

Art and Culture in Southeast Asia

I. Course Description

This course is designed to introduce students to the art and culture of Southeast Asia through the use of photographs, objects, videos, and personal narrative. Over the course of two extended stays in Southeast Asia (more than four years cumulatively), the most recent for my dissertation fieldwork from June of 2000 through September of 2002, I have collected a significant number of photographs of temples, festivals, religious rites, sculpture and performances, many of which I used during this course. There are ample publications that depict many of the same aspects of Southeast Asian culture that were discussed throughout this semester. I have included images from publications on a variety of topics with this description.

In addition, these images and narratives can be accompanied by objects, such as hand woven and dyed textiles, or worked brass objects, that can be used as a way of discussing the expression of ideas. For example, the patterns that are embroidered into the tail pieces of jackets worn by Yao women in northern Vietnam express whether or not they are available for marriage. Thus, the object itself becomes the vehicle for passing on information about another culture- with the students being given the key by which to translate the messages hidden within.

During the spring 2003 semester, this mini-course was offered in two third grade art classes per week. Due to scheduling constraints, rather than eight separate units, this course was broken down into four units, each of which were doubled and repeated for two classes. Using the structure already in place, new units could be added easily.

This mini-course can be adjusted to a variety of age groups, with age appropriate activities. For older students, activities would be more in depth studies that touch upon ideas such as personal expression of spirituality, or the role of artists in societies. Conversely, younger students could be engaged in an entrance to the topics through more hands-on activities. For example, before leaving for fieldwork, I was a member of an informal dance troupe that performed Balinese temple dances. As part of that activity, Yun Wen Sung and I performed a Balinese temple dance for elementary students in the area, with an accompanying basic lecture about what the dance meant, and some information about Bali. While I would not be able to put on a full performance this semester (it takes more than an hour to get into the costume), I did show a video of Balinese temple dance being performed, and followed it up with a mini-lesson in how to perform some of the basic dance movements.

II. Mini-Course Goals

The main objective of this course is to familiarize students with the artistic culture of Southeast Asia. This is a tall order in the short period allotted, so this is really just drawing the curtain back on a window that leads to new horizons. Hopefully, at least some of the students will decide to step up to that window to get a better look. More than anything, the goal has been to stimulate both interest and imagination in the students.

To give as broad a scope as possible, while still trying to keep topics intermingled enough to be cohesive and coherent as a group, the course is divided into four groups: monumental art and architecture, textiles, wayang (shadow puppetry), and dance. Each topic does not exclude other forms of artistic expression- and most intertwine several. For example, the wayang unit involves performance, the art of puppet making, as well as an introduction to stories and storytelling in Southeast Asia. This unit also harkens back to the monumental art and architecture section, as the story that is performed in the wayang video- the Ramayana- is the same story depicted on the walls of Angkor Wat.

III Overall Suggestions

This course is highly fluid, and new units can easily be brought in to accompany these units. Any additions should be intergrated into the overall theme as much as possible in order to provide continuity and coherence (which will help in comprehension). For example, the Ramayana images of Angkor Wat re-appear in the wayang unit. Subsequently, some of the textile patterns in the textile unit appear later on the women dancing in the dance unit.

In addition, I brought in a CD of music from a different part of Southeast Asia each week to play in the background as the children worked, and they seemed to enjoy the sounds of the gamelan as the cut and pasted. There is an extensive library of music from Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia, in the Kroch collection at Cornell.

II Biography

Jennifer Foley is a doctoral candidate in the History of Art Department at Cornell University. She has studied language, culture and art technique in China, Vietnam and Cambodia over the course of nearly five years spent living in these countries. She has taught at the kindergarten, middle school, high school and college levels, in a variety of areas, including ESL, art history and political science. She has traveled extensively in Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Burma and Indonesia. She is writing her dissertation about the parallel constructions of the Historical Park at Angkor, the National Museum in Phnom Penh, and the identification of the Khmer people with their art, architecture and artifacts by the French during the colonial period (1863-1954) in Cambodia.

Session One: Angkor What?! Angkor Wat!

In this session we will be looking at Angkor Wat, one of the central temples in the Angkor complex, which is located in Northwestern Cambodia. The complex is considered the largest religious structure ever built, and cumulatively uses more stone than all of the pyramids put together. In addition to giving a brief overview of the Angkor Wat temple, I will also briefly discuss the Bayon temple, which is also part of the Angkor complex.

