

MAADS MEETS

...with Sokmean Sin, Photo Collector



Sokmean Srin's work recognized at META House in 2013 (© AmazingCambodia)

At 23 years of age only, this shy yet passionate young Cambodian has dedicated since his early teenhood numerous and solitary hours to a formidable task: bring back his country's "Golden Age" to the new generations through thousands of personal, anonymous or promotional photographs. "Amazing Cambodia" is the name for this remarkable collection.

When he's not fulfilling his two professional occupations – English teacher at Sovannaphumi School and editor at *Sovrin* magazine --, Sokmean tirelessly browses library archives, looks around for family photos in Cambodian provinces, shoots himself pictures of endangered buildings. Carrying on with what is much more than a hobby: a labor of love.

Q: While foreigners have always been attracted to vintage photographs related to Cambodian history, younger Khmer generations seem to think more along the line of "the past is past, the future is now". Are you an exception here?

A: Since I was 13, I've developed a fascination for Cambodia's happier times, when the country was enjoying its independence, before the shadows brought upon us by regional war and the Khmer Rouge regime. My personal centers of interest being architecture, movies and music, I started to look for photographic material related to those fields. When I went to see film producers and studios, for example, they were taken aback: "What for would you need old pics?", they asked me. Then, they started to entrust me with some documents from their archives.

My friends cannot comprehend that I'd spend my whole free time digitalizing period pictures, researching the Net, or taking pictures of historic buildings threatened by developers. If they travel to their hometown and I ask them to photograph some urban landmarks, they reply: "No time for that weird stuff". But I hope things are going to change. People start to understand that Cambodia was once a prosperous nation, and they should be proud of it.

Q: You have exhibited part of your collection, your Facebook page is well followed -- did you attract the attention of public or private institutions so far?

A: I didn't feel really welcome whenever I went to public libraries or archives. They charge you 10 \$ just to copy one document, it's a lot of money for us...At the Ministry of Culture, the mindset is not to help individual initiatives but to get advantage from it.

I'm currently structuring my material so I could start a credible website before looking for sponsors. It is a lot of work, checking sources, writing reliable captions...That's my priority, but it's so time-consuming.



Amazing Cambodia)

Q: Several of MAADS hotels are period buildings renovated and remodeled with the idea of protecting Cambodia's architectural and cultural heritages. With your photo collector's eye, how do you assess the fast-paced urban transformation we're witnessing now?

A: One particular book, Michel Igout's "Phnom Penh Then and Now", has profoundly impacted me. It's a photographic essay on landscape changes in the capital, completed in 1993. I'd like to extend this compelling testimony to our present days, to actually document what we're losing and what we should absolutely keep from our past. I have in mind a print and digital book that would summarize my own research on that topic.

French movie director Marcel Camus and dancer Princess Norodom Bhuppha Devi on the set of "Dragon Sky" (L'oiseau de paradis), 1961 (©

Amazing Cambodia, <https://www.facebook.com/amazingcambo/>

JUNE 2016