Michael Falser

Colonial Appropriation, Physical Substitution, and the Metonymics of Translation: Plaster Casts of Angkor Wat for Museum Collections in Paris and Berlin

Abstract   Tales of stolen cultural objects and their restitution regularly generate nationalistic and polemic headlines in newspapers worldwide. However, there is a related practice of colonial appropriation that is slowly becoming the focus of art historical research—the technique of plaster casting. This paper conceptualizes the precise moment around 1900 when French colonial projects in Paris and German initiatives in Berlin commissioned plaster casts of the Cambodian temple of Angkor Wat for display in national museums. This mammoth act of architectural translation included exact copies of the temple's bas-reliefs as well as entire hybrid building pastiches. Forgotten for decades, these plaster casts are now being rediscovered as the unique transcultural products of a colonial enterprise.

Keywords   Translation, plaster casts, substitution, metonymics, Angkor

From translation to transculturality within the transfer of architecture

1. In *The Metonymics of Translating Marginalized Texts*, Maria Tymoczko asks how a translator can make non-canonical or marginalized literature understood by his or her audience.[1] She judges that "metonymic aspects" (the recognition of the whole by reading its associative parts) are essential in assimilating new literal formats or variations. The translator has to "either make some decisive choices about which aspects to translate—that is, do a partial translation of the literary information in the text—or seek a format that allows dense information transfer through a variety of commentaries on the translation." Following norms and aims, his work would result either in "popular or scholarly translations," where

> the former are usually severely limited in their transfer intent and minimally representative of the metonymic aspects of the original, while the latter allow a good deal of metatranslation to proceed, presenting quantities of information through vehicles such as introductions, footnotes, appendices, parallel texts, and so forth. In a scholarly translation the text is embedded in a shell of paratextual devices that serve to explain the metonymies of the source text, providing a set of contexts for the translation. In the case of a popular translation, by contrast, the translator typically focuses on a few aspects of the literary text which are brought to a broad segment of the target audience.[2]

Tymoczko's "popular or scholarly translations" mirrors what Walter Benjamin had defined earlier as "free or literal" translations—both depended on the translator's choice of the unit of translation.[3]

2. Translation, however, does not only lead to new translation products, but has *concrete consequences for the original text* itself: the translation "canonizes the foreign text, validates its fame by enabling its survival," in fact "creates it [and] reconstitutes it" and "freezes it, shows its mobility and its instability."[4] The source text and its translation form a dynamic and mutual relationship, in which popular/scholarly or free/literal translations each reconfigure the original differently. The *translational turn* addresses the shift from a linguistic approach to translation toward

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1 This paper is the result of a presentation during the CIHA Conference in Nuremberg, Germany, in 2012 and a slightly reworked version from the CIHA conference proceedings of 2013.
2 Tymoczko 1995, 11–24, 18.
3 See Benjamin's 1923 differentiation in *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* between *Treue* (fidelity), *Wörtlichkeit* (literalness), and *Freiheit* (freedom), for an "ideal echo of the original," an "interlinear version" (Benjamin 2012).
4 Venuti 1992, introduction 7, 9–11.

a broader context that describes different power relations in cultural contact situations and processes of exchange and transfer between cultures. Both individual translators and whole institutional complexes alike become agents of a larger practice of knowledge production. Thus, source texts and their translations are placed in a *transcultural framework* to constitute each other that might comprise the whole cultural complex or sections of culture within a larger translational flow, including social culture (institutions like museums), mental culture (cultural stereotypes), and *material culture* (artefacts, architecture).

