antiquities smuggling and objects entering into foreign museums. They are finally acknowledged in the third paragraph, which states that the SSO are carrying out research independent of the FAD. It then explains that the Ministry of Culture subsequently "verified" the SSO's facts. After this, the paragraph concludes by stating that The Prime Minister authorized the establishment of a Committee on Repatriation of Stolen Artefacts.

Figure 6: Section texts four and five of the Bangkok National Museum exhibition. Courtesy of Disapong Netlomwong.

The discrepancy in the role of the SSO in the exhibition narrative can be explained in several ways. The BNM exemplifies the authorized heritage discourse of the Thai state. It is seen, and sees itself, as the authoritative voice and custodian of Thailand's past. As Smith (2006: 29) argues, 'one of the consequences of the AHD [authorized heritage discourse] is that it defines who the legitimate spokespersons for the past are'. In this context, it was expedient for the BNM to portray itself to the public as the primary initiator of the restitution process. However, given the extensive social media presence and press coverage of the SSO from 2016 onwards (Phanomvan 2021), it would not be possible to write them out of the narrative either. Instead, the exhibition text subordinates the SSO to a secondary role and paints their work as supportive of the Ministry of Culture and the FAD. The museum thus maintains its primacy in the authorized heritage discourse while at the same time relegating the role played by the SSO.

The next section gives a detailed account of the intergovernmental efforts that took place. It concludes by pointing out that many parties were involved and that while the process was successful overall, it was very time consuming and labour intensive. The curator thus makes a plea for greater care and protection of the nation's heritage to be undertaken by everyone. This section, and the exhibition as a whole, ends by reinforcing this message with a quote from a speech given by the late King Bhumibhol Adulyadej (r. 9 June 1946–13 October 2016) at the opening of the Chao Sam Phraya National Museum on 26 December 1961 (Fine

Arts Department 1974: 25). Given the late king's revered status in Thailand, his words can be seen as the unimpeachable pinnacle of the Thai State's authorized heritage discourse:

> Antiques, objects of art and monuments are all precious and are necessary for historical studies and research. Art and archaeology testifies to past prosperity and greatness of the Thai nation. We must conserve and protect them so that they remain national treasures through time immemorial. It is said that nowadays people are very interested in buying antiques and exporting them overseas. In the future, if we have to study or see antiques or Thai cultural objects of art in a foreign land, it would be sad and shameful indeed. It would be best if we should strive to collect all our antiques and objects of art and build museums to display and protect them.

The exhibition thus ends with a rallying call to the Thai public to protect and safeguard their cultural heritage. However, in its use of the words of late King Bhumibhol Adulyadej, it elevates the issue to a national level while simultaneously negating local voices and epistemologies.

Overall, the exhibition succeeds in giving a clear and exhaustive account of the challenges and difficulties inherent in the restitution of antiquities. That being said, it could be argued that the exhibit is too verbose, as museum surveys have shown that it is doubtful that most visitors would read this amount of text.[25] The public may have been better served if the curator had distilled the sections into a more manageable size. However, given the importance of the topic, the curator should be commended overall in his efforts to convey this complex process to the public at large.

The return to the provinces

When the Bangkok exhibition finished on 30 September 2021 the decision was made to return the lintels to the regions of the respective temples. However, the FAD was reluctant to send them back to the temples themselves as neither has a site museum. Furthermore, FAD conservators were against placing the lintels back in situ on conservation and security grounds. The solution was to display the lintels in museums in close proximity to the sites. The Prasat Nong Hong lintel was thus relocated to Phanom Rung Historical Park, while the Prasat Khao Lon lintel was sent to Sdok Kok Thom Historical Park. Both are government funded, well-protected, and well-maintained historical parks run by the FAD, which play key roles in propagating the authorized heritage discourse of the state.

Prasat Phanom Rung is the largest Khmer temple in northeast Thailand while Sdok Kok Thom is the largest in Eastern Thailand. The decision to move the lintels to these sites was largely pragmatic. As both receive substantial amounts of visitors each year, Netlomwong argued that the exhibitions would have more impact here than at smaller sites. Furthermore, he hoped the displays would also encourage visitors to visit Prasat Khao Lon and Prasat Nong Hong which would most likely not happen otherwise.