I will be giving a brief (and simplified!) overview of where it is located, what the temple is built for, and the basic layout. We will look at slides showing what the temple looks like from many different angles, as well as looking at some images of the carved murals inside. I will also read a short passage about the temple from the French naturalist Henri Mouhot, who is one of the first Europeans to write about Angkor Wat.

The art project for this week is for students to draw and construct their own version of the temples they have seen, using construction paper, oaktag, and whatever other materials are available.

Bibliographic reference:

Henri Mouhot, Travels in Siam, Cambodia, Laos, and Annam (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2000 [Orig. 1862])

Suggested additional travel writings from the early period of European contact:

- Louis de Carné, Travels on the Mekong Cambodia, Laos, and Yunnan (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2000 [orig. 1872])
- Francis Garnier, Travels in Cambodia and Part of Laos The Mekong Exploration Commission Report (1866-1868) – Volume I (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1996) Originally published as *Voyage d'Exploration en Indo-Chine*, 1885
- Pierre Loti, A Pilgrimage to Angkor (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1996 [orig. 1912])
- Roxana Waterson, Ed. The Architecture of South-East Asia through Travellers' Eyes (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1998)
- Milton E. Osborne, The French Presence in Cochinchina and Cambodia: Rule and Response (1859-1905) (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1997 [orig. 1969]).

Additional suggested sources:

- David Chandler, A History of Cambodia, Second Edition (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1998).
- Bernard-Philippe Groslier, The Art of Indochina (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1962).
- Vittorio Roveda, Khmer Mythology Secrets of Angkor (Bangkok: River Books, 2000)
- Helen Ibbitson Jessup and Thierry Zephir, Eds. Sculpture of Angkor and Ancient Cambodia Millennium of Glory (Washington: National Gallery of Art; Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux; New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997).
- Albert le Bonheur, Of Gods, Kings, and Men Bas-reliefs of Angkor Wat and Bayon (London: Serindia Publications, 1995).

Images:

I Angkor Wat

- 1) Picture taken of Angkor from outer space. One can spot the barays (reservoirs)- the rectangular black shapes- and the square moat that surrounds Angkor Wat.
- 2-4) A variety of long, aerial angles of the temple.
- 5-7) Long views of the temple.
- 8-13) Closer views of angles of the temples.
- 14-16) Close ups of the Churning of the Milk Ocean bas-relief.
- 17) Detail of King Suryavarman II, the king that built Angkor Wat, from the historical procession bas-relief.
- 18-19) Detail of Ramayana bas-reliefs.

II Bayon

- 20-22) Series of long views of the Bayon.
- 23-24) Close up images of the giant faces that top the Bayon's towers.
- 25) Soldier bas-relief
- 26-29) Details from bas-reliefs of the Tonle Sap (the Great Lake).
- 30) Detail of fighting dogs
- 31) Buddha statue from the Bayon period.

III Other Temples

- 32) Horses
- 33) Statue of Ganesha

Session Two: Storytelling in Words and Pictures

In this session I will be retelling (in a much abridged version) the Indian epic, the Ramayana. This poem (said to be more than 20,000 slokas, or verses) traveled to Southeast Asia, where it has become an integral part of the cultures of Cambodia, Thailand, Burma, Indonesia, and Laos. Versions of this story are performed as dances, plays, and shadow puppet dramas across Southeast Asia, and images of it appear in temples frequently. I will accompany my telling of the story with images of the epic from temples, as well as a video that shows part of a Javanese wayang performance of the epic.

The project for this class will involve each student illustrating the part of the story that most appealed to them.

Video:

Title: The prosperity of Wibisana [videorecording] : a performance of Javanese Wayang Kulit / guest director, A.L. Suwardi.

Published: Portland, Or.: Resonance Media, c1995.

Description: Videorecording
1 videocassette (93 min.) : sd., col. ; 1/2 in.

Publisher Number: RM 105 Resonance Media

Summary: Video presentation of a traditional Javanese shadow play.

Notes: VHS.In Javanese.

Location: Kroch Library Asia A/V

Call Number: PN1978.I5 P766x 1995

Notes: Shelved at Asia Video #1010

There are other video recordings in the Kroch Asia collection at Cornell that could be chosen as well. I showed about fifteen minutes of a video for the class.

Bibliographic references:

Swami Venkatesananda, The Concise Ramayana of Valmiki (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988)

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and sister Nivedita, Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1967)

Ray A. Olsson, The Ramakien A Prose Translation of the Thai Version of the Ramayana (Bangkok: Praepittaya Company, LP, 1968)

Paula Richman, Ed., Many Ramayanas The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991)

Albert B. Lord, The Singer of Tales (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997)

Images:

All the images come from Cambodia bas-reliefs.

