

H-France Salon
Volume 14, Issue 8, #9

**‘Searching for ‘la petite Sap’:
Embodiment, Agency, and Recovery in Auguste Rodin’s Drawings of the Cambodian
Royal Ballet**

**Juliet Bellow
American University**

On July 28, 1906, the weekly periodical *L’Illustration* printed a photograph in a two-page spread publicizing the sculptor Auguste Rodin’s sketching sessions with dancers from the Cambodian Royal Ballet.¹ The troupe had accompanied King Sisowath (r. 1904-24)—ruler in title only of Cambodia, then a protectorate of France—on his ceremonial visit to the Exposition Coloniale held in Marseille that summer (figures 1-2). Rodin sits in the right foreground of the image, pad on his knee and pencil in hand, his eyes focused on his drawing in progress. On the opposite side of the image stands the subject of Rodin’s drawing: a young dancer, dressed in performance costume, who poses with her heels together, toes apart, knees lightly bent, left arm extended, left hand archly flexed. Two uniformed gendarmes, stationed in the photograph’s hazy middle ground, watch this scene unfold with evident interest. To their right, on a bench next to Rodin, sits a Cambodian child who gazes surreptitiously at the sculptor’s drawing.

Taken—it might be better to say “engineered,” given the ample signs of its staging and composite fabrication—by Émile San Remo, a Marseille-based photographer, this photograph bore a telling caption in *L’Illustration*: “The celebrated sculptor Rodin making sketches after the Cambodian dancers, in the garden of their residence in Marseille.” Like the image itself, this caption economically conveyed the unequal status of the principal characters in this *mise-en-scène*. On the one hand, we have the “celebrated sculptor,” a white, male French artist who received top billing. The whole article centered around Rodin’s perspective: it featured his drawings of the dancers and King Sisowath; an account of his pilgrimage to Marseille by George Bois, Inspector of Professional Education in Indochina and a Delegate to the Exposition Coloniale; and a “transcription” by Bois of Rodin’s comments about Cambodian dance. On the other hand, we have the young female Cambodian dancer whom the caption did not name. It’s conceivable that she was the “little Sap” whom Bois briefly mentioned in his account of Rodin’s sketching sessions with the dancers. Frequently, according to Bois, “the model, quickly tired, abandoned her pose and pouted”; but, appeased by a small gift from Rodin, “the little rebel resumed her position.” One day, he related, “Rodin placed a white [drawing] sheet on his knee and told little Sap: ‘Put your foot there,’ then grasped with his pencil the contour of her foot, and

I would like to thank the editors of this special issue of H-France for the opportunity to participate in this initiative. My thanks also go to Lucie Labbé, for her willingness to share her expertise on the Cambodian Royal Ballet, and to Sandra Boujot, Archiviste chargée des archives institutionnelles, and other staff at the Musée Rodin for their ongoing support of my research.

¹ George Bois, “Le sculpteur Rodin et les danseuses cambodgiennes,” *L’Illustration*, no. 3309 (July 28, 1906): 64-65.

added: ‘OK, tomorrow you will have your slippers; but pose a little longer!’” Sap, Bois explained with astonishment, had demanded that Rodin buy her a new pair of shoes.

Was there a dancer named Sap among those who boarded the steamship *Amiral de Kersaint* in April 1906 for the two-month journey from Phnom Penh to Marseille? How many performers comprised the “Ballet royal du Cambodge,” and how was this troupe formed? Where and how were they trained? Did they have extensive experience performing for the Cambodian courtly elite? Was their voyage to France willing or coerced, and what were the conditions of their labor there? Which dancers posed for Rodin over the course of his four-day sketching campaign?² How did those dancers feel about posing for the “celebrated sculptor,” and how much input did they have about the poses that they struck? These questions are all frustratingly difficult to answer. The historical record contains very little concrete, trustworthy information about the women who comprised the Cambodian Royal Ballet in the summer of 1906. We have newspaper articles that allow us to document the dates and times of their performances in France. There are official records that describe (at times, in excruciating detail) the Exposition Universelle’s displays. A few reviews and a handful of photographs give us glimpses of the dancers’ appearance and of the impressions that they made on French spectators. With these various sources, as with the spread in *L’Illustration*, our access to the dancers is mediated by the colonial politics that occasioned their journey to France, and by the racist ideologies that served as both the origin and byproduct of the French imperial project.

