

A rare find

He's a collector of ancient artefacts, and also has an interest in bodybuilding, but his passion is Khmer art

Published: 12/09/2010 at 12:00 AM [\[LINK\]](#) PHOTOS: PORNPROM SATRABHAYA

Long-time Bangkok resident Douglas Latchford is already the biggest contributor to the National Museum of Cambodia, and now he's planning to donate more rare ancient Khmer artefacts. Mr Latchford has been collecting Khmer stone sculptures and works in bronze and gold for the past 54 years, and is not only one of the world's leading experts on Khmer artefacts, but also a generous donor to Cambodia's main museum.

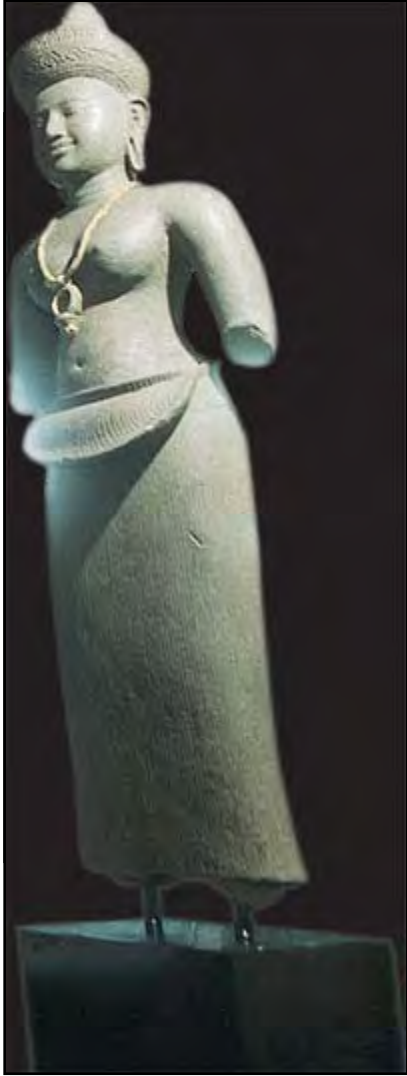


BODY OF WORK: Douglas Latchford, above, in his Bangkok apartment. Below, one of his rare Khmer items.

He recently donated US\$190,000 (about six million baht) to the museum to install new lighting.

"In June last year we had a presentation to the Phnom Penh museum and I collected \$190,000 to change the lighting in the museum - it hadn't been changed since the 1940s," he said.

"There were wires hanging loose and there was no neon lighting. I collected the money from several donors and I gave some pieces to the museum, and deputy prime minister Sok An came and made a speech and gave me a Khmer title, Neak Okhna, a Royal title.



"The old lighting was just big florescent lights in the ceiling that didn't highlight any of the works there. Now there are spotlights and proper lighting so people can appreciate and see the finer features of the works on display."

Later this year, to coincide with a new book he is publishing on bronze Khmer sculptures, Mr Latchford plans to donate four more ancient pieces of Cambodia's history to the museum.

One of the items he plans to donate is extremely rare - a finely detailed boat prow made of bronze, which is the only one of its kind ever found.

"These things fitted over the pointed wooden bow of the boat, and this particular one is also depicted in the stone relief on the south wall of the Bayon temple," he said. "It's a beautiful piece and the only boat prow of its kind ever found. It will be among the items I hand over somewhere between October this year and January next year when my new book is finally ready to publish."

Mr Latchford's love affair with Khmer sculpture started 54 years ago, and it shows no sign of fading - in fact, it's as solid as some of the rare pieces in his extensive collection. During an interview in his lavishly decorated apartment in central Bangkok, the Thai and Khmer-speaking Englishman spoke of his long association with Asian art. However, his love affair with sculptures started far from Phnom Penh.

"I lived in south India from 1951 to 1954 and I had an affinity towards Indian sculpture. I was born in India and lived there until I was 12 and was sent to England to study. There, during the war, I was subjected to books like Jungle

Book by Kipling, and I found deserted temples in the jungle fascinating.

"At that time I started to really admire Indian bronzes, particularly those from the Chola period - they range from the ninth to 13th century. I came to Thailand in 1955 and was introduced to a dealer here called Connie Mangskau, and she was probably the most reliable dealer in Southeast Asian art, particularly Khmer and Thai.

"And through Connie I met Jim Thompson, and we became quite friendly."

Jim Thompson is the legendary American resident of Thailand credited with starting the Thai silk industry. He went missing in 1967 in Malaysia, and his body was never found. His disappearance led to almost as many conspiracy theories as the JFK assassination. To this day, shops selling Thai silk bearing the Jim Thompson name are some of the must-visited tourist places in Thailand.

"Jim had been collecting primarily Thai art, and in the collection there were a few Khmer pieces. I asked him where they came from, and he said Korat, Ayutthaya and Lop Buri. He used to go around the shops in Bangkok in an area they then called Nakhon Kasem, or thieves market, in an old part of Bangkok near Yaowarat, and I started to go there and look.