3. European colonialism as an "uneven power relation" is a specific "politico-cultural translation history,"[5] in which the exchange and transfer between and of cultures, as well as the conditions and aims of knowledge production, are inscribed in coercive "translation memes" that follow imposed norms and values.[6] In our case, a European hegemonic "translation privilege" not only stereotyped Asian sources as primitive, exotic, and the "Other" (Orient),[7] but also influenced the self-representation of the Own and the Self (Occident) within a dynamic "process of strangeness and familiarization."[8] Using *power* as the key term in the colonial context implies the assertion of an asymmetry in translational flows of knowledge accumulation and partial representation modes of the colonized source text. The dominant authority or regime controls the translation process, which is "not simply an act of faithful reproduction, but, rather, a deliberate and conscious act of selection, assemblage, structuration, and fabrication—and even, in some cases, of falsification, refusal of information, [and] counterfeiting,"[9] namely, a manipulation of the parts being translated as "orientalised" texts to conform to the norms, values, and expectations of the occidental target culture. In contrast to this postcolonial critique of cultural appropriation, the analysis of the mere ontological status of material translations enable us, however, to appreciate these translational products as new and creative texts per se, as "continuers of the [Eastern] originals."[10]

4. In a typically colonial process of "code-switching,"[11] original objects from *the Orient* passed, by violent extraction, from their socially embedded use value at their original emplacement and their transfer over long distances and cultural political spheres and borders, into their new "representation [as] classified artefacts" for the target culture. Their new, institutionalized settings were often ethnographic or art or architecture museums. In this context, they were themselves cultural translations "by the virtue of their job in representing cultures through

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5   Bhatti 1997, 5.
6   Chesterman 1997.
7   Lepenies 1993, esp. 66.
8   Carbonell 1996, 79, 84.
9   Tymoczko and Gentzler 2002, xxi.
10 Hermans and Koller 2004, 26.
11 Hermans and Koller 2004, 24–25.

the medium of objects [...] a translation from the originating world of the objects into a new network of meanings and interpretations."[12] What has been largely overlooked in the discussion of colonial art history is that whole Oriental architectures were also transferred into the colonizer's or Occidental collector's museums. These monumental translations were not only the most spectacular modern-time operations in the field of material culture translation between the Orient and the Occident, but are also unique case studies with which to open up the classical field of architectural historiography to a truly transcultural and global perspective. The object of our transcultural inquiry is the largest religious stone monument in the world—the twelfth Hindu, and today Buddhist, temple of Angkor Wat in Cambodia. Our time frame is the era of European imperialism around 1900, which encompassed competition between the established colonial power of France and the emerging cultural power of Germany. Our investigation queries the processes, the concrete agency, and the varying museographical end products of these translational operations. Before discussing these details, however, we must first formulate some theoretical observations that are valid for both cases:

(Ad 2–4) Beyond the transfer of small-scale artefacts from the *Orient* to the *Occident* and their commodification as museum objects of Western curiosity, translated monumental architecture like Angkor Wat was used as a powerful means by which to visualize the Western image of the East as being made up of ancient, powerful, but lost civilizations within a powerless and chaotic present. Whereas partial or full-scale reconstitutions of the once glorious architecture were represented in Occidental displays in an ideal or restored condition, the "original site" was depicted and canonized as being an "eternal ruin." This truly transcultural narrative simultaneously presented one and the same architectural complex as both an Oriental ruin *and* a restored monument within its Occidental display, thus enabling the birth of an aesthetic concept that "reconstituted the original and enabled its survival"—namely, *cultural heritage*. Following what James Clifford called the "salvage paradigm, reflecting the desire to rescue something 'authentic' out of destructive historical changes,"[13] this concept mirrored the European nation's dual self-representation both as the guardian of a progressive modernity and of a civilizing mission towards the *degenerated Orient* with its forgotten cultural heritage.[14] This translation of Oriental architecture also enabled the inclusion of the same in the colonizer's own canon of cultural heritage. Given the original connotation of the term "heritage," Angkor Wat was therefore "inherited" by the colonial power through its translation, transfer, and ideal reconstitution. The

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12 Sturge 2007, 131.
13 Clifford 1989, 73.
14 For the role of cultural heritage in colonial civilizing missions, see Falser 2015.

local stakeholders (religious communities, monks, and pilgrims) were dis-possessed of and excluded from their own property.