Then we have Rodin’s drawings—around 150 of them in total. As the article in *L’Illustration* pointed out, these images are highly abstract: to the “profanes” unacquainted with Rodin’s style, the text noted, his sketches may seem “a bit summary and odd.”³ A drawing placed just below the photograph of the posing session serves as a case in point. Some of the eight figures scattered across the page are rendered in spindly, fluid, weightless lines that fuse body parts with the motions they traverse. Others are caught in a tangle of dense marks that suggest successive or repeated movements. As the present state of that drawing illustrates (figure 3), Rodin subsequently reworked many of the original pencil sketches, adding layers of watercolor, gouache, pencil, and pen. The resulting images altered the dancers’ bodies in significant ways: Rodin stretched their arms to impossible lengths; removed inconvenient hands or feet; twisted torsos beyond anatomical limits (figure 4). Most disturbingly, he consistently rendered these women’s faces as blank fields, thus depriving them of individuality and full personhood. Yet these drawings, singly and collectively, also project a vivid kinesthetic that forcefully registers the dancers’ presence before Rodin and, I will argue, insists that we acknowledge their contributions to the making of the images.

As part of my ongoing research on these drawings, I have often asked myself a question articulated by the editors of this special issue of *H-France Salon*: “What methods can help us to

² Rodin arrived in Marseille on July 14, and his sketching sessions took place from the 15th to the 19th. The photography session with Sanremo took place on the 19th. Jacques Vilain et al., eds., *Rodin et les danseuses cambodgiennes: Sa dernière passion* (Paris: Édition du musée Rodin, 2006): 13, 39.

³ Bois, 64.

recover the agency of the people who modeled for, or were depicted in, artworks?”⁴ My search for such methods has led me to three different types of sources, broadly speaking: historical documents related to the 1906 troupe; the repertoire of Cambodian dances practiced today; and images of the dancers, chiefly Rodin’s drawings. Below, I describe my encounters with these different forms of information, evaluating what each can and can’t tell us about the Cambodian dancers who performed in France in 1906. In the process of writing this essay, I revisited some of my sources and noticed evidence about the dancers that I previously overlooked, including the story of “little Sap.” So, as much as my account spotlights the absence (or, more accurately, the erasure) of information about the particular individuals that comprised the Cambodian Royal Ballet—a circumstance that testifies to the ways in which national, racial, and gendered power dynamics structure archival collections and scholarly research—it also serves as a potent reminder that some of what we are seeking out has been sitting in our file cabinets and hard drives all along.

I. Documents

I came across the article in *L’Illustration* in a dossier in the Musée Rodin, Paris, devoted to the sculptor’s Marseille sojourn.⁵ This and thousands of other newspaper cuttings in the Musée Rodin’s archives were compiled during the artist’s lifetime: from the 1880s, he subscribed to clippings services that forwarded him copies of articles that mentioned his name. Through an agreement ratified in 1916, Rodin bequeathed his oeuvre, his art collection, and this trove of documents to the French state in exchange for the creation of a museum in his honor located in the Hôtel Biron, his former studio.⁶ The culmination of the artist’s assiduous efforts at self-promotion, this centralized institution now serves as a one-stop shop for Rodin researchers. It contains a wealth of materials, including the sculptor’s correspondence, appointment diaries, sketchbooks, and photographic collections. However, like all archives, this one actively shapes the historical record by “promoting certain voices and leaving others out,” including those of the models who posed for Rodin.⁷ This asymmetry of documentation sustains his ongoing canonization as a “great artist” and reinforces the tendency to treat his models as mere raw material for his art. The effects of this organizing structure on the production of knowledge became clear as I searched the collections for information about the Cambodian dancers. By reading between the lines of the newspaper articles that Rodin collected, and scanning the

