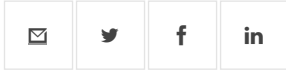


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The transformation of a creative capital



(Image credit: Simon Urwin)



By Simon Urwin 11th April 2023

For centuries, Battambang, Cambodia, was renowned for the arts – until its artists were targeted by the Khmer Rouge. Now, its troubled history is informing its creative spirit.

Article continues below

"You can be a starving artist in Battambang, but you'll never die of hunger," said Theanly Chov, as he began sketching out his latest artwork: an homage to the Cambodian movie posters of the 1960s.

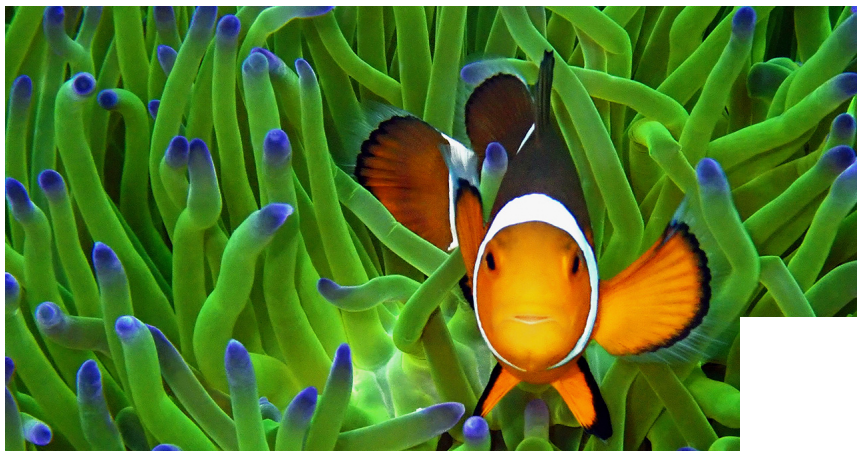
Chov, considered one of Cambodia's leading up-and-coming artists, was explaining why the laid-back riverside city in north-western Cambodia came to have such a long-standing reputation for the arts – renowned across Southeast Asia for its creative endeavours.

"[It's] because the land is incredibly fertile; it's the country's rice bowl. It's how Battambang became a hub for art and culture in the first place: the food was so plentiful that people had time for other things beyond working in the paddies, such as creative expression."

He said that the wealth from the rice trade then allowed the arts to flourish, with plentiful funds to carve the most beautiful Buddhist temples, craft the finest musical instruments and produce high-quality motion pictures. As a result, Cambodia's greatest singers, painters, dancers and musicians all came from Battambang.

"That was until an estimated 90% were murdered by the Khmer Rouge," he added, darkly.

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Theanly Chov's painting of an album cover (right) features a bow-tied Sinn Sisamouth (Credit: Simon Urwin)

The **Khmer Rouge** was the brutal regime led by Marxist dictator Pol Pot that killed up to two million people between 1975-1979. They wanted to rid Cambodia of what they deemed to be decadent Western-style culture and were particularly mistrustful of artists and intellectuals.

"Artists were free thinkers; they were popular too, so the Khmer Rouge wanted their voices silenced," said Chov. "They also destroyed paintings, statues and many other treasures of our cultural heritage. And for generations, 20 years at least, the arts disappeared in Cambodia almost completely."

Chov stopped work momentarily to fetch a finished work from a back room: a painting of an album cover celebrating Sinn Sisamouth, the legendary "King of Khmer Music", who was one of the many victims of the genocide.

Paintings like this are my way of building a bridge between the past and the present, of remembering the great talents we lost

"He mixed traditional and Western music to create his own Cambodian rock sound," said Chov. "But the Khmer Rouge just wanted propaganda songs, so he was killed. Paintings like this are my way of building a bridge between the past and the present, of remembering the great talents we lost."

Today, a new generation of creatives like Chov are bringing fresh vitality to Battambang's arts scene – launching festivals and education programmes with the aim of not only healing the trauma of the past but transforming the city's fortunes.

"Art has the power to help us look inside ourselves and heal," Chov told me. "I hope it can also help lift up Battambang to how it was in the old days – a cultural capital."



Artist Loeum Lorn owns the gallery Tep Kao Sol in Battambang (Credit: Simon Urwin)

As part of this, a number of dedicated gallery spaces have sprung up in recent years, displaying works that show how Cambodia's troubled history has informed today's creative spirit. They include **Tep Kao Sol**, a gallery owned by Loeum Lorn (best known for his **photographs of melting ice** that represent the bitterly cold nights he experienced as a child refugee on the Thai-Cambodian border); and **Romcheik5 Art Space**, which showcases contemporary pieces by its four founders, alongside works by other Battambang-born artists, including **Touch Khchao**.

In the midday tropical heat, I jumped into a tuk-tuk and headed across town to meet Khchao at her studio, where she arrived in style on her "garden motorbike" – a famous sight on the city's streets, designed with its own modified sidecar planted with a riot of greenery and featuring a miniature gazebo.

"Flowers, trees and nature – they spend their lives giving us everything we need: colour, oxygen, shade and beauty," she said. "They are healing, too. And that's especially

important in Cambodia, where trauma is a universal experience."

