

Teaching

Sopheap Pich

ARTIST

Sopheap PICH

(sop-he-yup pih-ch)

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Sopheap Pich

BORN

1971, Battambang, Cambodia

LIVES & WORKS

Phnom Penh

THEMES

History
Materials and Process
Nature

ART MEDIUM

Sculpture

“I find that making sculptures, while utilizing various ways and techniques that are different from drawing, are in many ways—meditative. . . . Slicing rattan and bamboo strands with blades and tying wires for making sculptures is very meditative as well. You can also see that in the end, my work tends to have a kind of complete look to them, a kind of clarity in the forms; and this also requires a kind of meditation to arrive at.”¹

ABOUT THE ARTIST AND WORK

Sopheap Pich was born in 1971 in the agricultural town of Battambang, Cambodia. In 1979, when the Vietnamese invasion led to the ousting of the brutal communist regime known as the Khmer Rouge, he fled with his family to Thailand, spending four years in refugee camps before migrating to the United States. Pich remembers traveling vast distances on foot and witnessing the devastation of war—injured people, ravaged landscapes, abandoned artillery, and ruined buildings.

Pich went on to study painting in the United States, earning a BFA in 1995 from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and an MFA in 1999 from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In 2002 memories of his childhood, as well as a desire to reconnect with his previous life and culture, drew him back to Cambodia. It was there that he turned his attention to sculpture. In 2005 Pich gave up painting altogether in favor of making three-dimensional objects using indigenous materials and weaving techniques.

In *Morning Glory* (2011), the common morning glory plant is rendered at a monumental scale. Some gardeners consider it a weed or a nuisance and generally regard it as unexceptional. Also known as water spinach or swamp cabbage, however, the plant is served as a green vegetable and is especially popular in East and Southeast Asian cuisines. During the Khmer Rouge regime, Cambodians valued it as a source of nourishment at a time when millions were threatened by starvation.

In his work, Pich synthesizes the contemporary artistic methods he studied in the United States with aspects of his current life in Cambodia. He treats rattan and bamboo, materials used in Khmer crafts such as basket weaving and making fish traps, like lines to make drawings in space. By repurposing these basic components of everyday experiences in Cambodia, he instills them with renewed life.²

1 Sopheap Pich, quoted in Naima Morelli, “The Importance of Craft: Sopheap Pich at the Venice Biennale 2017,” CoBo, June 22, 2017, <https://www.cobosocial.com/dossiers/the-importance-of-craft-sopheap-pich-at-venice-biennale-2017/>.

2 See June Yap, “Sopheap Pich: *Morning Glory*,” Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, accessed July 31, 2019, guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/artwork/31325.



Sopheap Pich, *Morning Glory*, 2011. Rattan, bamboo, wire, plywood, and steel, 188 × 261.6 × 533.4 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Guggenheim UBS MAP Purchase Fund 2013.3

View and Discuss

Before students look at *Morning Glory* (2011), have them brainstorm a list of qualities that are usually associated with sculpture. After compiling the list, show *Morning Glory*. How many of the words on the list can be applied to Pich's work? Now make a list of words that describe Pich's work. Compare and contrast the two lists.

- Pich titled his sculpture *Morning Glory*. What does this work remind you of? Look at some photos of the common plant to which the title refers or, if possible, examine the plant in person.

How does Pich's work resemble its subject?



Morning glory flower

- View a slide show about Pich's materials and process on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's website: [metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2013/sopheap-pich](https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2013/sopheap-pich). In the slide show, Pich and his studio assistants bring one of his sculptures outside, placing it in the Cambodian landscape.

Where do you think would be the perfect place to install *Morning Glory*? Why?

- Educated in the United States, where he studied theories of and approaches to contemporary art, Pich also wanted his work to connect to his Cambodian childhood and native culture.

How does *Morning Glory* synthesize these two influences? The morning glory flower is significant to Pich because it was a source of sustenance for his people during a very difficult time. If you were to choose a form, manufactured or natural, that has meaning to you, what would it be and why?

Classroom Activities

Weaving

Basket weaving has been one of the most widely practiced crafts in human history. Using carbon dating, scientists have found baskets that were made as long ago as ten to twelve thousand years.