⁴ This research on the Cambodian Royal Ballet is related to my current book project in process, tentatively titled *Rodin’s Dancers: Sculpture in the Age of Spectacle*; the present essay is intended as a companion piece to my article “Hand Dance: Auguste Rodin’s Drawings of the Cambodian Royal Ballet,” *Art Bulletin* 101, no. 3 (September 2019): 37-66.

⁵ Many of these sources were published in Vilain, ed., *op cit.*

⁶ Dominique Viéville, *Rodin. Les Métaphores du génie, 1900-1917* (Paris: Musée Rodin and Flammarion, 2014): 92-110.

⁷ Sarah Gutsche-Miller, “The Limitations of the Archive: Lost Ballet Histories and the Case of Madame Mariquita,” *Dance Research* 38, no. 2 (2020): 296; see also Nupur Chaudhuri, Sherry J. Katz, and Mary Elizabeth Perry, eds., *Contesting Archives: Finding Women in the Sources* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010). On Rodin’s models, see Susan Waller, “Rodin and the *modèle italien*,” *Sculpture Journal* 27, no. 1 (2018): 75-88; Héléne Pinet, *Rodin et ses modèles: Le portrait photographié* (Paris: Musée Rodin, 1990).

souvenir programs he saved, I was able to glean facts such as the dates that the troupe performed, the physical settings for their performances, and the titles given to the choreographies that they rendered in France. These data allowed me to form some conjectures about the 1906 dances, and to discern some oblique clues about the dancers' experiences—but I was far from having solid information about them as people or performers.

To supplement what I learned at the Musée Rodin, I consulted the collections of the [Archives Nationales d'Outre Mer](#) (ANOM), which contains the administrative records of the French colonial ministries. There, I found the minutes of the committee formed in Phnom Penh to furnish the Cambodian displays for the 1906 Exposition Coloniale.⁸ These notes make clear the priority that this group placed on “giving visitors the exact impression of the Cambodian kings' palace dances” as well as the political and logistical hurdles involved. First, they had to procure a troupe. The committee's president, one Dr. Hahn, announced at their first session that the newly crowned King Sisowath had repeatedly offered to put his troupe at their disposition.⁹ Fearing that the travel costs for the royal troupe would prove too high, he proposed recruiting a smaller group of dancers from the retinue of Sisowath's predecessor Norodom (r. 1861-1904), who had recently dispersed from the palace. However, at their fourth meeting, on March 21, 1905, the committee noted that it would be a “serious mistake” not to accept Sisowath's gesture of goodwill, and resolved to do so. The minutes then described the composition of an “average corps de ballet,” listing typical roles in order of rank, and the number of dancers required for each, for a total of 41. Other documents in the ANOM generally substantiated this figure. A photographic album commemorating the “Palais du Cambodge,” the showcase for the Cambodian displays in Marseille, stated that the corps de ballet comprised 42 dancers, 12 musicians, 8 drummers, 8 singers, 8 dressers, and 2 jewelers.¹⁰ The accompanying photographs stressed the sheer number of dancers by amassing them in groups and picturing them from a relatively far distance.¹¹ Not surprisingly, then, the materials preserved in the ANOM treated the Cambodian dancers as a generality whose presence in France fulfilled the Colonial Ministry's aim of glorifying the Protectorate and, by extension, French imperial power.

The survival of a travelogue recounting King Sisowath's visit to France, written by Minister of the Palace Okñā Veang Thiounn, allows us to measure the colonial records against those of an insider to the Cambodian court.¹² Originally intended for publication to a Khmerophone audience, this text illuminates how Sisowath used his visit to the Exposition Coloniale as a form

⁸ ANOM, RSC 276.

