



Female torso

On display

Title/Description: Female torso

Born: 1000 - 1100

Object Type: Figure, Fragment

Materials: Limestone

Measurements: h. 450 x w. 330 x d. 160 mm

Accession Number: 276

Historic Period: 11th century

Production Place: Cambodia, Khmer

School/Style: Baphoun style

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

This delicately modelled torso, perhaps from an image of Laksmi, consort of Vishnu, is a product of the mature phase of the ancient Khmer civilisation and most probably dates from the mid eleventh century. Evidence for this is indicated by the style of the *sampot*, or loincloth, which rises high over the hips at the back and is tied with a butterfly-shaped knot at the front. This is typical of sculptures from the Baphuon, a massive 'temple-mountain' which was built at Angkor during the reign of Udayâdityavarman II (1050-66), son and successor of Suryavarman I, to represent the holy Mt Meru, home of the gods and centre of the universe. The Baphuon was dedicated to Shiva and would have housed the royal *linga*, phallic symbol of Shiva, with whom the ruler was identified in the new cult of god-king. This sculpture thus predates by almost one hundred years the completion of Angkor Wat, the most celebrated of the great Khmer temples, which was built during the reign of Suryavarman II (1113-45).

The builders of the Baphuon, although employing sculptors of genius, lacked the engineering skills for a temple on the scale planned, and the loosely packed earth core was eroded by rain and undermined by subsidence from the weight of masonry. It had to be rebuilt at least three times in the short reign of its royal patron (Marchai, 1955: 66-7), which was also plagued by a series of provincial rebellions. In spite of this, the great temple of Baphuon, the 'bronze temple' as it was apparently known, survived well enough to make a profound impression on the Chinese ambassador Zhou Daguan when he visited Angkor, the Khmer capital, in the middle of the thirteenth century (Chou Ta-Kuan, 1992). Today, its badly fissured remains lie just northwest of the Bayon, the central temple of the vast Angkor Thom complex built during the reign of Jayavarman VII (1181-1219). The Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient is soon to recommence reconstruction of the Baphuon, which was started in 1962 but abandoned in 1972 because of political unrest.

This torso is likely to be from a standing figure which adorned the Baphuon or a related temple. Sockets in the shoulders show that arms were formerly attached, though their original position is uncertain. The top of a long pleated skirt is visible above the break (for a complete figure, see Groslier and Arthaud, 1966: pl. 32). Curiously, the absence of limbs and head seems to enhance the impact of what Auboyer (1950: 20) has described as its slender yet opulent proportions and the

subtlety of the modelling of its delicate curves. Jacques (1990) and Rooney (1994) provide further information on Angkor and its temples.

Entry taken from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection 3 volume catalogue, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997).

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

We assume she is a goddess, because she came from a temple. Is she Lakshmi, Hindu goddess of wealth, love and prosperity, or Parvati, the consort of Shiva and the mother of Ganesh? Is she even Hindu, or might she be a Buddhist deity?

It is hard to guess what attitudes her lost arms or legs might be striking, but there is a stillness of posture which implies a standing figure and a generosity of form which, to me at least, suggests that the lost head was smiling at the spectator.

We know very little about this magnificent limestone torso from a temple in Cambodia. What is clear is that she is a superb stone rendering of female beauty. The consummate shaping of the shoulders, breasts and waist is matched by the precise carving of the drapery. The sculpture clearly derives from a distant Indian prototype, but it speaks of the absorption and transformation of Indian ideas and ideals into a totally Cambodian tradition – just as the temple models of India were reimagined and expanded in the incomparable complex of Angkor Wat.

The public collections of the UK are rich in the cultures of the world and there are few traditions which cannot be explored in our museums and galleries. But perhaps the greatest gap in our public collections is the supreme achievements of Cambodian sculpture. They simply cannot be studied and enjoyed within our shores. That makes this object of particular importance. Not only was it a great favourite of Sir Robert Sainsbury when it was part of his private collection, but in its public setting in the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts it represents at the highest level what is effectively a missing chapter in our story of the representation of the human body.

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Neil MacGregor, writer and broadcaster, Former Director, British Museum

Provenance

Formerly in the collection of George Eumorfopoulos, and acquired at the auction of his collection (Sotheby's, 1940: lot 467). An old photograph shows an oval Eumorfopoulos label (now lost) glued to the back, with the inscription Sc.3. The sculpture was thought to have been acquired by Eumorfopoulos from Sydney Burney in the 1930s. There is a distinct possibility that this is one of a number of sculptures which were offered for sale, between 1923 and 1944, at the Grand Hôtel d'Angkor in Siemreap by the Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient. These sales were authorised by the Governor-General of French Indochina, according to decrees of 1923 and 1931. in order to prevent looting of statuary and to provide for collectors and overseas museums good quality pieces which could not be reinstated on the monuments and were not required for French metropolitan museums

or those in Indo-china. Further research in the archives of the E.F.E.O. might lead to a positive identification of this piece and its original date of sale.

Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1940. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