Sdok Kok Thom temple is located 24 kilometres to the south of Prasat Khao Lon (approximately 35 minutes by car). In 2017 the FAD completed their restoration of the site and opened the Sdok Kok Thom Historical Park, which also included a small site museum.[26] The site is more famous, however, for an inscription of the same name that was found there over a century ago.[27]

The exhibition of the Prasat Khao Lon lintel at Sdok Kok Thom was an abbreviated version of the display in Bangkok. The main section texts were placed in the portico of the museum, greeting visitors upon their arrival (fig. 7). In contrast to the Bangkok exhibition, the central panel consisted of the section describing Prasat Khao Lon and the photographs of the lintel in situ prior to its looting. This was flanked on the left by a section presenting the timeline of the returns ("Chronology of the Repatriation of the Lintels to Thailand"), and on the right by the work done by the committee ("Outcome of Work by the Committee on Stolen Artefacts"). These provide the visitor with a more focused discussion on the Prasat Khao Lon Lintel itself as opposed to the larger overview of repatriation issues presented at BNM.

The lintel is displayed on a plinth inside the museum in a section dedicated to architectural elements of Khmer temples (fig. 8). The object label provides the standard historical and cultural

context but does not mention anything about the restitution case. However, there is a standee placed to the right of the plinth which bears a copy of the "Certificate of Transfer" from the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency, Department of Homeland Security. This makes it clear in no uncertain terms that this is the returned lintel. However, the certificate is not translated into Thai and its meaning may thus be unclear to some visitors.

Figure 7: The exhibition of the Prasat Khao Lon lintel in the portico of the Sdok Kok Thom museum. Author's photograph.

Figure 8: The Prasat Khao Lon lintel on display inside the Sdok Kok Thom museum with the "Certificate of Transfer" placed to the right. Author's photograph.

The use of the Certificate of Transfer represents an interesting curatorial technique. Prominent governmental logos, high ranking signatories, and official language all indicate that the curator is using it to leverage the voice of the authorized heritage discourse of the Thai state. Concurrently, in this display the local voice is conspicuously absent.

In November 2022 a replica of the lintel was created by the department of architecture – a subsection of the FAD – through the use of 3D scanning.[28] It was placed in situ on the restored monument. This is a novel approach to the conservation and restoration of monuments and is the first attempt by Thai authorities to use this technology in this way.

The oft-cited 1935 text by Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1968), questions the idea of the transference of the aura of an original work of art when it is mechanically reproduced. We may ask what bearing would this have on the Prasat Khao Lon lintel? Would visitors somehow see it as lesser to the original or inauthentic? As Bruno Latour and Adam Lowe (2011) argue, replicas can possess an aura in their own right, particularly when placed in a larger historical and cultural context. Stuart Jeffrey et al. (2021) have also pointed this out in reference to digital copies, or a digitally printed one in this instance.[29]

In the case of Prasat Khao Lon, much of the temple has already been restored by the FAD, and many parts are not original. It seems we need not cling so closely to the original and Benjamin's semi-mystical ideas of aura (Latour and Lowe 2011: 281-8). And of course, visitors can easily access the returned lintel at the Sdok Kok Thom museum.

The addition of the 3D-scanned lintel was thus a fitting solution to legitimate concerns about conservation and security. It provided a good test case for the Department of Architecture to see how suitable this method may be, and whether they should pursue it in other locations and for other monuments too. In this instance, the benefits of returning the lintel are clear. It has allowed Thai heritage professionals to explore new and innovative conservation approaches on their own terms, something that most likely would not be possible had the lintel remained in the US.

By comparison, the Prasat Nong Hong lintel was relocated to Phanom Rung Historical Park. Located in the Buriram province, the FAD started restoration work on the temple in 1971. It was completed in 1988, and the historical park was opened in the same year.[30] The site is 30 kilometres northeast of Prasat Nong Hong as the crow flies, and takes approximately one hour to reach by car.

Displaying the lintel at Prasat Phanom Rung also ties it into the restitution narrative more generally, as the temple is home to another well-known case. The Phra Narai Lintel was returned from the Art Institute Chicago in 1988. This was one of two examples that Netlomwong referred to in the Bangkok exhibition under the section "The return of the lintels from Prasat Nong Hong and Prasat Khao Lon to Thailand". As with the two lintels from AAMSF, the Phra Narai Lintel was stolen sometime in the 1960s, and was acquired by the Art Institute Chicago in 1967. As the restoration of Prasat Phanom Rung neared completion, calls were made in Thailand for this lintel's return. After protracted negotiations and an intense media campaign, they eventually succeeded. Unlike the two from AAMSF, the Phra Narai Lintel was placed back in situ and is still visible today as part of the reconstructed temple. The likely reason for this is that this was the main argument given in demands for its return.