⁹ Probably Dr. Philippe Hahn, a Strasbourg-born civil servant who accompanied King Sisowath to France: see the introduction to Okñā Veang Thiounn, *Voyage du roi Sisowath en France* [1906], Olivier de Bernon, trans. (Paris: Mercure de France, 2006): xiii-xiv.

¹⁰ ANOM, ICO 8FI/287.

¹¹ Curiously, though, none picture the troupe in full, and one appears to be spliced together from separate photographic negatives.

¹² The original Khmer manuscript is in the collections of the National Library of Phnom Penh (ta. 35/1-7.166); it was fully translated into French in 2006 by Olivier de Bernon; see Thiounn, *op cit.*

of political self-fashioning aimed at audiences at home and abroad.¹³ The journey, Thiounn explained, was made “so that His Majesty may learn about, in order to imitate, the virtues of the great government that is Paris,” thereby cementing “the bridge of friendship between Cambodia and France” and helping “the Khmer Nation [to] develo[p] magnificently in all respects.”¹⁴ Clearly, Sisowath wished to be perceived as a French ally, but also to be accorded quasi-sovereign status. The Cambodian Royal Ballet’s presence in his retinue reinforced this complex symbolism: in Thiounn’s telling, Sisowath “charged his courtiers with ensuring that a ballet troupe accompanied him...because the French have never seen the Khmer ballet dance...for which they have a great desire.”¹⁵ The procurement of a troupe thus demonstrated Sisowath’s control over his court and Cambodia’s cultural heritage, while at the same time affirming his loyalty to the French state.¹⁶ Befitting this status as a political pawn, the Cambodian Royal Ballet figured as an ancillary presence in the travelogue. Their performances merited short paragraphs, whereas Thiounn devoted several pages to *La Maladetta*, a French ballet that Sisowath witnessed at the Paris Opéra.¹⁷ However, his description of the gala performance at the Élysée Palace included the following list of dancers and their roles:

Mmes. Nou Nâm, Prem, Pho, Yin, Sarin, Chan Ham, Thlai, Yoeun, Yèm, Krâchab played the roles of the *kinaris*; Mme. Mit played the role of Preah Virulachak; Mme. N. played the role of Preah Kanurat; Mme. Pho played the role of Thepi; Mme. Prem played the role of Preah Samut, neak Nou Nâm played the role of the young princess Somaly. The demons were played by Mme. Dak Din, Prince Va, Mmes. Pum, Mi, Uy, Kramang, Chray, Tom, Lvey, Thèm, Karyin, Sap.¹⁸

¹³ Sisowath allowed extensive press coverage of every stop in the journey, appearing in numerous French illustrated journals.

¹⁴ Thiounn, 28.

¹⁵ Thiounn, 14. He later claims that the troupe was formed of volunteers, and notes that it was put under the supervision of Okñā Praseuth Sorei Sakdey (Son Diêp), and Sisowath’s daughter, Princess Sumphady. The wording suggests that the 1906 troupe was only a portion of Sisowath’s court dancers: Thiounn, 18.

¹⁶ For more on Cambodian dance as cultural heritage, see Bellow, “Hand Dance,” op cit., and Falser, “Cultural Heritage as Performance: Re-enacting Angkorian Grandeur in Postcolonial Cambodia,” in Ruth Craggs and Claire Wintel, eds., *Cultures of Decolonisation: Transnational Productions and Practices, 1945-70* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016): 126-155.

¹⁷ Thiounn, 123, 135-37, 195-99.

