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Down in the Basement: Cham Art in Context

This paper is about Cham art in context. However, my interest here is not some form of “original” context (the traditional object of art historical research), rather my focus is on the current contexts of ancient Cham art. We are all too used to the idea of things being “out-of-context” (implying that we are not seeing them in the way they were originally intended to be seen), but we are also, I suggest, all too used to overlooking the importance of just how we *are* seeing these objects (their present context). The extreme fragmentation of what was once the civilisation of Champa means that the primary objects of art-historical research (the artworks themselves) are nearly all displaced, widely scattered in museums throughout Vietnam and around the world. Archives of the artworks, these institutions frame any approach to studying the artwork.

In this paper I look at two of the rare exhibitions which have brought together Cham artworks from different locations (museums, sites, private collections). Both were in Paris, and both were located down in basements (traditionally places of storage and hiding - and, hence, discovery) : one at the Bon Marché department store in 1995, and the other, which ended two weeks ago, at the Musée Guimet.

How and why did these exhibitions come about? In what ways do these two institutions (museum and department store) frame the displays, offering the past up to us in specific ways?

Like so many exhibitions, these were temporary “events”. I look at their ephemeral nature and the lasting traces they leave behind, and I explore behind the scenes, to unearth the political, personal, economic facets of the exhibition, the parts hidden from the exhibition viewer.