"I became seriously interested in about 1957 when I met a Frenchman called Francois, who was an adviser to American heiress Doris Duke, and he showed me this female stone torso, minus head, arms and feet, about 24 inches high. It had an immediate effect on me that would change my life.

"I was smitten by it, and Francois told me about an identical one for sale in the thieves market, so I went around the next day and bought it. That was my first sculpture. That was in about 1957. I still have it, but it's at my place in London.

"These days I have about 50 to 60 pieces in total."

For many, collecting ancient artifacts is a business, and at times a very profitable one, but not for Mr Latchford. He made his money many years ago working for an English firm's Bangkok branch.

"We sold pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, chemicals, a bit of everything. I was the branch manager here in Bangkok, and that's what I started off doing. We were one of the first big foreign firms importing goods into this part of the world.

"The earliest big foreign companies here were Barrow Brown and the Borneo Company, then Anglo Thai started. I was sent here to be their assistant manager.

"The first place I lived in Bangkok was where the Australian Embassy now is. It was a three-storey apartment building belonging to a prince. I lived there for five years. There were two apartment buildings in Bangkok then the one I lived in where the Australian Embassy is now, and if you turned down Soi Suan Phlu there was another one just around the corner from Sathorn Road. The second one belonged to another prince."

Mr Latchford now lives on Soi Chidlom in the heart of Bangkok on land he bought many years ago. "When I first bought this block of land my Thai friends wanted to know why I bought property in a slum area," he said. "They don't say that any more."

The only drawback to living in the heart of the capital city happened earlier this year. "The red shirts set up a big barricade of tyres on the bridge over the canal outside my place and parked a big truck in the middle of the road. They told my neighbours the truck was full of explosives.



RED RAMPAGE: Tyres were set on fire right below Douglas Latchford's Bangkok apartment.

RED RAMPAGE: Tyres were set on fire right below Douglas Latchford's Bangkok apartment.

"The day the army moved on them they set fire to the tyres and the truck, so my driver and chef grabbed a fire hose and went out and fought the fire. Then they came under fire from the red shirts, then the army troops started shooting back, so my guys had bullets going over their heads from in front of them and from behind them. They bravely stood their ground and put out the fires."

Mr Latchford not only collects artworks, it seems he's also quite good at collecting passports.

"I took out Thai citizenship 36 years ago. My daughter and my bodybuilder chef talked to two priests some time back, independent of each other, and both of the priests indicated that in some previous life I was Khmer. It's strange one priest was in the south of Thailand and the other was in Surin, in the northeast.

"In June last year, before we had the presentation at the museum, I had some sweet people come up to my place and teach me Khmer for three months. This was so I could speak in Khmer at the ceremony. They came three times a week, and the speech was very good it lasted about five minutes and it was accepted by the minister of culture at the museum and by Sok An, the deputy prime minister.

"When I started speaking they looked kind of quizzical, but then they started nodding and laughing. After I gave the speech I said to Sok An that the two priests had said that I was previously Khmer, and I would like to be again. I told him I would like Khmer citizenship. And he's given it to me.

"After the speech Sok An got up out of his chair and came over, looked at me and shook hands, and said, 'you know, of course you can have Khmer citizenship'."

Mr Latchford has been visiting Cambodia for many years, and has fond memories of his early journeys there.

"I went to Cambodia the first time in about 1961, to Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, and it was wonderful then. The Angkor complex then was completely void of tourists. We stayed at the Grand and Royal, but to get around the complex we had to take motorcycles. It was great fun and there were virtually no tourists at all.

"And in 1968 I went back with a group of two couples and we drove from Bangkok to Sisophon and then Siem Reap, and when we got there, there was a mix-up with the hotel and there was nowhere to stay. The Grand was not viable, but there was a little bungalow, or chalet, nearby that was owned by (King) Sihanouk.

"It was suggested that we go and ask if we could stay there as it was vacant, and we drove around there and there was just the guard, and we asked him if we could stay, and he said yes. So we ended up with three bedrooms and a swimming pool. That place has now been bought by the Amanpuri and it now has a new name and is \$1,000 a day. The hotel there now is wonderful."



When asked about the trade in stolen Khmer artefacts, Mr Latchford said the story had been blown out of proportion.

"Not true. As far as I know, going back before my time, some Khmer sculptures have come into Thailand, but that has nothing to do with the Khmer Rouge at all. The trade is not what the media

has made it out to be. It is true that some pieces were stolen, but not necessarily from Angkor Wat.

"It is true that some of the temples there had pieces stolen, but it wasn't on a large scale."

The Khmer Rouge had little time for or appreciation of art, according to Mr Latchford.