¹⁸ Thiounn, 209-10. Thiounn’s text is unclear as regards the dances to which these roles refer. The dancers that he refers to as playing the roles of the *kinaris* could have taken part in the “Fan Dance.” The rest of the text seems to describe the roles in a dance titled “Preah Samut.” I thank Lucie Labbé for elucidating this point. The travelogue’s second annex, “Composition of the corps de ballet and list of members of the personnel of the Palace accompanying His Majesty in France,” included only ten members of the corps de ballet: Princess Sumphady, the “ballet mistress,” Meah Fuong, lady of the king’s company, Nou Nâm, Prem, Sam-ây, Buoy Huoy, Sa-at, Pho, Mitr, and Sam Ang. This adds four names not listed in the description of the “Fan Dance,” for a total of 34 names out of about 42 dancers who traveled to France. It is unclear why all of the dancers’ names were not recorded.

Thiounn's account gave me some names to work with—a step toward according the dancers agency as individuals in their own right. It also allowed me to confirm that there was indeed a dancer named “Sap” in France, and that she played the role of a demon. A list of the dancers who traveled to France in 1906, now held in the Cambodian National Archives, corroborates some of this information.¹⁹ Sap is the 26th entry; she is described as 17 years old, and an orphan. This is as far as the trail of documents took me.

II. Repertoire

Embodying the role of Moni Mekhala, the ocean goddess, Malene Sam advances from stage right. She syncopates her steps, alternating between small and large, keeping her knees bent just slightly. Her arms and hands move continuously: her elbows slowly undulate, complementing the winding sound of the *sralai* (an oboe-like wind instrument), while her hands pivot around her wrists, and her fingers form a series of mudras. When she reaches center stage, she turns toward the audience with an impassive but direct gaze. As the music shifts to a quicker tempo, she crosses her feet back and forth in a tight range, keeping her arms in constant motion. She mounts a low dais and kneels, bringing her palms together to touch her forehead. Rising again, she performs a series of balances on alternating legs. With the supporting leg in soft *plié*, she raises the other in front of her at hip height, knee and foot turned subtly out, then behind her, with the sole of the foot to the sky. Her arms, bent at the elbows, move in counterpoint, so that the arm opposite the raised leg is also raised, the other near the waist. Her movement in this passage is so slow that she frequently comes to near stillness. At several moments, she strikes poses reminiscent of ones that I have seen in Rodin's sketches.

Malene Sam's dance is the opening sequence of “Ream Eyso and Moni Mekhala,” a work in the repertory of the [Sophiline Arts Ensemble](#). This troupe was formed by Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, among the first generation trained in Cambodian classical technique after the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979). I attended a [performance](#) given by the ensemble in October 2019 at the National Museum of Asian Art in the hope that, by watching current Cambodian dancers, I might be able to fill some gaps in the archival records of the 1906 troupe.²⁰ My use of this performance as a source was prompted by Priya Srinivasan's argument that “a focus on corporeality and kinesthetic exchange offers an opening for bodies that have been unaccounted for”—including her research subjects, Indian “nautch” dancers who performed in the United

¹⁹ Cambodian National Archives, RS 419, page 2. I am indebted to Lucie Labbé for sharing this document with me.

²⁰ My description of this dance is based on my memories of the performance as well as two filmed versions: one taken on [October 19, 2019](#) and posted to the National Museum of Asian Art's Facebook page, and the YouTube version linked above. There are no films of the 1906 troupe. In 1920, Ananda Coomaraswamy filmed a troupe performing in front of buildings in the Angkor complex. Lucie Labbé deduces from the costuming and performance style that this was an amateur troupe, not court dancers: “Danseuses et divinités: Modalités et enjeux de l'apprentissage de la danse du cour cambodgienne” (Ph.D. thesis, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2016): 232. I viewed a film of court dancers made in 1938 (Collection of the New York Library for the Performing Arts, *MGZHB 8-1477) as part of my research.

