

# Exhibition Review: Remembering S-21 Victims Through Their Clothes

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## **Keywords**

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## **Abstract**

The exhibition “Remembering S-21 Victims through their Clothes: Textile Preservation at Tuol Sleng Museum” at Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh, Cambodia introduces visitors to the history, triage, and conservation of thousands of clothes found at S-21. From 1976 to 1979, S-21 was the main detention centre during the Khmer Rouge regime, incarcerating and killing approximately 18,000 people. Clothes and fabrics circulated in the prison, collected from the prisoners and the dead and reused by guards, until these items were abandoned in the facilities at the fall of the regime in January 1979. From 2018 to 2021, with the support of the US Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation and the Cambodian Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, US textile conservator Julia Brennan devised an ambitious textile conservation and training plan in close collaboration with the in-house conservator Kho Chenda and her newly formed staff. This review discusses the specificity of this textile collection. A compelling selection of pieces supported by didactic panels in Khmer and English reveal a diversity of typologies of garments, from military accessories to male and female civilian shirts and children’s clothes. The garments present distinctive features, such as extensive mending and patches, telling a history of adaptability and survival of Cambodian people in the 1970s. In doing so, the curatorial framework emphasizes the crucial importance of textile conservation in preserving these objects, standing as material testimonies for the S-21 victims.

Nested in the southwest of Phnom Penh, Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum embodies the brutality of the Khmer Rouge regime by welcoming visitors to the very site of S-21, the main secret interrogation and prison centre under Democratic Kampuchea. Listening to an audio guide, visitors silently walk in the halls where prisoners were interrogated, shackled in cells, and tortured. During their visit, they pass in front of endless galleries of stunned faces of men, women and even children photographed in black and white, which leave an indelible mark in their minds (Figure 1). When it comes to what happened at S-21, the general audience is often less aware of other crucial documents and materials evidencing the life of hardship of the prisoners held on-site.

An exhibition, which was on view from December 2021 to March 2023 at the museum, offers to redress this gap in knowledge with a presentation of the history, triage, and conservation of the thousands of clothes found at the prison.



**FIGURE 1** BLACK AND WHITE MUGSHOTS OF S-21 PRISONERS IN THE PERMANENT GALLERIES, TUOL SLENG GENOCIDE MUSEUM, PHNOM PENH, CAMBODIA, COURTESY OF CHRISTIAN HAUGEN, FLICKR, 2009, [HTTPS://CREATIVECOMMONS.ORG/LICENSES/BY/2.0/](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/).

## DRESS AND THE DEHUMANIZATION PROCESS AT S-21

The detention centre S-21 was established in 1976 in the former buildings of the Tuol Svay Prey High School in Phnom Penh to imprison political opponents, government officials, academics, their families, and anyone deemed a traitor to the regime. The incarceration of prisoners followed a specific protocol. Upon arrival, they were photographed.<sup>1</sup> Their information was meticulously taken by Khmer Rouge cadres, who then proceeded to interrogate them, exerting torture to extort and record their confessions. In this dehumanization process, prisoners had to relinquish their clothes. Women were allowed to keep their sarong, while men were left naked or in their undergarments. About 18,000 people were arrested, tortured, and killed at S-21. As a result of these atrocities, thousands of pieces of clothing and fabrics circulated in the prison, collected from the prisoners and the dead and reused by guards until these items were abandoned in the facilities at the fall of the regime in January 1979. After Vietnamese troops arrived in Phnom Penh and ousted the Khmer Rouge, Vietnamese war photographer and filmmaker Hồ Văn Tây, journalist Dinh Phong, and a few soldiers entered the prison's perimeters, which had been evacuated in haste.<sup>2</sup> In the back of the main building around the kitchen area they found a large mound of clothes in which five children — of the twelve survivors remaining on-site — had hidden to escape the forced evacuation led by Khmer Rouge prison guards.<sup>3</sup> Numerous garments were also scattered in different rooms across the prison.

When the site reopened as a museum and memorial, thousands of items were collected and exhibited in the permanent galleries as a large pile, which created a strong impression on the visitors.

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<sup>1</sup> David Chandler, *Voices From S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2008), 27.

<sup>2</sup> Nic Dunlop, *The Lost Executioner: A Journey to the Heart of the Killing Fields* (New York: Walker Books, 2006), 15-17.

<sup>3</sup> Kok Tay Eng, *Norng Chanpal: The Mystery of a Boy at S-21* (Phnom Penh: Cambodia Institute for Peace and Development, 2018), 57.

The clothes started to smell and were eventually removed from the exhibition display, moved to another floor of the building, and then moved again to be left under staircases in plastic bags to decay, except for nearly 800 pieces stacked in two window casings in the permanent galleries. In 2016 the then-museum director Chhay Visoth, a trained archaeologist, found out about these objects and decided to regroup them in dedicated plastic crates. He organized a preliminary sorting of the textiles into different categories (shirts, shorts and trousers, shoes, belts, wallets, bags, and fragments) with volunteer students from the Royal University of Fine Arts. He also ordered anti-termite treatment to stabilize the objects further.