While the rationale for relocating the Prasat Nong Hong lintel to Phanom Rung as outlined above makes sense, space at the host museum is nonetheless limited. The exhibition is placed in the entry hall to the museum and is cramped overall (fig. 9). As with Prasat Khao Lon, the exhibition is a truncated version of the one that took place in Bangkok. The lintel sits on a plinth in the centre of the room with the corresponding object labels and Certificate of Transfer from the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency placed in front of it. Two section texts explaining the historical context of Prasat Nong Hong are placed behind it and the section titled "The Discovery of the Prasat Nong Hong Lintel in Foreign Museums" is placed off to one side. Thus, while the display location overall is far from ideal, the exhibition still manages to convey its main theme to the visitors. Located at the same site as the more famous Phra Narai Lintel, both objects now send a powerful message regarding restitution.

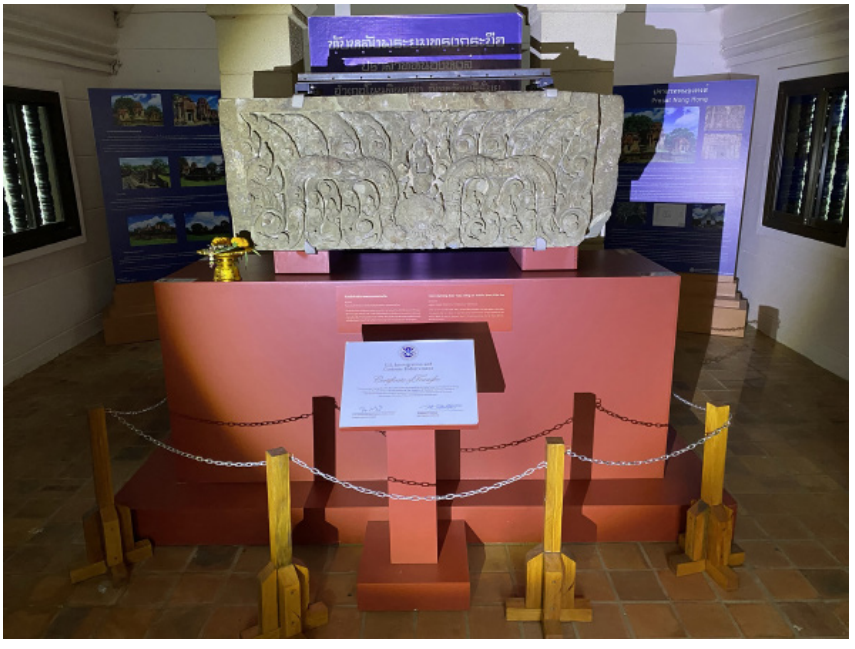

Figure 9: The Prasat Nong Hong Lintel on display inside the Prasat Phanom Rung Museum with the "Certificate of Transfer" placed front centre. Author's photograph.

Conclusion

Many of the debates today surrounding restitution hinge around questions about what will happen upon the return. However, very few studies have broached this in any depth. This article has attempted to begin to fill this lacuna. By focusing on the exhibitions that took place after the return of the two lintels from AAMSF, it has provided some concrete examples of what can and is being done in source countries.

The initial display at BNM by Disapong Netlomwong sought to emphasize the value of heritage, albeit from an authorized heritage discourse provided by the state, and the need for everyone to protect it. He succeeds in doing this by walking the visitor through the various stages of the restitution process from the initial looting to the eventual complexities of their return. He chooses to explore the object biographies of the lintels and does not shy away from the sensitivities of the issue. By employing this approach, his exhibition stands as an effective pedagogic strategy for reaching both Thai and international visitors alike.

The restitution of the lintels also facilitated their return to well-managed historical parks within close proximity of their original temples. Netlomwong retained the overall restitution narrative in these displays. However, their location at two prominent Khmer monuments also allows for an appreciation of them in their wider cultural and geographical landscape. Visitors to the sites of Sdok Kok Thom and Phanom Rung now have the opportunity to also explore the temples of Prasat Khao Lon and Prasat Nong Hong respectively. The placing of a 3D replica lintel at Prasat Khao Lon also allows viewers to understand it in its original architectural context. Furthermore, the replica has allowed the Department of Architecture to begin to experiment with the possibilities of 3D printing technology.

