

Introduction

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This exhibition has been over a decade in the making¹. In 2001 Diane Dufilho, then director of the Meadows Museum, contacted me at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). She explained that the Meadows' core holdings consisted of a collection of 365 paintings and drawing by the French-born artist, Jean Despujols (b. Salles en Gironde, France, 1886 - d. Shreveport, Louisiana, 1965). In 1936 Despujols won the prestigious *Prix de l'Indochine*. This enabled him to travel for eighteen months in French Indochina (today Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos) in 1936-38. The museum's collection of his work primarily consisted of landscapes and portraits, primarily of women, made during that time. Many of the portraits show the dress of ethnic minorities of the region in great detail; Diane felt that exhibiting the paintings next to examples of that attire would make the images 'come to life' for a modern audience. I suggested that Dr. Michael Howard, a specialist in the extraordinary variety of dress found in the region, should join the project. In 2003 he and I made the first of several visits to Shreveport to determine an exhibition strategy and select the paintings and drawings for display. This was done in consultation with Diane and Dr. Dana Kress, professor of French at the college and familiar with Despujols's diaries. Then Michael and his wife, Kim Be Howard, began collecting the traditional clothing associated with the portraits and providing technical information on textile production and embellishment for each ensemble. Owing to limited staff and gallery space the team decided to divide the material into three exhibitions, organized geographically based on Despujols's travels in Indochina. The first, *The Meadows Museum and the Odyssey of Jean*

¹ The author would like to thank Diane Dufilho, former director of the Meadows Museum. Without her vision, leadership and dedication this project would never have come to fruition.

Despujols: the Journey Begins (2007), focused on peoples of the rural lowlands of Indochina. *The Odyssey of Jean Despujols Continues* (2008) featured people inhabiting the Central Highlands (in central Vietnam and Laos). The final exhibition, *The Odyssey of Jean Despujols Concludes* (2009), included groups living in the Northern Highlands (in northern Laos and Cambodia). All were presented at the Meadows and were well attended. The plan was ultimately to combine them into one traveling exhibition, accompanied by this publication.

At first glance, the art of Jean Despujols seems to consist simply of highly skilled paintings and drawings of the landscape and peoples of French Indochina. They are rendered in the realist style of European academic painting of the 1930s, as taught in the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Bordeaux, France, where the artist trained. Despujols's detailed personal diary documenting in detail his stay in Indochina was made available to the authors in the original, unabridged French for the first time, at last permits a far more nuanced and complex view of the artist, his subjects and the French colonial experience.

The four essays pair neatly into two very different, yet equally valid, analyses of Despujols's work, presenting a multi-faceted view ranging from the theoretical to the descriptive. Two of the authors, Panivong Norindr and Nora Taylor, come from the disciplines of comparative literature and art history respectively, while Michael Howard and Leedom Lefferts are cultural anthropologists. All focus on mainland Southeast Asia—the former French colonies of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, in particular—as their primary areas of research. Thus the reader will find an analysis of Despujols's "colonial gaze" (Panivong) and his role as a colonial artist (Taylor) juxtaposed to Lefferts's reconstruction of Despujols's travels linked to specific paintings, and Howard's descriptive essays on the varied ethnic groups and their dress and textile production in the region.

Nora Taylor's essay, "Jean Despujols: a Colonial Painter in Indochina", highlights the contradictions and dualities in Despujols's art and personality demonstrating that they are consistent with colonialist attitudes of his era. She situates the artist in his time and place, comparing and contrasting his sexualized female portraits with those of his Lao, Vietnamese and Cambodian artistic contemporaries. In "Jean Despujols's Colonial Gaze: Aestheticizing French Indochina", Panivong Norindr analyzes the artist as a colonial voyeur, who, like others before him, romanticized the "exotic" peoples and landscapes he encountered. Both authors comment on Despujols's stated goal of "collecting" images of female "types" in his portraits; Norindr also places that "explorer's" impulse in its colonial context.

Despite these issues, Despujols's painted representations of his sitters' clothing is accurate enough (with the occasional artistic liberty) to provide a valuable record of styles of local dress for many ethnic groups in the region as they existed just prior to World War II (Howard), and his drawings and diary so detailed and precise that his entire stay in Indochina can be deciphered and mapped (Lefferts).