States in the early twentieth century.²¹ To that end, Srinivasan mobilized her experiences as a viewer and practitioner of Bharata Natyam technique. Through the sweat of her own dancing labor, and that of the present-day dancers she watched, she aimed to uncover and activate traces of the “important but nameless” early twentieth-century nautch performers. By positing this “bodily archive” as a complement to written records, Srinivasan not only offered a means of access to past performances, but also legitimated embodied experience as a form of knowledge and a vehicle for cultural transmission.²²

Cambodian dance offers ripe material for such an embodied form of historical investigation. Like other genres, the technique and choreographic repertory are preserved through dancers’ muscle memories, and are passed from one dancer to another through bodily interaction (in classrooms, on stages, and the like). Indeed, Sophiline’s dance knowledge came from a teacher who trained with a dancer surnamed “Mith”—possibly the “Mit” named by Thiounn. Sophiline was told that Mith specialized in playing the “Giant” role; that she traveled to France in 1906; and that she modeled for Rodin.²³ Some of the works currently performed by Sophiline’s company may also be related to dances performed by the 1906 troupe. I watched Malene Sam’s performance with particular interest because, according to Thiounn, the Cambodian Royal Ballet’s gala performance in Marseille opened with “The Story of Young Mekhala.”²⁴ By seeing how Malene Sam acted out the role of Mekhala, I could imagine how dancers in 1906 carried their bodies and moved through space.

However, while Cambodian dancers of today afford us valuable insights into past performances, we must be careful not to equate them with the dancers of 1906. First, because we ought not treat dancers as interchangeable: Malene Sam’s performance demonstrates just how much each dancer’s unique charisma, execution, and interpretation inflect a given role or choreography. Second, because Cambodian dance underwent profound changes in status and practice after 1906. The success of Sisowath’s troupe in France made the court dance a powerful symbol of Cambodian identity—one that French administrators and post-colonial regimes took steps to both preserve and modernize.²⁵ Its association with court culture put the troupe in the crosshairs during the genocide of the late 1970s.²⁶ Its subsequent revival necessitated a reconstruction of the repertory, a [project spearheaded](#) by Princess Norodom Buppha Devi and extended by the

²¹ Priya Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012): 72.

²² See also Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Bill Bissell and Linda Caruso Haviland, eds., *The Sentient Archive: Bodies, Performance, and Memory* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2018); and André Lepecki, “The Body as Archive: Will to Re-Enact and the Afterlives of Dances,” *Dance Research Journal* 42, no. 2 (Winter 2010): 28-48.

²³ Communication with Sophiline Cheam Shapiro via Facebook Messenger, February 8, 2022.

²⁴ Thiounn, 135.

²⁵ Sasagawa Hideo, “Post/colonial Discourses on the Cambodian Court Dance,” *Southeast Asian Studies* 42, no. 4 (March 2005): 418-441; Labbé, op cit.

²⁶ Toni Samantha Phim and Ashley Thompson, *Dance in Cambodia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Denise Heywood, *Cambodian Dance: Celebration of the Gods* (Bangkok: Rover Books, 2008).

Sophiline Arts Ensemble, among other contemporary troupes. Ironically, Rodin's drawings participated in this process of recovery. His renown, and his contact with the 1906 troupe, projected an authoritative status onto his images; widely disseminated, his renderings became incorporated into the "bodily archive" of Cambodian dance. Rodin's depictions, in other words, have served as a source for late twentieth and early twenty-first century Cambodian dancers and choreographers, much as the dancers of 1906 did for Rodin.²⁷

III. Images

Looking at Rodin's drawings of Cambodian dancers is a visceral experience—at least, it is for me. Though I am not trained in Cambodian dance technique, I feel the poses depicted in Rodin's drawings in my body in various ways. A close-up of a flexed hand (figure 5) might prompt me to bend my own back slightly, so that the skin and muscles stretch tight across my palm. A leaning torso initiates a subtle shift of internal weight in my upper body. A dancer supporting herself on a single bent leg reminds me of the stress this puts on the calf and quadricep muscles; I think of watching Malene Sam, and project into the drawing the tiny ankle tremors that show how much stamina it took to sustain that pose. Similarly, while I have only basic training in drawing practice, Rodin's marks awaken feelings of kinesthetic empathy in me. Looking at thick marks of graphite, I can feel the hand pressure required to produce them. The long arc of a pen line allows me to imagine the way his arm swept over the drawing sheet; squiggly lines evoke the haste he may have felt as he struggled to set his viewing experience down on paper.²⁸