The respective exhibitions are not without their drawbacks, however. On a practical level, the display at Phanom Rung Museum is too cramped – the museum's curator is aware of this issue and is looking for solutions. The most telling drawback is the dominance of the authorized heritage discourse that is employed throughout. This is particularly visible in the emphasis placed on the pre-eminent role of government agencies in both Thailand and the US,

and the downplaying of local activists and academics who played key roles in the restitution. There is also a telling lack of a local voice, particularly in the displays at the historical parks. This is characteristic of the approach of the FAD in general, which often overlooks local heritage groups (Ikeda 2020: 176-7).

Having said this, grounding the return in local epistemologies is still something that could happen in the future, given that the objects are now located close to the temples in question – something that would not be possible if they were still at the AAMSF. If pursued, this could result in more equitable and regionally-grounded narratives that could potentially go beyond the dominant heritage discourse of the Thai nation state.

Coda

In the four years since the AAMSF lintels were sent back to Bangkok, a number of further high-profile returns have occurred, with several more imminent. In 2024 the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York returned 14 bronze sculptures to Cambodia and two to Thailand.[31] One of the latter two, a bronze standing Siva/deified king, is considered one of the finest Khmer bronzes ever cast, and there was considerable controversy regarding its return to Thailand rather than Cambodia.[32] In stark contrast to the 2021 exhibition discussed herein, it was placed on display at the BNM in the "Khmer Art in Thailand" gallery, thus situating it firmly within the historical discourse of Thai art. In 2024 a pilaster from Prasat Phanom Rung at the Art Institute Chicago was also returned.[33] It will be interesting to see if this piece gets placed back in situ or placed in a museum. And finally, four "Prakhon Chai" bronzes from AAMSF will soon be returned. Where and how the above objects get displayed in the future will shed considerable light on the politics of heritage and display in Thailand and beyond.

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Notes

1 From the world of journalism, see for example: Ellen Wong, 'Dynamite Doug', Project Brazen. https://dynamitedoug.com/ accessed 20 June 2023; and Sam Tabachnik 'The global hunt for a cache of stolen Thai treasures runs through Denver', Denver Post 2022. https://www.denverpost.com/2022/12/01/prakhon-chai-bronzes-douglas-latchford-emma-bunker-denver-art-museum/, accessed 3 June 2024.

2 One of the few exceptions is the project Beyond Restitution: Exploring the Story of Cultural Objects After Their Repatriation, which was undertaken by the British Institute of International and Comparative Law, and looks at a number of case studies in this regard. See British Institute of International and Criminal Law, 'Beyond Restitution: Exploring the Story of Cultural Objects After Their Repatriation', British Institute of International and Criminal Law. https://www.biicl.org/projects/beyond-restitution-exploring-the-story-of-cultural-objects-after-their-repatriation?cookiesset=1&ts=1688551702, accessed 5 July 2023.

3 Disapong Netlomwong, interview by author, digital recording,17 September 2022, Bangkok, Thailand; Tanongsak Hanwong, interview by author, digital recording,15 September 2022, Pak Chong, Thailand.

4 I have for example published elsewhere on the generative moments that can arise from restitution. See Murphy (2024b).

[5] Asian Art Museum Press Office, 'Asian Art Museum Cleared to Return Artworks to Thailand as Long Planned', Press Release 2021. https://about.asianart.org/press/asian-art-museum-cleared-to-return-artworks-to-thailand-as-long-planned/, accessed 20 June 2023.

[6] U.S. Attorney's Office, Northern District of California, 'United States Successfully Negotiates the Return of Two Thai Religious Relics Reported Stolen by Thailand and Displayed at San Francisco Asian Art Museum', U.S. Attorney's Office, Northern District of California 2021. https://www.justice.gov/usao-ndca/pr/united-states-successfully-negotiates-return-two-thai-religious-relics-reported-stolen, accessed 20 June 2023.

[7] Asian Art Commission, 'Agenda: Annual Meeting Asian Art Commission and/or Special Executive Committee, Tuesday, September 22, 2020 – 4:00 – 5:00 pm', Asian Art Commision 2020 https://about.asianart.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/09/09-22-20-Commission-Full-Board-Agenda-4pm-FINALv2.pdf, accessed 11 February 2025.