- 1) The Death of the Monkey King
- 2) Hanuman
- 3) Fighting monkeys
- 4) Fighting monkeys
- 5) Rama riding on Hanuman's shoulders

Session Three: Weaving the World Together

This session will concentrate on weaving and textile production in Southeast Asia. We will see some examples of embroidery, silk weaving, ikat weaving and batik. I will be bringing in samples of each of these styles and techniques of textile production, including embroidery from the Hmong and Dao of northern Vietnam, silk weaving from Cambodia, ikat weaving and batik from Indonesia. I will begin by showing slides of looms, dye production, as well as the final products, while explaining the basics of textile weaving. After passing around examples, I will ask the class to identify which pieces are embroidered, woven or batiked.

The project for this class will be to create a “fabric pattern” based on the examples we see in class. These patterns can be drawn, or constructed by cutting and pasting, or any other method available to the class.

Bibliographic references:

- Michael Howard, Textiles of Highland Peoples of Northern Vietnam: Mon-Khmer, Hmong-Mien, and Tibeto-Burman (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2002).
- Michael Howard, Textiles of Southeast Asia: An Annotated and Illustrated Bibliography (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1994)
- Mattiebelle Gittenger, Textiles and the Tai experience in Southeast Asia (Washington, D.C.: Textile Museum, 1992)
- Robyn Maxwell, Textiles of Southeast Asia: tradition, trade and transformation (Melbourne: Australia National Gallery; New York: Oxford University Press, 1990)
- I. C. van Hout, Indonesia Weaving between Heaven and Earth: Religious Implications of Bird Motifs on Textiles (Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute, 1999)
- Fiona Kerlogue, Scattered Flowers: Textiles from Jambi, Sumatra (Hull: Centre for South-East Asian Studies, University of Hull, 1996)
- Susan Rodgers, Weaving life, weaving wealth: Sumatran Textiles in transition (Worcester, Massachusetts: Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Art Gallery, College of the Holy Cross, 1995)
- John Gillow, Traditional Indonesian Textiles (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993)
- Susan Conway, Thai Textiles (London: British Museum Press, 1992)
- Kiri Schultz and Ardhendu S. Chatterjee, Profiles of plants used for natural dyeing in Cambodia (Phnom Penh: TRC/JVC, 1997)

Images:

- 1) Thai cotton weaving.
- 2) Processing cotton, Thailand.
- 3) Spinning thread, Thailand.
- 4) Thai cotton weaving.
- 5) Dye production, Thailand.
- 6) Thread dying, Thailand.
- 7) Cambodian silk weaving.

- 8) Small loom, Thailand.
- 9) Ikat weaving, Indonesia.
- 10) Thai woman sitting at her loom, wearing an example of Thai weaving.
- 11) Weaving at a loom, Thailand.
- 12) Weaving at a loom, Thailand.
- 13) Detail of loom, Thailand.
- 14) Textile on loom, Thailand.
- 15) Weaving, Indonesia.
- 16) Thai cotton weaving.
- 17) Thai cotton weaving.
- 18) Thai cotton weaving.
- 19) Woman folding her textiles, Thailand.

Session Four: Dancing the World to Life

The Hindu god, Siva, has an incarnation (the Siva Nataraja, or Lord of the Dance), in which he is said to dance the world into existence. In this session we will watch a short video performance of dancers on the Hindu island of Bali, in Indonesia. I will talk about why the dance looks so different from what the students are probably used to, and will end the class by teaching some of the basic positions and movements.

Video:

Title: Island of temples [videorecording] / directed by Deben Bhattacharya ; produced by Seabourne Enterprises (Film Productions) Ltd.

Published: London : Sussex Tapes ; Guilford, CT : Distributed in the U.S. and Canada by Video-Forum, a division of Jeffrey, Norton Publishers, Inc., [1992?]

Publisher Number: V72542 Audio-Forum

Summary: Filmed in Bali, the Hindu island, this video illustrates the day-to-day life of the islanders, their folk songs, Gamelan orchestras and dance-dramas. The temple is the focal point of each village, where the villagers gather for religious ceremonies as well as for music and dance. The film shows two fairly long extracts from the religious dance-dramas named "Barong" and "Kecak."

Notes: VHS format.

Location: Music Library A/V (Circulation Desk)

Call Number: Videotape 298

Volumes : videocassette

