

Exploring the feminine in Angkor's visual imagery

Soumya James

There has been relatively limited scholarship on the feminine in premodern Cambodia, and the meager variety and confined scope of primary sources are cited as contributing factors for this lacuna. Inscriptions (in Khmer and Sanskrit), cultural artifacts and archaeological data are considered the main sources of information for the Angkor period. The only other written source for the period is an account compiled by a Chinese traveler who visited Angkor in the 13th century. Using examples from my research I suggest that these sources should be examined in relation to the physical and metaphorical context within which they are embedded. For example, the iconology of the 11th century reclining Vishnu and Lakshmi carvings at Kbal Spean is illustrated through their indissoluble connection with the physical landscape, both natural and anthropogenic. Other images, such as the 10th century Durga relief at Banteay Srei appears to encode human interaction within their iconography. Elucidating the interrelationships between landscape, built forms and humans could contribute towards a more comprehensive understanding of the divine feminine.

Biography

Soumya James is an independent Art Historian who studies premodern South and Southeast Asian art. She received her PhD in Art History from Cornell University in 2011. Her dissertation focused on the cultural and eco-political significance of the divine feminine at three Angkor period sites. Her research investigates the relationship between landscape and built form, gender and sexuality, and the art historical links between premodern South and Southeast Asia. Following her graduation, she continued her research while working as the coordinator for the Science and Society Programme at the National Centre for Biological Sciences, Bangalore, India. She was a Postdoctoral Associate at the Franke Program in Science and the Humanities and a Fellow at the Whitney Humanities Center, both at Yale University. She is currently working on a book manuscript and planning her next fieldtrip to Cambodia.