Sopheap Pich working in his studio, Phnom Penh, 2009

Pich adapts this traditional craft to the production of enormous sculptures, but you can get a basic understanding of the weaving process yourself by trying some smaller, simpler projects. Paper weaving, building simple looms, and creating small baskets can provide insight into this ancient but still relevant global practice.

Sopheap Pich's Art Assignment

In 2015, as part of a Public Broadcasting System (PBS) series *The Art Assignment*, Pich was invited to suggest an art assignment.

View the video at [youtube.com/watch?v=-eszUEdj-Hs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-eszUEdj-Hs). Then see some of the submissions that were received in response: [youtube.com/watch?v=f55wHe-PfiE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f55wHe-PfiE).

Classroom Activities

The Khmer Rouge

For much of his childhood in Cambodia, Pich lived under the brutal Khmer Rouge, which ruled from 1975 to 1979. The regime murdered hundreds of thousands of their perceived political opponents. Ultimately, the Cambodian genocide led to the deaths of 1.5 to 3 million people, around 25 percent of Cambodia's population, from famine, disease, forced labor, executions, and purges.³ The Khmer Rouge targeted groups that they believed were enemies of the state and murdered many artists and intellectuals—even individuals who happened to display stereotypical signs of learning, such as wearing glasses.

Enemies of the People is a documentary project by a Cambodian journalist who sought to investigate the genocide in the “killing fields.” Much of the film is in Cambodian with English subtitles, and many scenes are quite intense. PBS has lesson plans and teacher resources at pbs.org/frontlineworld/educators/history_cambodia.html to guide learning and discussion about the Khmer Rouge and their brutal regime.

Discuss Genocide

The organization Teaching Tolerance encourages educators to talk with their students about genocide and offers lesson plans that discuss its structure, analyze international responses, and provide students with the opportunity to read or listen to the testimony of survivors—in the hope that they will learn about this difficult subject and acquire the tools necessary to take an active role in preventing it.

Their website includes suggested lesson plans: tolerance.org/classroom-resources/tolerance-lessons/tolerance-and-genocide.

³ Wikipedia, s.v. “Khmer Rouge,” last updated July 30, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khmer_Rouge.

Resources

Websites

- Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Cambodian Rattan: The Sculpture of Sopheap Pich*. <https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2013/sopheap-pich>.
- Asia Motion, *Sopheap Pich: Sculptor*. <https://www.asiamotion.net/photo-stories/stephane-janin/sopheap-pich-sculptor>.

Videos

- *Brilliant Ideas*. Episode 42, “Sopheap Pich’s Bamboo and Rattan Explorations.” December 8, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrUCuA_oAH8.
- Metropolitan Museum of Art. “*Cambodia Rattan: The Sculpture of Sopheap Pich*.” February 20, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=byvonzo4POU>.
- Metropolitan Museum of Art. “Sunday at the Met: *Cambodian Rattan* Discussion.” April 17, 2013. <https://www.metmuseum.org/metmedia/video/collections/asian/cambodian-rattan-discussion>.
- Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. “Sopheap Pich on Rattan, Sculpture, and Abstraction.” April 2, 2014. <https://www.guggenheim.org/video/sopheap-pich-on-rattan-sculpture-and-abstraction>.

- Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. “Sopheap Pich on *Morning Glory* as Food and Artwork.” March 4, 2014. <https://www.guggenheim.org/video/sopheap-pich-on-morning-glory-as-food-and-artwork>.

Articles

- Dover, Caitlin. “Artist Sopheap Pich and the Making of *Morning Glory*.” *Guggenheim UBS MAP* (blog). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, July 2, 2014. <https://www.guggenheim.org/blogs/map/artist-sopheap-pich-and-the-making-of-morning-glory>.

Visit guggenheim.org/teachingmaterials for high-resolution images, audio, and video, as well as additional historical and contextual information about this artist and others featured in *Teaching Modern and Contemporary Asian Art*.

Note: On page 2, the artist's surname is capitalized to differentiate it from his given name. Colloquial phonetic pronunciations are included, rather than versions in the standard International Phonetic Alphabet, to help teachers pronounce names that may be unfamiliar.

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