(Ad 1) A crucial question concerning the "translatability" of architec-ture relates to its size, accessibility, and ownership; architecture is, after all, generally defined as immobile. While single original fragments from architecture were appropriated for European museums, large-scale archi-tectural translations were seen as special "transfer operations" between the "repetition through identical text processing, recycling, borrowing, copying, the compilation of various text fragments, adoptions and, finally, large-scale collages and pastiches ranging from a mishmash of fragments to the mimicking a certain style in a virtuoso manner *à la manière de* with the risk of overinterpretation."[15]

As metonymic strategies of free or literal and popular or scholarly translations, respectively, they followed either the "principal of equiva-lence" (similarity) or the "principle of contiguity" (referential connection).[16] However, monumental architecture translation cannot be executed by a mere transfer of *original* architectural fragments. Thus, all kind of *mimetic operations* function under the term *substitution*. Current definitions of sub-stitution help to conceptualize material translation:[17] from the Latin *substi-tutio*, substitution means the "action of placing something or someone in place of another [and/or] the appointment of a person as alternative heir." Applying a legal perspective, the "action or act of putting one thing in place of another" lets the translating (here colonial) agency "inherit" an object through the "transfer of any associated rights and duties." Through the substitution of the original architecture in a colonial museum, "the selling of an inferior or cheaper product in place of the one desired by the pur-chaser" takes place. Since the desired original large-scale monument could not be acquired by colonial power per se, substitution necessitated adopt-ing a specific translational strategy—namely, *plaster casts*—a technique of making negative moulds of the original surface to produce a three-dimen-sional copy from the original in plaster. Subsequently, a limited number of translated elements were reassembled in Europe as displays that repre-sented the whole architectural structure. The heyday of this Europe-wide practice of material translation occurred in the second half of the nine-teenth century; by the first half of the twentieth century, the practice was abolished in favour of a focus on authentic originals. In the postmodern 1980s, plaster casts were rehabilitated as valid "substitutes in museums" for the purposes of public education,[18] the protection of the original arte-fact, and the democratization of the same through its display in multiple museum settings. However, a focus on European sculpture has meant that a discussion of the plaster casts of architecture has only recently begun,[19]

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15 Gorp 2004.
16 Gorp 2004, 62.
17 *Oxford English Dictionary,* s. v. "substitution."
18 Cf. Sofka 1988 and (for a more general view) Sofka and Schärer 1985.
19 Frederiksen and Marchand 2010; Lancestremère 2016; Haak 2016.

and the discussion of the colonial political implications of plaster casting *Oriental architecture* for *Occidental museums* continues to be a scholarly desideratum.

On the importance of imprints in relation to authenticity and power, Georges Didi-Huberman's reflection that the process of "impression" leaves the trace of an original object in a foreign medium is a useful one to explore the hypothesis that plaster casts were a powerful tool in the translation, appropriation, and representation of architectural heritage.[20] While the original object will alter in its physical appearance over time, the trace might technically be fixed as a permanent, anachronic marker—an unchangeable imprint represented by a moulding as the basis of plaster casting. This moment of direct and intimate contact with the original in the process of translation imbues the imprint/moulding with authenticity and authority. Like coinage, possessing representative mouldings was the central key or generic code for producing authentic re-translations in the form of plaster casts. This rematerialization empowered the "inheritor and owner" to display, reuse, and even circulate licensed copies of the object in any desired place, context, duration, or function according to his political intentions.[21]

How did the products of the European translations of Angkor Wat around 1900 look when the site itself was not yet owned by a colonial power of Europe, but by Cambodia's neighbouring kingdom of Siam (today Thailand)? As we shall see, France and Germany's differing cultural and political intentions led to different results in the representation of Angkor Wat in museums in Paris and Berlin.[22]