"During the Khmer Rouge days, I heard that the guy in charge of the museum just locked the doors and put sandbags in the doorway and left, and I don't believe it was touched. They emptied Phnom Penh in two days, so I guess there was hardly anybody there. "There were reports that people had vandalised the museum from 1975-80, but when I went there after 1980 _ at the time the Vietnamese were controlling Phnom Penh and I went to the museum and everything was as it was. It was fine. I mean, it was a bit dusty and moldy, but nothing had been stolen and nothing had been damaged."

One of the sprightly 80-something-year-old's biggest concerns these days is the amount of fake artefacts making their way on to markets. And as usual, he has done his research.

"There is a lot of fake stuff getting about. That's true. In fact, I inquired today where the fakes are being made in Cambodia. There are a lot of fakes coming through on a continual basis and I found out this morning that there are two main areas where pieces are being faked, around Siem Reap in umpur (district) Dong Bak and in Sisophon, in an area called umpur Sinopur.

"These are places where pieces are now being made in bronze and particularly stone. Only small amounts of bronzes, but the stone items are coming through in great quantity. You can see them in shops all around Bangkok. The quality of the workmanship is getting better."

When asked if it's getting harder to pick the fakes, Mr Latchford replied with a smile: "It depends on who is doing it. But they are getting better and nobody is infallible. To make stone appear to be old, they generally sand-blast it first to give it a weathered look. Then they will heat it _ I've seen this being done. They start a charcoal fire, then put the piece on a wire above the fire to dry it, to take all the moisture out of it.

"Then they immerse it in a bath of liquid, which contains chemicals, acid and colouring. The stone is dry so it will absorb the chemicals and colouring to give it that aged look. What you have to do is to take a very small chip of the stone from the base or somewhere it won't be noticed and test it, and if it contains chemicals and acid and colouring, it's a fake."

The oldest Khmer piece Mr Latchford has is from the 7th century. "I found it in New York in a private collection. I had been trying to get it for 20 years. They had it for six years before I got it. It is now in London."

When asked where the piece originated from, Mr Latchford simply said: "The ground. When I buy a piece, on principal I thoroughly research it. I have many reference books and I carefully search for any recorded photographs of a piece to see if has been displayed in a museum, a collection or recorded anywhere else. I certainly don't want to buy a piece that has been stolen or anything.

"Most of the pieces I have come across in the past years have been excavated, or dug up. You know, there is a farmer in the field who digs something up, and he probably thinks if I take it to Bangkok or Singapore or a middle man I can get \$100 instead of getting \$10."

Although Bangkok has been his home for many years, the veteran of the art world is considering a move to Cambodia.

"You know, if I didn't live in Bangkok I would very much like to live in Cambodia. In fact, I thought of buying a piece of land in Siem Reap. A friend of mine has bought an old Khmer house

in Siem Reap and done it up, and has now bought a second one. He visited me last month and I asked him if he'd consider selling me the first one. He said we can talk about it. They're all teak and very open, and beautiful. Phnom Penh is lovely too."

Mr Latchford's big collection of artefacts is spread around several sites.

"I have some on loan to the Denver Museum and I have some in storage because there's nowhere to put it. I also have some in my London apartment, and I have some here, in Bangkok. But I collect not just Khmer, I collect Tibetan, Nepalese, Indian and Suvichai, which was a maritime state that existed in the 8th century, but there's no one capital of Suvichai as such." Suvichai art is found in Java and in Sumatra, Borneo, Cambodia and Thailand.

"They were a maritime state, so they just shipped from port to port. Some of their art is very beautiful."

His dealings in the art world have led him to some interesting characters.

"I collect, but it's not a business. From time to time a better piece will become available, so I have to upgrade to get a better piece. (Tycoon John D.) Rockefeller did the same thing. I met him and I had a piece once that he'd seen a picture of and when I was in New York once he asked to see me.

"He asked me if I would consider an exchange, and I said 'no'. My piece was better."

Mr Latchford now spends most of his time in Bangkok, but travels to London about three times every year. And he has a rather unusual interest for an art dealer. "One of the things I do as a hobby is to help the Thai Bodybuilding Association. I've done that for about 5-6 years now.

"One of the Thais has been world champion three times now. We had the Asian Championships earlier this year in Iran and my chef, who looks after my diet, won the gold medal in his class.

"I was elected as president for Asia earlier this year. I am also the president of the Thai Bodybuilding Association.

"So now I run Southeast Asia and Asia. I'm a Thai citizen, so I am allowed by law to hold these positions."

However, Mr Latchford is a heavyweight in his own right when it comes to Khmer art, and he's travelled the world to admire it.

"Khmer art is on display in many cities around the world — in Australia, in Canberra, in England the British museum have maybe three or four pieces. The main collections are in New York, Cleveland, Los Angeles County and Pasadena. There is a lot in America. And in France."

And soon there will be more in the National Museum of Cambodia.

