Michael Falser, *Angkor Wat—A Transcultural History of Heritage Volume 1: Angkor in France. From Plaster Casts to Exhibition Pavilions. Volume 2: Angkor in Cambodia. From Jungle Find to Global Icon*. De Gruyter, 2020, xii + 1150 pp. ISBN: 9783110335729, price: EUR 172.95 (hardcover); 9783110335842, EUR 172.95 (ebook).

It is only fair to start with a disclaimer: I have never visited the legendary Angkor Wat temple complex, yet the very act of observing it through a range of publications will suffice for the time being to imagine its majesty. It is no surprise that many books aim to unearth the secrets and mysteries of this site. Some have been written for the benefit of tourists, while others focus on history, mythology, urban planning, architecture, sculpture, and reliefs. In addition to books, the temple complex has inspired many non-written productions, ranging from documentaries to action films, and of course the famous Tomb Raider video games. To this day, series on Angkor Wat continue to be produced and circulated on different social media platforms. In the written domain, most narration relies on a strictly academic or semi-academic approach. There are, of course, exceptions, such as a small genre of publications linking the temple complex with extra-territorial activity. But if one thing connects the entire discourse, it is a sense of marvel at the proverbial City of God-Kings. Listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site in 1992, Angkor Wat will be there for hundreds of years to come and may require similar lengths of time to understand all its details.

Michael Falser's *Angkor Wat: A Transcultural History of Heritage* is a two-volume, double-columned mammoth publication containing thousands of illustrations and thousands of pages. A result of ten years of research, it offers a distinctive and sophisticated approach to the temple complex. It investigates "the formation of the modern concept of cultural heritage by charting its colonial, postcolonial-nationalist and global trajectories" (p. 5). Such a focus is not surprising considering the site's historiography; long-lived, networked, convoluted, and featuring sources that "overlap with and influence one another" (p. 7). In addition, Angkor Wat displays "visual representations, forms of written discourse and remnants of material on-site and abroad in France and around the world" (p. 7). As Falser explains, at least two approaches have emerged around its study, namely "deploying the methods of (art) history and building archaeology" (p. 7).

We are invited to imagine the textual material Falser has excavated "archeologically". This argument is best quoted in full: "Textual material on Angkor Wat comprises (primarily French but also English and German) travel and expedition literature, ideological writings, political and administrative documents and scientific works, literary expressions and political media that articu-

lated the French *mission civilisatrice* in Indochina, planning materials from the various museum projects and universal and colonial exhibitions in France, the first Cambodian nationalist journals and media, Marxist-communist pamphlets of the Khmer Rouge, and the art historical analyses and conservation reports of Western academics and experts of the French colonial" (p. 7). And, this is only half of it. There are also visual archives: "from sketches, architectural drawings, and photographs to virtual models from the same sources and additional databases" (pp. 7–8). Judged from the way the author combines these lines of evidence, this book must be considered an authoritative *magnum opus*.

It was admiration that sparked the project. One morning in the late 1990s, Falser was sitting on the open rear of a truck with the Cambodian team members of the French Baphuon temple restoration project; "I watched as the temple's majestic towers emerged from the huge trees in the magic matutinal mist that lay over the deep green moat around the site" (p. xi). He was amazed by what he witnessed and felt, and his journeys to various other classic and magnificent sites across Southeast Asia could not take his mind off Angkor Wat. It is indeed quite understandable that the world's most extensive religious construction, built in the early twelfth century by the Khmer King Suryavarman II, has become a cornerstone for the human desire to connect with the past. While no occupying force has ever managed to move the temples from their original lands, a replica was made and exhibited at the 1931 Colonial Exposition in Paris. This was a transcultural and also transformative moment for Angkor Wat, leading to its elevation as a global icon (see Chapter 7).

Falser encourages his readers to investigate history by charting colonial, postcolonial-nationalist, and global spaces. He asserts that the global is not to be understood as an expansive frame to include "the world". Instead, the author embraces a transcultural perspective to question the taxonomies and values built into the discipline of art history since its inception and have often been taken as universal (p. 5). In reality, global history is networked: West-East, North-South, Europe-Asia, regimes to regimes, powers to powers, documents to documents, and so forth. One can narrate the world from anywhere, at any time, and through various perspectives. To illustrate the importance of temporality, we may recall that the Renaissance was about to begin as the forest swallowed up Angkor Wat. And, given that the writing of history is connected with the enthusiasm of individual chroniclers from bygone times, why should a history of Angkor Wat not start in 1296, when the Chinese traveller Zhou Daguan described his visit to the temple complex in no less impressive terms than the account of Henri Mouhot's—the French naturalist and explorer credited for having "discovered Angkor"—centuries later?

We are furthermore invited to ask ourselves the extent to which history can be written on the basis of visual documents. Those interested in this question will not be disappointed. Falser has shown how to write history by interpreting photography. The black and white photography published in French historian Pierre Nora's *Lieux de mémoire* catered to the context of a colonial exhibition. The Asians in these photographs, while featuring on the margins, speak volumes about the Eurocentric hierarchies under which they were produced. At the same time, "an impressive architectural structure, seemingly constructed in stone and clearly identifiable as twelfth-century Angkorian style, frames the scene" (p. 1).

If anything, Angkor Wat was never lost, nor has it ever been abandoned. Falser exposes how and why Mouhot, by the 1860s, formulated his "architectural hymn" for Angkor through a unique blend of French colonialist and missionary rhetoric. This specific case study certainly invites comparisons elsewhere. How did the discourse of architectural admiration take shape transculturally? Part of the answer is provided by Mouhot himself. Angkor Wat's main temple reportedly constituted "a rival to that of Solomon, and erected by some ancient Michael Angelo [sic!]¹—[which] might take an honorable place beside our most beautiful buildings. It is grander than anything left to us by Greece or Rome, and presents a sad contrast to the state of barbarism in which the nation is now plunged" (pp. 57–58).

More than 150 years later, gazing in awe at the grace of Southeast Asia's ancient Hindu civilization in 1999, in the footsteps of Mouhot, Michael Falser has given us his own hymn, one of history, architecture, heritage, and transcultural encounter. Angkor Wat deserves this hymn because, much more than an amusement park for tourists, it constitutes a "university"—in the original sense of the word—of human civilization. But at the end of the day, it may take the world many more centuries to fully appreciate this unique piece of heritage for what it is.

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