Khchao invited me indoors and we sat down to chat over a pot of jasmine tea, surrounded by her vast canvases festooned with plant tendrils, petals and foliage.



Battambang artist Touch Khchao sees art as a way to heal from trauma (Credit: Simon Urwin)

"Everyone in Cambodia has been affected by the Khmer Rouge in some way, especially in Battambang," she said. "Their so-called Killing Cave (a notorious execution site) was just 6km from here. But even if you don't have direct experience of their atrocities, the trauma was passed on through the generations subconsciously in some shape or form."

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Khchao went on to describe her own childhood as chaotic: born into a poor family that scraped together a living from making homemade wine, her parents divorced, then her mother died prematurely as a result of alcoholism and drug addiction. "Art can be healing when you use it to tap into your feelings and try and understand them better," she said. "I wanted to learn to draw, but the Khmer Rouge had killed most of the art teachers and there was no arts education in the government schools – there still isn't to this day. But I eventually found the place to do it, and drawing and painting have since become my joy, my release."



Phare circus performers often go on to perform internationally with the likes of Cirque Du Soleil (Credit: Simon Urwin)

Khchao studied art (as did Loeum Lorn and the founders of Romcheik5) at **Phare Ponleu Selpak** (meaning "Brightness of the Arts"), a widely renowned NGO that provides free

public education and vocational arts training to children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Founded by nine young Cambodian refugees returning home after the fall of the Khmer Rouge, it began as an art school in 1994. Over subsequent years, music, dance, theatre and circus skills were added to the curriculum, and now more than 1,000 students enrol each year. Its **animal-free circus** has also grown to become a Battambang tourist attraction in its own right and currently holds the Guinness World Record for **the longest circus show ever performed** (at 24 hours, 10 minutes and 30 seconds.)

I arrived at the school's leafy campus to the sound of *roneat ek* (a classical Khmer xylophone) drifting through the air and entered a vast central hall where teacher Chanpheakdey Sy was beginning her circus class for a group of 13-year-olds. "Cambodian circus is unique; it's over 1,000 years old," she told me. "There are engravings dating back to the 12th Century on the Bayon Temple at Angkor Wat that show acrobatics, tightrope and wheel spinning. It's a privilege to teach such an ancient and important part of our heritage; the Khmer of Angkor Wat were the original artists of Cambodia."



The Bayon Temple at Angkor Wat has 12th-Century engravings that depict circus acrobats (Credit: Simon Urwin)

Sy instructed the class to begin their warm-up and flexibility routines – both vital parts of learning contortionism, aerial ribbon work and trapeze, skills the students will eventually perform to audiences to get on-stage experience and earn a small salary.

"I see how the whole process impacts upon them," said Sy. "As they get fitter and stronger, they grow in confidence. Cambodian circus focuses on storytelling, which allows them to process their experiences and emotions in a safe space. It has a ripple-on effect that reaches far beyond the classroom, too," she added, instructing the students to begin their cartwheels and hand-to-hand balancing.

"We put on shows about the Khmer Rouge – which helps the audience come to terms with their own stories. Our graduates go on to perform internationally (including with the likes of Cirque Du Soleil) then return here to share their knowledge and experience as teachers; others set up their own art initiatives in Battambang to help bring about change. Whatever they do, it's all good karma."

Poy Chhunly and his wife Kolab Koeurm are former students who met at Phare Ponleu Selpak and have since set up their own art school and animation studio. They are also co-directors of the city's **Chumnor Arts Festival**, an annual, three-day event featuring workshops and performances.

We want to help the city regain its reputation as Cambodia's cultural capital and make it an Asian art destination in its own right

"I've experienced first-hand how transformative art can be," said Poy, who grew up in a family too poor to afford paper and pencils so he would scratch drawings in the dirt with a bamboo stick instead. "But with the festival, we want to do more than change one or two

lives," he added. "We want to help the city regain its reputation as Cambodia's cultural capital and make it an Asian art destination in its own right."

The couple told me they plan on doing this by growing the festival into a longer-running calendar event that features hundreds of Cambodian and international artists, as well as establishing a number of permanent attractions in the city, such as an interactive trail around its famously eclectic mix of shophouse, modernist, French colonial and Buddhist temple architecture.



Visitors to the monastery complex Wat Ek Nom will find brilliantly illustrated pagoda panels (Credit: Simon Urwin)

"Take **Wat Ek Nom**, which is near our house," said Koeurm of the monastery complex, first built in 1757. "Even if you have no money for entrance fees, this is like a free art gallery; this is where you can appreciate the power of visual storytelling in every pagoda panel and see how something as extraordinary as Buddha's enlightenment can be captured with just a paintbrush. This is a place to encourage people to go and seek inspiration."

While the Chumnor Arts Festival receives support from Phare Ponleu Selpak, it is yet to attract any larger corporate sponsorship, but the pair remain undaunted by the challenges of finding funding.

"This is a poor country, so here in Battambang we'll never be able to match the glitz of something put on in Bangkok or Singapore," said Poy. "But we can do things our own way. We know that people loved the rawness of previous festivals and how lo-fi, accessible and community-focused they were. Visitors were particularly moved by the pain of Cambodian history that they felt lying deep within the art. We are determined to put the city on the map again. We are direct descendants of the people who built **Angkor Wat** after all – so we believe that anything is possible."

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