### **CONSERVING TEXTILE MATERIAL EVIDENCE OF THE KHMER ROUGE REGIME**

In 2017, with the support of the US Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation and the Cambodian Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, US textile conservator Julia Brennan was invited to devise an ambitious textile conservation and training programme for the in-house conservator Kho Chenda, mostly in charge of metal conservation at the time, and her newly formed staff comprised of Chean Chetrey and Chheang Sokpenh. The project began in 2018 with a large triage plan of the damaged objects. Due to the specific nature of Tuol Sleng's textile pieces which are both testaments of the prisoners' lives and evidence of crimes, every single fragment had to be kept as intact as possible to prevent the potential erasure of stains caused by dirt and blood. Subsequently, pieces were gently surface-cleaned with a brush and vacuum cleaner. Textiles were then carefully inventoried, photographed and registered with specific cataloguing numbers into different groupings including recognizable typologies of clothes and accessories, fragments, and one-of-a-kind pieces qualified as "Special ID Textiles." In 2020 started a second phase dedicated to the objects on view in the permanent galleries. The plan consisted in assessing these materials' conditions, treating them as needed, and documenting the final product. Most objects were put in storage and the conservation team only kept a limited selection for display.

In 2021, with a second grant from the US Embassy, Tuol Sleng’s textile team, led by Chenda, Chetrai and two new members Ping Sreynoch and Choub Sokly, in close discussions with Brennan, has designed the exhibition “Remembering S-21 Victims through their Clothes: Textile Preservation at Tuol Sleng Museum” (December 27, 2021–March 1, 2023) to share their remarkable accomplishments since 2018.<sup>4</sup> The rescuing mission of the textile and clothing remnants from S-21 is presented through comprehensive panels in Khmer and English. On the panels, technical descriptions, photographs, and quotes from the textile team provide a welcome insight into the different protocols implemented between 2017 and 2021 — especially for a non-expert audience — from triage to surface cleaning, storage, treatment, collection management, and mounting for exhibition display. To this date, approximately 1,300 pieces of clothing and 2,000 textile fragments have been inventoried, photographed, and stored in a climate-controlled system.

The museum now owns a large textile archive that is not only shedding light on the life and identity of the prisoners but also, more broadly, on how people dressed under the dictatorship and which materials they had access to.

### THE CLOTHES TELL THEIR OWN STORIES

In dialogue with didactic posters, the exhibition turns its focus to the objects themselves. Photographs of different items in the collection, post-conservation treatment, reveal a large majority of military items (shirts, pants, caps, and bags), as well as a smaller range of male and female civilian shirts and children’s clothes (Figure 2).

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<sup>4</sup> Yin Soeum, “Tuol Sleng launches moving new exhibition of victims’ clothes,” *Khmer Times*, December 28, 2021 <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50995959/tuol-sleng-launches-moving-new-exhibition-of-victims-clothes/> [Accessed December 27, 2022].



**FIGURE 2** POSTER AND WINDOW CASING SHOWING THE RANGE OF GARMENTS, WHICH WERE RECOVERED, STABILIZED, AND PHOTOGRAPHED, AUTHOR'S PICTURE, COURTESY OF TUOL SLENG GENOCIDE MUSEUM, NOVEMBER 2022.

In an economy of means, a simple window casing carefully showcases a handful of industrially-made garments. This selection of clothes, stemming from the Special ID classification, presents distinctive features, such as extensive mending and patches, revealing past hardship and strategies of survival. Repairs show a range of makeshift techniques such as hand and machine stitching, fragments to consolidate inside garments, patches to replace pockets, and ribbons used to clip buttons on the cuffs and collar. The choice of patched fabrics and threads indicates that textile materials were scarce for Cambodians in the mid-1970s. A printed orange girl's dress and pair of repaired shorts are installed on standing mannequins, while a shirt, two patched shorts, and another baby's dress lay under a large glass cabinet close-by (Figure 3).



**FIGURE 3** GIRL'S DRESS AND SHORTS IN A LARGE WINDOW CASING, AUTHOR'S PICTURE, COURTESY OF TUOL SLENG GENOCIDE MUSEUM, NOVEMBER 2022.



**FIGURE 4** WOMAN'S SHIRT WITH PATCHED POCKETS AND SIGNS OF MENDING, AUTHOR'S PICTURE, COURTESY OF TUOL SLENG GENOCIDE MUSEUM, NOVEMBER 2022.

With its hand-stitched pockets and an inside patched lining made of a floral female sarong fragment, the black shirt offers a remarkable example of adaptability and resourcefulness for a woman who most likely owned very few pieces of clothing before her incarceration (Figure 4). The owner repeatedly stitched her shirt to strengthen weaker areas, even using torn ribbons made of the ubiquitous *krama* scarf commonly worn by Cambodian people to make buttonholes on the cuffs.

The most striking aspect of this exhibition remains the fragile yet resilient nature of these objects, of which the materiality brings a compelling new layer of understanding of the prisoners' lives, survival strategies, and identities.

In the absence of bodies, these clothes represent the last belongings of people who are now disappeared. They are material relics for the families of the victims and Cambodian people as a whole. The tremendous efforts involved in their care underline the crucial necessity of conserving these objects, which carry their own sensitive, forensic, and material stories to tell.



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## Author Bio

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Dr. Magali An Berthon is a Canadian-French-Vietnamese textile historian focusing on the modern and contemporary history of Southeast Asian dress and textiles, with a specific interest in Cambodia.

With prior experience in design, curation, and documentary, she earned a PhD in History of Design from the Royal College of Art of London with a thesis titled “Silk and Post-Conflict Cambodia: Embodied Practices and Global and Local Dynamics of Heritage and Knowledge Transference (1991–2018)” in 2021. Since January 2022, she is a Marie Curie postdoctoral research fellow attached to the Centre for Textile Research at the University of Copenhagen, researching dress and textile practices and production during the Khmer Rouge regime.

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