My experience of these sketches makes me question the tendency to see in them only Rodin's (white, male, European) perspective. Kathy Foley, for example, characterizes the drawings as vehicles for his Orientalist fantasies about "Asian" women, while the actual dancers who modeled for him "have dimmed or disappeared into the representation that he constructed for them."²⁹ Foley is right to remind us of the unequal power dynamic that structured Rodin's interactions with his Cambodian models, inequities that mirrored and abetted the premise behind the Exposition Coloniale. Rodin arranged the posing sessions in Marseille through a direct appeal to Jules Charles-Roux, the General Commissioner for the Colonial Exposition; Charles-Roux facilitated an introduction to Princess Sumphady, Sisowath's daughter and the troupe's

²⁷ Lucie Labbé provides an in-depth discussion of Princess Norodom Buppha Devi's efforts to reconstruct the early 20th-century technique in a work that pays direct homage to Rodin's drawings: see "Cambodia's 'Royal Ballet' and 'Classical Dance': Defining an Embodied Practice from Royal Belonging to World Heritage," forthcoming in Stéphanie Khoury and Celia Tuchman, eds., *Stagecraft and Cultural Expression: The Intersectionality of Cambodia's Intangible Heritage*.

²⁸ On the bodily experience of abstract art, see Nell Andrew, *Moving Modernism: The Urge to Abstraction in Painting, Dance, Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020): xxiv.

²⁹ Kathy Foley, "Hanako and the European Imagination," *Asian Theatre Journal* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 76. For similar interpretations, see Stephen Feeke and Ramsay Burt, *Rodin: Rhythm and Ritual* (Leeds: Henry Moore Sculpture Trust, 1998) and Marco Deyasi, "French Visual Culture and 'Indochina': Modernism, Primitivism, and Colonialism, 1889-1931" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Duke University, 2007).

guardian, who likely oversaw these interactions.³⁰ This situation invested Rodin with the authority to record the dancers' poses and gestures by translating them into a graphic form. As a result, like all archival sources, these images provide a distorted, incomplete view of the past. But, taken too far, this logic prevents us from ascribing any agency to the dancers, or granting importance to the skill set that they brought to posing for Rodin.³¹ Instead, I propose that we regard the marks on the page as shaped both by a dancer's embodied actions and by Rodin's hand, each responding to the other. This approach rests in part on the concept of "archives of watching," posited by Kate Elswit to challenge distinctions between a dance event and the viewing experience: spectatorship, she notes, "is a relational practice, full of productive uncertainties between where dancing bodies end and the bodies perceiving them begin."³²

This interpretive framework allows us to read Bois's story about the modeling sessions in Marseille with new eyes. We notice, for example, that Bois acknowledges the *work* of posing—the fatigue experienced by Rodin's models. He also makes clear the extent of Rodin's negotiations with the dancers. Recall that, according to Bois, Rodin told "little Sap" where to place her foot while she posed. This contradicted the artist's oft-repeated assertion that "I never indicate a movement to [my models]," but simply "seize and retain" the poses that they naturally offered him.³³ Indeed, we learn from Bois that Rodin had to continually cajole the dancers into posing, and that the dancers often rebelled against his demands. If Bois is to be believed, Sap boldly demanded remuneration (in the form of new shoes) in exchange for her labor. The picture given is not one of an artist in full control of the situation, but of a dynamic, unpredictable encounter.