The invention of the Angkor pavilion: The *Musée Indo-chinois* in the *Palais de Trocadéro* in Paris

Angkor Wat, built in the twelfth century AD, was the largest single temple structure in the ancient city plan of Angkor (later sacked by the Siamese in the fifteenth century and left by the Khmer king for a new capital). Despite being completely abandoned, it survived as a pilgrimage site and Buddhist monastery. Consequently, the narrative of a "discovery of the ruined temple in the jungle" is a French-colonial invention of the late nineteenth century.[23] The first casts of Angkor Wat were made as a byproduct of a French explorative mission concerning the navigability of the Mekong river into

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20 Didi-Huberman 1999.
21 For the dialectics between the authority of the copy and its replication, the issue of substitution, and the reciprocal dependency between the surviving original and its replica, see also the contribution of Birgit Mersmann in this volume (compare this case study to Falser 2011a).
22 Cf. Falser 2013a.
23 This debate is part of the first part in the upcoming publication of Falser, forthcoming.

China in 1866–1868. They were sent directly to France and were integrated into the Universal Exhibition of Paris in 1867, not as specimens of exotic architectural decoration, but—in their function as a substitute for original objects in general—for the section on techniques of mechanical reproduction. This occurred right at that moment when the first pan-European translation and exchange project was initiated by the director of the South Kensington Museum in London and signed during the event in Paris by all monarchies in the form of the so-called *International Convention for the Exchange of Reproductions of Works of Art*.[24]

One of the mission's members, Louis Delaporte (a naval captain and talented draughtsman), became fascinated with Angkor and, in 1873, organized a special mission to Angkor which was at that time situated a few kilometres north of the French protectorate of Cambodia, in Siamese territory. His decision to bring back either original works or mouldings from the site depended mostly on the *translatability* of the desired objects with respect to transportation infrastructure. Although his staff continued to take away a few heavy originals in sandstone, he assured the Siamese authorities (who strongly forbade any removal) that they were only using the substitute technique of creating "plaster casts of sculptures and bas-relief"[25] from the temples. What he finally brought back was an initial, massive "trans-lation" of Angkor for the French *métropole* containing about seventy original sculptures and architectural fragments, 80 mouldings of the bas-reliefs of Angkor Wat and other temples, as well as plans, drawings, and photographs. When these translational products arrived in France in 1874, and were not accepted for the Louvre museum, Delaporte found an interim solution for his *Musée Khmer* in the castle of Compiègne, northeast of Paris.

His first great success, however, came during the Universal Exhibition of 1878, in Paris. Within the exhibition's overall objective to place the French nation at the pinnacle of world civilization, its colonial project in Indochina was already well represented. The colonial section continued to display exotic findings (with casts from Angkor), but a special section on scientific missions was prominently placed: Delaporte's Angkor trip with plaster casts, drawings, photographs, and—originally conceived as a full-scale version to counterbalance the gigantic British-Indian pavilion next door—a 1:10 scaled plaster cast model of a *porte d'entrée* of the ancient city of Angkor Thom,[26] north of Angkor Wat, was featured. Delaporte's Angkor project underwent a small but significant change between the 1867 and 1878 exhibitions: during the former, it was embedded in the context of industrial arts in the age of mechanical reproduction and, during the latter, in the colonial-scientific propaganda which classified world civilizations

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24 Falser 2014a.
25 Delaporte 1874.
26 A depiction can be found in Soldi 1881, 269–330. For more on the first Angkor model in Europe, see Falser 2013b.

into different degrees of progress and claimed the (still Siamese) temples of Angkor as part of the French *patrimoine culturel*.

