

69 Buddha statuettes discovered at Vat Muang Kang

On the morning of July 14, 2025, the workers on the restoration site of the library of Vat Muang Kang Monastery (Champasak district, Champasak province) unearthed 69 ancient statuettes of Buddha. These images are a distinctive type of artifacts, made of a resin core – *keson dokmai* – covered by a thin sculpted metal sheet.

The restoration of the library

The restoration of Vat Muang Kang's library (fig. 1) is carried out as part of the CHAMPA project (Cultural HeritAge Management, Protection and Attractiveness of CHAMPASAK District, 2021-2027), funded by the French Development Agency (AFD), in collaboration with the office of the World Heritage site of Vat Phou and the French School of the Far East (EFEO) for its expertise and recommendations. The works are carried out by the company LEUANAM (fig. 2).



Fig.1 – Vat Muang Kang's library in 2010



Fig.2 - Vat Muang Kang's library under restoration, in 2025

There are known records about Buddhist monks officing in Vat Muang Kang - also called Vat Phuthavanaram - as from the beginning of the 20th c.. The construction of the current buildings can be related to this period, according to their architecture: they feature a unique blend of colonial, Vietnamese, and traditional Laotian styles. These buildings are forming a remarkable complex comprising of several structures types: the Praying Hall (*Vihan*), the Library (*Ho Triptika*), the Meeting Hall (*Ho Jek*), and three residences for monks (*Kuti*). The library originally housed one of the largest collections of sacred manuscripts on latan leaves in Laos.

Work to consolidate the foundations and renovate the Library was initiated in 2024, due to significant subsidence, and in order to preserve this old and remarkable construction in danger. This renovation is expected to be complete in 2026, and should allow to retrieve some of the building's original functions as a conservation place for the manuscripts, and, maybe, as a study place. It is also planned to exhibit some of the manuscripts there, in order to promote the richness of Laotian heritage to visitors, and to raise awareness about the necessity to preserve it.

The discovery of the *keson dokmai* images

In the morning of Monday, July 14, 2025, two workers of the LEUANAM company were digging the ground nearby a section of the interior walls of the building, on the West side of the interior gallery, in order to prepare the installation of the structural consolidation slab. On that occasion, they unearthed a terracotta jar with a lid - of 34 centimeters height, 24 centimeters diameters, and buried about 45 centimeters deep - containing the

statuettes. The breaks of the jar seem to be recent. 20 fragments were brought to Vat Phou Museum, that allow to reconstruct the general shape of the jar, which remain incomplete (fig. 3).



Fig. 3 – The terracotta jar that contained the artifacts (fragment assembled by Chanpenh Phommavandy), Vat Phu Museum, 07/31/2025

After proceeding to the extraction of the jar and statuettes, the workers' foreman informed the village chief and the Vat Phou office, which sent its archaeologists to the site.

The excavated corpus includes 69 statuettes - 33 of which are acephalous -, 15 heads and several fragments of *uṣṇīṣa* and pedestals (fig. 4). The statuettes are between 10 to 18 centimeters height and 3 to 5 centimeters width. It is entirely comprised of *keson dokmai* images: sculptures that are composed of a plant resin core - *keson dokmai*, "flower pollen" – and covered with a very thin metal sheet sculpted with repousse, and engraved (fig. 5).



Fig. 4 – Discovery of the Buddha statuettes, 07/14/2025



Fig. 5 - Discovery of the Buddha statuettes, 07/14/2025

Other discoveries of this type were made in monasteries, in similar burying contexts. For example, 200 statuettes were discovered during archaeological excavations of an ancient monastery in Houay Sa Hua (Champasak), in 1992. More recently, 337 Buddha statuettes were unearthed in That In Hang (Savannakhet province), in 2018. These discoveries attest to the function of *keson dokmai* images: these are cultic objects assembled to be given as offerings, in above-mentioned cases as sacred deposits. They can be accompanied by other types of artefacts (small bronze Buddhas, *phra patima*, etc.). The oldest known images in *keson dokmai*, dated according to their inscriptions, were made in the seventeenth or eighteenth century.

Description of the artifacts

The 69 statuettes (fig. 6) are figuring the Buddha seated on an ornated pedestal. Most of the images are performing the *mudrā* of “taking the earth as a witness” (*bhūmiśparsamudrā*), or “victory over Māra” (*māravijaya*). Six of them are in a meditation posture (*dhyānamudrā*). These *mudrā* are the same as those of the sculptures discovered at Houay Sa Hua.



Fig. 6 – The entire discovered collection, Vat Phou Museum, 07/16/2025

The bases' decorations (geometric motifs, lotus petals and foliage) are organized in several registers ("tiered parts") that contain inscriptions for 32 of them, in the lower section. Some inscriptions are short, while others are rounding the base of the sculpture entirely. Some are difficult to see. They probably are written in Tam script, and will be further studied. Reading the inscriptions might help for a better understanding of the making circumstances of these artifacts, and of their dating.

Artifacts' Conservation

The members of Vat Phou Division were entrusted with the artifacts, upon the village chief and Wat Muang Kang's venerable approvals.

The Museum's conservation workshop (Chanpenh Phommavandy, Thongbang Phengsawat, Soubanh Kanhaphanh, Sisamai Silaphet) will ensure their conservation with appropriate techniques. This is an opportunity for Vat Phou museum's unit to put into practice the knowledge acquired during the conservation training courses organized and led by Bertrand Porte (EFEO) and several experts (including Armand Desbat, CNRS), and to learn new packing practices with Sophie Biard (EFEO).

The following actions are already taken, or currently undergoing:

- Temporary packing of the artifacts with polyurethane foam and Tyvek (fig. 7 to 9)

- Detailed inventory, including descriptions and pictures (fig. 10 to 12)



Fig. 7 – Preparation of inventory and conservation actions to be taken, Vat Phou Museum, 07/16/2025



Fig. 8 – Packing preparation, Vat Phou Museum, 07/16/2025



Fig. 9 – Packing, Vat Phou Museum, 07/16/2025



Fig. 10 – Inventory works: pictures, Vat Phou Museum, 07/16/2025



Fig. 11 – Inventory picture, Vat Phou Museum, 07/16/2025



Fig. 12 – Inventory works: measurements and descriptions, Vat Phou Museum, 07/16/2025

While some sculptures are in good state of preservation, many of them are badly deteriorated. Among 69 statuettes, half are quite damaged (missing heads, damaged bases). Specific metal restoration actions may be undertaken, under Bertrand Porte's supervision, and backed by Donna Strahan's recommendations (expert in the conservation of precious metals).

The following actions are planned:

- Cleaning of the ground remaining inside sculptures' crevices: mechanical removal and cleaning with distilled water
- Tests for a paraloid solution coating to protect the metallic surfaces. If the test is good, this treatment will be applied to all the artifacts.
- Assembling of the matching fragments.

After the completion of Wat Muang Kang Library's restoration, it is considered to display the artifacts there, with display solutions guaranteeing their safety and long-term preservation. This exhibition would give a better visibility and a better understanding of local religious practices to the visitors.

[For more information: The art of metal in Laos](#) (C.Hawixbrock 2000)

It is important to recall here the procedure to be followed in case of the discovery of ancient artifacts: the Vat Phou office must be informed as soon as archaeological assets/remains are identified, and no extraction or attempt of extraction should be made without the presence of qualified Laotian archaeologists from the Vat Phou office.

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