With this in mind, we might use the photograph published in *L'Illustration* as a point of departure for a new, speculative account of Rodin's interactions with the dancer pictured—let's call her Sap.³⁴ Having pulled strings with the Colonial Ministry to arrange a posing session with members of Sisowath's troupe, Rodin sits down on a bench in the garden of the villa where the dancers are staying. To prepare for this session, Sap donned her performance costume and warmed up her body. Speaking through an interpreter, Rodin asked Sap to perform her part in the "Fan Dance," which he saw at the Pré-Catelan theater a few days earlier, during the troupe's brief trip to Paris. Typically, she wore a mask to play the demon role; this being an unusual circumstance, she danced without it. Her large motions, which communicated the power and ambition associated with this character, initially dictated the actions of Rodin's hand. Suddenly, at a moment of particular interest, Rodin asked Sap to stand still. Having danced the night before, she felt the strain that this pose put on her shoulders, her lower back, her thighs. Still, she held it...until she could no longer. Rodin convinced her to resume the pose. As he worked on his

³⁰ See Vilain, ed., 39 and Deyasi, 118-119. Rodin was also on friendly terms with Colonial Minister Georges Leygues, who helped the sculptor get a ticket to see the Cambodian Royal Ballet's performances at the Pré-Catelan on July 10: Vilain, ed., 12.

³¹ Waller, 84.

³² Kate Elswit, *Watching Weimar Dance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): xviii.

³³ Auguste Rodin, "Rodin par lui-même," *Je sais tout (supplement d'art)* (March 1910): 210; quoted in Waller, 75.

³⁴ I take inspiration for this speculative account from Saidiya Hartman's concept of critical fabulation: "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 26 (June 2008): 1-14.

drawing, she stole a glimpse at it. His depiction stayed with her; over time, it changed the way that she felt the pose inside her body and how she expressed it externally.

We will likely never be able to know with certainty whether a dancer named Sap did pose for Rodin—or, if so, which of the 150-odd drawings capture some semblance of her.³⁵ That we cannot verify these simple facts testifies to the barriers thrown up by the historical archive, which reifies and perpetuates the hierarchical relationship between artist and model. What can we do to correct this problem? How can we responsibly study figures like Sap, whose images may have been preserved, but who otherwise constitute “ephemeral archival presences”?³⁶ In the analysis provided above, I have modeled one way to do so, namely, to work into the artworks that bear their likenesses and hold the traces of their physical presence. Such images will never allow us to assume the historian’s authoritative, “objective” voice. They do, however, enable us to write “the history of an unrecoverable past”—to construct “a narrative of what might have been.”³⁷



Figure 1: Émile San Remo, *Rodin Sketching a Cambodian Dancer*, 1906 (detail of figure 2)

³⁵ Christina Buley-Urbe lists “Soum, Yem, and Sap” as Rodin’s favorite models, and notes that Soum’s name appears on two of Rodin’s drawings, Inv. D. 2494 and D. 4504. I have not yet been able to correlate “Soum” with any of the extant lists of dancers: see Vilain, ed., 39.

³⁶ Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016): 1.

³⁷ Hartman, 12.



Figure 3: Rodin, *Study of Seven Cambodian Dancers*, 1906



Figure 4: Auguste Rodin, *Cambodian Dancer*, 1906



Figure 5: Rodin, *Hand Study of a Cambodian Dancer*, 1906

About the Author: Juliet Bellow is Associate Professor of Art History at American University. Her publications include *Modernism on Stage: The Ballets Russes and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (Ashgate, 2013); articles in *Art Bulletin*, *Art Journal*, *American Art*, and *Modernism/modernity*; chapters in edited volumes including *The Cambridge Companion to Ballet*, *The Modernist World*, and *Foreign Artists and Communities in Modern Paris, 1870-1914*; and contributions to exhibition catalogues on Sonia Delaunay, Merce Cunningham, Henri Matisse, and Auguste Rodin. She is currently at work on a book project entitled *Rodin's Dancers: Sculpture in the Age of Spectacle*.

H-France Salon

ISBN 2150-4873

Copyright © 2022 by H-France, all rights reserved.