When Delaporte, in a third setting inside the section *Ethnographie des peuples étrangers* in the Trocadero palace and next to exhibits from Egypt, China, and Japan, successfully staged the giant original balustrade of the Angkorian Preah Khan temple, he was closer than ever to his ultimate goal—the "installation of a permanent Khmer Museum in Paris."[27] For this project, Delaporte was heavily influenced by the architectural museum projects of France's strongest rival in the colonial project in Asia—Great Britain. In 1874, the newly-built *Architectural Courts* of the South Kensington Museum opened: life-sized plaster cast replicas of cultural heritage icons manifested Great Britain's political rhetoric in the form of a veritable "three-dimensional imperial archive" that stretched from Trajan's Column in the western court to the gate of the ancient Buddhist site of Sanchi in the eastern court,[28] representing Great Britain's civilizing mission to inherit India's ancient cultural heritage as part of British India. Delaporte's *Musée indo-chinois* opened at the same time as the Parisian Universal Exhibition of 1889 (fig. 1). Located at the end of the southern wing of the Trocadero palace, his reconstitution of Angkorian temple architecture was also an answer to Viollet-le-Duc's concept of the *Musée de sculpture comparée*, with its 1:1 scale plaster cast facades of (mainly) French Gothic sacred architecture.[29]

Three other missions to Angkor before 1900 had not only brought more than 1,000 plaster cast elements for Delaporte's substitute version of the monumental temple architecture of Angkor in front of the visitor: in front of and directly attached to completely black walls, which formed a neutral and homogenizing background, 1:1 copies as "word-by-word translations" and original exhibits were merged into a metonymic collage of larger architectural temple units and stylistic entities. At both ends of the staircase into his Indochina Museum, Delaporte reconstituted two temples from Angkor as free-standing structures on the basis of several hundred "authentic" plaster cast elements. Whereas one pavilion-like structure was a literal translation in the form of a life-sized section of the lower east side of the central tower of Angkor Wat, the second model was a free translation that formed a veritable "pastiche à la manière" of the Bayon temple.[30] Delaporte himself asked museum visitors to "virtually reconstitute the grandiose ensemble in their imagination" by wandering from the metonymic displays on the walls to the free-standing pastiche models—only to conclude with the emotional and political statement that the "real but heavily-decayed site" could still be saved, not by the "neglecting Siamese,

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27 Delaporte 1880, 249–250.
28 Barringer 1988, 11.
29 For a study about the French and British versions of staging their own and Oriental architecture in museums, cf. Falser 2013c.
30 For a detailed analysis, cf. Falser 2011b.

Figure 1: Louis Delaporte's *Musée indo-chinois* in the Parisian Trocadéro palace around 1900.

but maybe by the French who did not (yet) own it."[31] Through Delaporte's physical translation of the temple for the French *métropole*, their ideal (or idealized) architectural reconstitution, and their inclusion in the *performative museum parcours*, the visitor was familiarized with and initiated into the French-colonial vision. The vast archive of "authentic" plaster casts elements from Angkor, as much as Delaporte's first free-standing reconstitutions, served as a generic code and inspiration for the Angkor pavilions at the following universal and colonial exhibitions. The "real" site of Angkor was mentally converted from a living religious site to a dead archaeological ruin and canonized as French cultural *patrimoine*—even before Siam's retrocession of Angkor to (French) Cambodia in 1907.

Competing translations: "Not for the show but for the sciences"—Angkor in the *Völkerkundemuseum* in Berlin

> "It will be a pleasure to prove to our dear friends of the Seine that a German museum can possess and exhibit what a French museum is hiding in childish and stingy pettiness."[32]

With the political vacuum hanging over Angkor in around 1900, other European nations began to be curious about the site. Surprisingly, by that time, it was not Delaporte's museum that owned the largest complete "facsimile" of Angkor Wat, but rather the Ethnographical Museum in Berlin, which possessed altogether 300 mouldings (totalling 200 meters in length and up to three meters high) of its famous bas-reliefs.[33] The German Empire did not try to augment its Indian collections in Berlin with specimens of *Hinterindien* in the context of a direct colonial interest like the French, but rather did so for the cultural and scientific prestige befitting a rising European power. As a consequence of this different, and not propagandistic but supposedly "scientific" reason, Berlin's display of Angkor was completely different from the French one. Commissioned by the director of the museum, Adolf Bastian, along with the head of the Indian section, Albert Grünwedel, these mouldings were created in Angkor, in 1898, by the rather dubious adventurer Harry Thomann, and were displayed from 1904 until the destruction of the museum during World War II (fig. 2).