[8] For an overview of the major Khmer temples in Thailand, see Siribhadra and Moore (1992).

[9] The other five are Northern Thailand, Central Thailand, Eastern Thailand, Western Thailand, and Southern Thailand.

[10] This complicated relationship has come under the spotlight in recent years with the revelation that Brundage held racist and anti-Semitic views. See: Artforum, 'Asian Art Museum Contends with Racist Legacy of Patron Avery Brundage', Artforum 2020. https://www.artforum.com/news/asian-art-museum-contends-with-racist-legacy-of-patron-avery-brundage-83266, accessed 20 June 2023.

[11] A facsimile of this letter is displayed in "The Rally for the Lintels' Return" section of the BNM exhibition.

[12] Natasha Reichle, personal communication, 11 February 2025.

[13] Tanongsak Hanwong, interview, 15 September 2022.

[14] Ellen Wong, 'Dynamite Doug', Project Brazen. https://dynamitedoug.com/, accessed 20 June 2023.

[15] Disapong Netlomwong, interview, 17 September 2022. The three objects are known as *sema* stones/Buddhist Boundary markers. Disapong Netlomwong has confirmed to me that the Thai governmental Committee on Repatriation of Stolen Artifacts has submitted a restitution claim. The lintels have yet to be claimed by either the Thai or Cambodian government.

[16] See for example: The Phnom Penh Post, 'Repatriated Artefacts on Display at National Museum', The Phnom Penh Post 2024. https://www.phnompenhpost.com/arts-culture/repatriated-artefacts-on-display-at-national-museum, accessed 12 February 2025; and CNA, 'Indonesian Artefacts Repatriated by the Netherlands Now on Display in Jakarta', CNA 2024. https://www.channelnewsasia.com/watch/indonesian-artefacts-repatriated-netherlands-now-display-jakarta-4831231, accessed 12 February 2025.

[17] Paritta Chalermpow Koanantakool, 'Monastery Museums in Thailand: A Brief History', Gods' Collections. https://www.godscollections.org/case-studies/monastery-museums-in-thailand, accessed 20 June 2023.

[18] Tanongsak Hanwong, interview, 15 September 2022.

[19] Tanongsak Hanwong, interview, 15 September 2022.

[20] *Moving Objects: Learning from Local and Global Communities*, November 15 2024–March 10 2025 (https://exhibitions.asianart.org/exhibitions/moving-objects/). This exhibition took place while this article was in the final stages of production and thus could not be included in the discussion herein.

[21] Disapong Netlomwong, interview, 17 September 2022.

[22] Disapong Netlomwong, interview, 17 September 2022.

[23] The complete exhibition text in Thai and English was kindly provided to me by Disapong Netlomwong.

[24] This law was drafted by George Coedès (Peleggi 2013: 1539).

[25] British Council, 'Transforming Future Museums: International Museum Academy Greece: Developing Exhibitions Toolkit', British Council 2017. https://www.britishcouncil.gr/sites/default/files/ima-developing-exhibitions-toolkit.pdf accessed 20 June 2023.

[26] See http://virtualhistoricalpark.finearts.go.th/prasatsadokkokthom/index.php/en/, accessed 20 June 2023.

[27] For a full discussion on the inscription and its significance see Sak-Humphry and Jenner (2005).

[28] Disapong Netlomwong, personal communication, 11 November 2022.

[29] There is growing academic literature on the issues of digital copies and heritage. See for example the dedicated special issue on the topic in this journal *Museum & Society*, 19 (2) (2021).

[30] See http://virtualhistoricalpark.finearts.go.th/phanomrung/index.php/en/, accessed 20 June 2023.

[31] Metropolitan Museum of Art, 'The Metropolitan Museum of Art Announces the Return of 16 Khmer Sculptures to Cambodia and Thailand', Metropolitan Museum of Art 2023. https://www.metmuseum.org/press-releases/return-of-khmer-works-2023-news, accessed 12 February 2025.

[32] See https://mola.omeka.net/items/show/2236, accessed 12 February 2025.

[33] See Nicolas Revire, 'A Sacred Pilaster Returns Home', Art Institute Chicago 2024. https://www.artic.edu/articles/1151/a-sacred-pilaster-returns-home, accessed 12 February 2025.

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