

## Letter to editor

The Phnom Penh Post

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Emily Rafferty, Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, places a jasmine garland over one of the repatriated Koh Ker statues during the opening session of the 37th World Heritage Committee at the Peace Palace in Phnom Penh on Monday. HENG CHIVOAN

## Closure to a tragic time period

Dear Editor,

On June 11, 2013, after more than 40 years away from home, two 10th-century Pandava statues – also known as the Kneeling Attendants – were returned to Cambodia from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the US.

The statues were brought to the Peace Palace of the Council of Ministers where they are on display for the World Heritage Committee Conference.

The act of returning these statues is clearly significant and Cambodia should take advantage by showcasing their return.

But while it is important that Cambodia showcases the successful return of these statues, it is equally important that we complete their journey home.

Returning these statues to their original location will serve as a pow-

erful symbol of Cambodia's success in restoring its past.

Indeed, the long journey of these statues, and their restoration to their historic home, will carry great symbolic meaning for the long struggle that Cambodians have waged in coming to grips with their past.

Cambodian history has come to be defined by two events: the illustrious Angkor period and the traumatic years of genocide.

In stark contrast to its beautiful Angkorian past, Cambodia has suffered decades of war and mass atrocities.

Beyond causing the tragic loss of life, these events have devastated Cambodia's social fabric.

While partly a consequence of these events, illegal looting and trafficking of cultural property threatens Cambodia's rich cultural identity.

Cambodia's treasured artifacts even today continue to face the risk of being stolen and sold on illicit markets.

Cambodia today is striving to move from the horrors of its past through a variety of efforts and mechanisms.

The prosecution of Khmer Rouge crimes is underway at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), and genocide education programs blanket the countryside.

Under the umbrella of international and Cambodian law, the ECCC is seeking to bring a sense of justice and closure for victims of the Khmer Rouge.

In addition, the genocide education program teaches the younger generation about the history of this tragic time period.

With an eye toward dialogue, reconciliation and public awareness, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport and DC-Cam are seeking to build a lasting foundation of truth and memory.

Likewise, the restoration of Cambodia's cultural heritage plays an important role in helping Cambodians heal and achieve reconciliation.

Reconciliation is about bringing people together, restoring relationships and building a better society.

The protection and restoration of Cambodia's cultural heritage contributes to this process by rooting Cambodians in their shared glorious past.

In this vein, the return of the Pandava statues is significant to the people of Cambodia.

The statues' return symbolizes the restoration of the kingdom's spiritual and cultural identity.

In addition, with the public display

and discussion of their return, Cambodians will develop a greater awareness of their shared cultural heritage.

It is the combination of these effects that makes the public repatriation display an important piece of the statues' return.

In addition, the repatriation of the statues comes on the occasion when Cambodia takes a role as a host country for the 37th World Heritage Committee Conference.

This event is important both for Cambodia and the world, and the statues will form an important piece of this event by encouraging the world community to take greater responsibility in protecting and restoring the cultural heritage of looted nations.

But after they are restored and their symbolic message is achieved, we should complete the statues' journey home.

Returning the statues to their original location will bring a sense of closure to this tragic time period, and it will symbolise another milestone in Cambodia's renewal of its past.

Sirik Savina,  
Director,  
Museum of Memory

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