In his essay, "Despujols's Indochina Journey: Art, Space, and Time", Leedom Lefferts surveys the extensive notes the artist made during his journey and correlates them for the first time with his paintings and sketches. Given the massive amount of written and visual material, this is no simple accomplishment: Despujols's notes run to 2, 560 pages, his artwork (including paintings, sketches, maps and diagrams) numbers some 670 items. This essay provides the reader with new insights into Despujols's environment and his reactions to his subjects—whether the natural environment (greatly differing from that the artist had encountered in Europe), archaeological ruins (Angkor Wat in particular), or people (both those he painted and those he

met)—as well as his own views on the artistic production that was often (but not always) the result.

In mainland Southeast Asia clothing and the textiles are multivalent objects. Among the many messages they convey are self and group identity; social status (e.g. single or married, monk or layman)²; political allegiances and geographical associations;³ and subtle distinctions of individual creativity and skill. To a lesser extent than in Despujols's time (late 1930s), handmade textiles still function as a vital form of artistic expression, primarily for women for whom weaving and decorating cloth is an essential element of their female identity in society. In ceremonies marking transitional states, males are often represented by metal objects (swords, knives, metal bowls) and females by weaving implements and cloth. The processing, production and decoration of cloth for clothing and household use are virtually the sole purview of women. Cloth is protective, first in a purely practical way; the leggings (puttees) worn by many highland women in Southeast Asia, protect their legs from scratches while they walk in the forest. The patterns on the cloth also provide spiritual protection for the wearer's life and soul, and by extension, for her family and village. Some of the handwoven and hand-decorated textiles of the peoples Despujols photographed and painted are twentieth-century survivals of ancient weaving traditions in Southeast Asia. A recently discovered sixth-century bronze statue of a woman using a backstrap (body tension) loom of a type still in use in remote areas of Southeast Asia attests to the antiquity of weaving in the region and the continuity of technology.⁴

² See Norindr's discussion of an incident where Despujols put a married woman's headdress on a fifteen-year old girl to balance the portrait of her he was painting. The head cloth symbolized a status to which she was not yet entitled, upsetting her. See Despujols's portrait entitled, *Tega*.

³ For a ground-breaking study of Lao-Tai textiles as indicators of tributary relationships directly related to geographical location rather than ethnicity alone, see Patricia Cheesman, *Lao-Tai Textiles: The Textiles of Xam Nuea and Muang Phuan*, Chiang Mai: Studio Naenna Co., Ltd., 2004.

⁴ The clay core of this lost-wax bronze statue has been scientifically dated to the 6th c. C.E. See Robyn Maxwell, *The Bronze Weaver*, Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2006.

But who were the people Despujols encountered and documented and what was Indochina like in the 1930s? Michael Howard's first essay, "The Peoples of French Indochina" will help familiarize the reader with the ethnic diversity of the colony in Despujols's time. He briefly traces the origins of the various linguistic groups as they migrated about 4,000 years ago from places as diverse as China and Borneo to what are now Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. An important distinction he makes is between peoples living in the lowlands (both urban and rural) and those residing in the mountainous highlands. As Howard explains, these two groups rarely interacted, as might be expected, it is the ethnic mix making up urban dwellers and lowland farmers who had the most contact with Europeans (and others through time, including the Chinese and Indians).

The Textiles and Dress of the Peoples of French Indochina, Howard's second essay, illuminates the complexities of ethnicity, dress, adornment, and indigenous belief systems. Highlighting the diverse realities of people in 1930s Indochina, Howard points out that it was a time when many ethnic groups, particularly those in the Highlands, still lived in their traditional (that is, pre-colonial) manner. In contrast, those in the more urbanized lowlands participated to a much greater extent in the "modern" world; thus the greatest impact of foreign ideas, dress and modes of artistic expression can be found in and around the cities. Howard describes in some detail the materials, techniques and stylistic variations of attire that appear in Despujols's work.

In the exhibition the portraits are paired with costumes similar to those worn by the sitters. This juxtaposition creates an extraordinarily accurate record of the ethnic groups of Indochina in the 1930s and one that is invaluable today. At the same time, both Jean Despujols's technical virtuosity and the artistry of the unknown women whose beautiful clothes are on display are immediately apparent.