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Phare Ponleu Selpak of the arts | Cambodia



In 2014, ASEF culture360 invites a **number of special correspondents** to get an insight on issues that are highly discussed in the cultural sector across Asia and Europe.

Magali An Berthon, will explore arts, crafts and design topics focusing on Southeast Asia and France. Through a number of in-depth articles and interviews, she will attempt to portray creative profiles emerging from a new young generation of artists and designers without borders. She will also focus on inspiring initiatives renewing and promoting local crafts and traditions.

In this third article, Magali An shares the **story of an inspiring non-profit organization based in Cambodia** called Phare Ponleu Selpak, located near Battambang city. The association provides educational support and artistic activities to socially vulnerable children and young adults and has reached a worldwide recognition with its circus school.



Establishing peace and cultural development through the arts and youth is the main goal of the [Phare Ponleu Selpak](#) association, a remarkable initiative that uses cultural identity as its essential milestone.

For more than twenty years, Cambodia has been shaken by a dramatic civil war which has deeply damaged their culture in all sections of society, damaging the most vulnerable populations and the younger generations in particular.

A STORY THAT STARTED IN THE REFUGEE CAMP

It all began in 1986 at a Cambodian refugee camp located near the Thai border, where young children were invited to participate in art workshops to express themselves and maintain a connection with their Khmer identity. Inspired by the positive action there, nine former refugees, Srey Bandaul, Tor Vutha, Khuon Det, Lon Lor, Chea Yoa, Svay Sareth, Chan Vuttouk, Dy Mala and Rin Nak, along with their French drawing teacher Veronique Decrop, decided to return to Cambodia. They were determined to create a project that would help the children overcome the trauma of civil war.

They chose to purchase a land in the Anh Chanh village near Battambang city. They selected this poor rural area because of the many landless families who were settling there again, following repatriation from the refugee camps.

THE BRIGHTNESS OF THE ARTS



The committed young people immediately started the construction of their first building and they eventually founded the Phare Ponleu Selpak organization in 1994, where they first offered drawing classes for children. Phare Ponleu Selpak means "**the brightness of the arts**", with the khmer words « Ponleu » for « light » and « Selpak » for « art », picked to express how the light of art would overcome the darkness of war.

The association has since expanded, having developed a specific approach to meet the needs of fragile children, young adults and families through three intervention and activity sectors: **social and community actions, educational arts and cultural programmes** which promote the Cambodian culture.

Nowadays Phare Ponleu Selpak follows an ambitious plan, welcoming on its site more than 1,400 children, adolescents and young adults daily. In 18 years of existence, the organization's center has grown into a considerable campus providing a **visual arts school and a performing arts training center, a child development unit, a public school and a library area.**

A WORLD RECOGNIZED CIRCUS SCHOOL



The organization's members strongly believe that **art can be a force behind social change**, as it would give street children a purpose and the opportunity to get out of poverty. Recognized for the quality of the teaching and the high artistic and technical level, Phare Ponleu Selpak's **circus school** is seen as one of their biggest achievements. This institution was founded in October 1998 on the impulse of Khuon Det, one of the founders who had a solid experience in martial arts and gymnastics.

Khuon Det followed a **training programme at the National Circus School of the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh** and he came back to Anh Chanh with three teachers who stayed at the center for several months to contribute to the setting up of the future school. This valuable partnership is still on-going until now, one to three teachers from the National School are sent to Battambang to give master classes two times a year. The young students receive high-quality training in many disciplines such as acrobatics, juggling, clowning, balancing and dancing to obtain a complete education in circus arts.

The **circus school receives 120 young Cambodians each day** and currently hosts three different troupes, the most experienced students have joining the first circus troupe. Since 2002, the company has been performing very regularly, **not only in Cambodia but also touring worldwide**, receiving critical acclaim and international recognition. It is a great opportunity for the young artists to promote their talent and earn a regular income. They are paid for each performance and are given the chance to make their first steps as professional circus artists, showcasing the full extent of their skills.

Read more about Phare Ponleu Selpak:

<http://www.phareps.org/>

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