From the beginning, the German argument for the Angkor mouldings was formulated in terms that were directed against the French project (see introductory quote for this sub-chapter). In March 1898, Grünwedel

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31 Delaporte 1901, 39, 40, 46.
32 Thomann, Harry. 1897. Letter to Albert Grünwedel, December 8. Files regarding the acquisition of ethnological artifacts by H. Thomann. Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum, Archiv, Pars I.B.31.
33 A 400-page file from the museum's archive is cited in the following discussion. (Thomann 1897) For a detailed analysis, see the two subsequent parts of an article about this story in Falser 2012–2014.

Figure 2: The bas-reliefs of Angor Wat inside the Ethnographic Museum in Berlin, Stresemannstraße, after 1905.

reported that "Bastian had tried several times in vain to purchase copies from the *Musée Khmer*, which was hidden in an artillery school at Compiègne, but that a unique opportunity arose to acquire maybe some originals, certainly paper mouldings (*Abklatsche, Papiermulden*) and photographs from Angkor on the Siamese territory."

The agent for this job knew how to bypass the French port authorities in Saigon by using a fake name and nationality. Thomann left Genoa in April 1898 under his new name "A. Gillis" and, three months later, reported on the progress of his campaign in Angkor, where he attempted to make casts with two assistants and 120 "lazy natives." He took "more than 300 mouldings from the most famous bas-reliefs of Angkor Wat, 120 additional paper mouldings, and 130 photos, for a total purchase price of 110,000 Marks."[34] In order to finance this purchase, what followed was a curious strategy exercised by Grünwedel that included a critique of the French translation technique and purpose. Arguing that "the French had moulded only a few parts directly from unclean stone and only from selected scenes, without any scientific basis and just for an instant show effect (*Momenteffekt*)," he utilized the "*Maudsley* procedure to get more details and larger areas" and suggested that the "controlled multiplication" (see Didi-Huberman) of the collection be "offered to other museums in England or the USA." The purchase of Thomann's Angkor collection would, according to

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34 Thomann, Harry. 1898. Letter to Albert Grünwedel, November 24. Files regarding the acquisition of ethnological artifacts by H. Thomann. Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum, Archiv, Pars I.B.31.
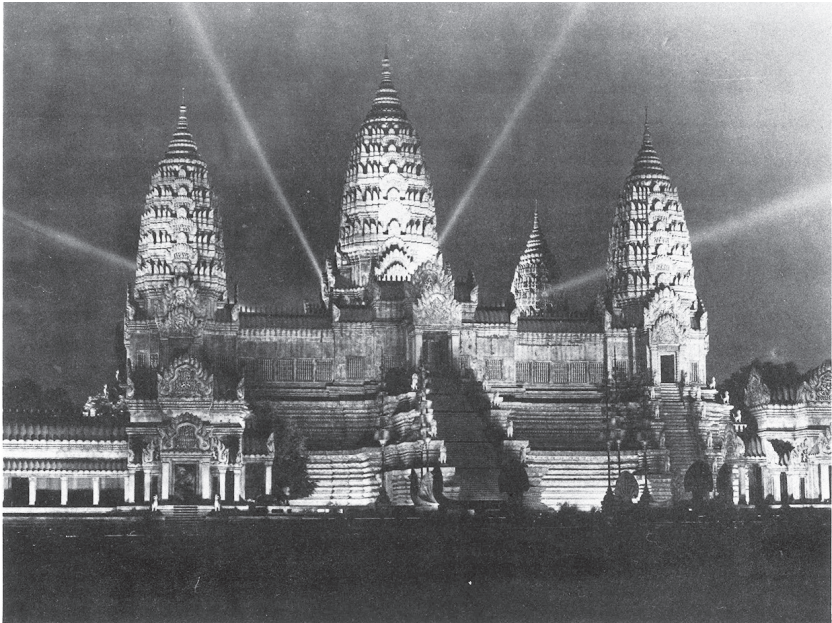
MM. Charles et Gabriel Blanche Arch. Le Temple d'Angkor-Vat. — La façade principale illuminée. Studio G. L. Manuel Frères.
Entreprises Lajoinie constr.

Figure 3: The 1:1 replica of Angkor Wat during the International Colonial
Exhibition in Paris, 1931.

Grünwedel, "help to close this intolerable gap inside the Berlin Museum
[…] and to dwarf the French Angkor project […] an absolutely necessary
measure of German patriotism and for the leading role of the [German]
museum with its collection and research of the Far East." The Thomann
inventory of 442 entries was bought in its entirety in 1903 and displayed as
flat, complete and 1:1 scale copies of the bas-reliefs of Angkor Wat along
the inner gallery walls of the second, and later of the first, floor. Along with
the Schliemann and Turfan Collection, the bas-reliefs of Angkor Wat con-
tributed to Bastian's comparative vision of a "universal archive of human-
ity." This completely two-dimensional and clinical display of the bas-reliefs
from Angkor Wat in Berlin, in the form of a "scholarly 1:1-translation" (com-
pare Benjamin) with a (supposedly) purely scientific claim, couldn't have
been more different from Delaporte's "free translation" within a French-co-
lonial heritage *parcours* in Paris.

However, both versions offered valid strategies with which to substitute
the "Oriental text" of monumental Angkor and helped to pre-define Angkor
Wat as a UNESCO Cultural Heritage site almost a century later.[35] Tragically,

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35 For the discussion of the UNESCO nomination politics and standards of original-
ity and authenticity, see the contribution of Christoph Brumann in this volume
(compare Falser 2010, 2015b).

Figure 4a: Delaporte's 1900 plaster cast replicas from Angkor next to
the original sculptures in the same interior display in a 2013 exhibition
in the Musée Guimet in Paris.

Figure 4b: The copies of the original plaster casts from Angkor Wat
for the former Ethnographic Museum of Berlin, recently rediscovered and
restored for the future Humboldt-Forum.

both collections were almost completely lost in the first half of the twentieth century, but the parts that survived are now being slowly rediscovered and are considered two different accounts—and rare relics of—the *colonial translations of the Orient.* The French story continued until 1937, when Angkor was reconstituted in several universal and colonial exhibitions in Paris and Marseille. During the 1931 International Colonial Exhibition in Paris, Delaporte's small-scale Angkor Wat version had developed into an ephemeral 1:1 replica comprising a surface area of 60 × 60 meters and a total height of 65 meters—the largest *translation qua substitution* of non-European architecture on the European continent ever (fig. 3). The rediscovery of the plaster casts from Angkor has been in full swing in recent years. The Musée Guimet in Paris opened an exhibition about Delaporte's achievements in October 2013 (fig. 4a) and the former plates of the Ethnographic Museum in Berlin have recently undergone a restoration process, and will be incorporated in the future Humboldt Forum (fig. 4b).[36]

Figures

Fig. 1: Book cover of *Le Musée indo-chinois. Antiquités Cambodgiennes*, from around 1900, by the editor Armand Guérinet.
Fig. 2: Photo: Zentralarchiv der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin-Preußischer Kulturbesitz.
Fig. 3: Photo from *Livre d'or de l'Exposition coloniale internationale de Paris 1931*. Paris, 1931, p. 121.
Fig. 4a: Photo: Author, 2013.
Fig. 4b: Photo: Author, 2013.

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36 Compare Falser 2013d, 2012–2014, 2014b; Haak 2016.

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