



This photo taken on February 16, 2016 shows Cambodian people looking at a painting at the Angkor Panorama Museum in Siem Reap province.

Cambodia a canvas for North Korea's grand masters

In a vast parking lot outside Cambodia's famed Angkor Wat temples complex stands a new museum built by North Korea, part of a lucrative charm offensive by a hermit state exporting its monumental art to a handful of foreign allies.

"When people come here sometimes they cannot believe their eyes," beams Yit Chandaroat, of the Angkor Panorama Museum, which opened in December after a construction process shrouded in secrecy. "They really feel like they are back in the time of Angkor", he added, referring to the world heritage site which comprises the remains of the different capitals of the Khmer Empire, dating from the 9th to the 15th centuries.

Behind him stands the museum's piece de resistance, an enormous 360-degree panorama that 63 North Korean painters from the state-owned Mansudae Art Studio toiled away on for more than a year. The mural, epic in scale and intricate in detail, covers an area larger than eight tennis courts and reflects the sweeping grandiosity for which Pyongyang's artists are renowned.

But this is no socialist realist tribute to North Korea's 'Dear Leaders'. Instead the paintings portray the battles of the fearsome Khmer Empire at the apogee of its power in the 11th and 13th centuries and the construction of Angkor Wat. That a closed, hardline communist state might choose to build a museum honoring a feudal Southeast Asian dynasty-and foot the \$24 million price tag-may initially appear surprising. But Cambodia has long belonged to a select and somewhat motley band of North Korean allies.

Family ties

When the country's late King Norodom Sihanouk was toppled in a 1970 coup, North Korea's founding leader Kim Il-Sung offered him sanctuary. And when Sihanouk returned after the bloodletting of the Khmer Rouge era, he kept a retinue of North Korean

bodyguards for the remainder of his reign and gifted his birth home to Pyongyang for its envoy.

The North's nemesis, South Korea, has also dramatically increased its business presence in Cambodia and its embassy in Phnom Penh remains a haven for North Korean defectors to aim for. But Cambodia's relations with the North remain strong even as Pyongyang deepens its pariah status with nuclear and missile tests that triggered a fresh round of tough UN sanctions earlier this month.

"Those family connections are not to be underestimated on the North Korean side in terms of the affection that the Kim family have for Cambodia specifically," Adam Cathcart, a North Korea specialist at Britain's Leeds University said.

Monument men

The museum is also more than a friendly gesture. It is the latest in a growing portfolio of artworks that Mansudae has built overseas. With 1,000 artists on the books the studio is often described as the world's largest. It churns out propaganda pieces and has long been the only outlet allowed to produce portraits of the Kim dynasty.

The majority of its overseas work has been in Africa, with Angola, Botswana and Namibia all boasting North Korean-built pieces-the most famous of them Senegal's colossal "African Renaissance Monument". But it has picked up clients elsewhere, including the German city of Frankfurt who decided Mansudae's artists were the only ones skilled enough to faithfully recreate a 1910 art deco fountain.

Koen de Ceuster, an expert on North Korean art from Leiden University in the Netherlands, says the operation is "very much a business venture". But it has other uses too. "North Korea has discovered soft power, it has discovered cultural diplomacy... they

are trying to broaden the image of what North Korea is about," he said. As such the Cambodia museum also serves as a "calling card" for future business, he said.

Perfect English

Among the staff at the Siem Reap museum are some 20 North Koreans, some of a tiny percentage of people from the isolated country who ever see life in the outside world. A few North Korean women work in a souvenir shop selling Mansudae acrylics and oils from between \$100 to \$2,000.

"I've been here six months," said one woman, declining the offer of an on-camera interview. "There are not so many people at the moment but we have only just opened. Hopefully there will be more in the future," she added in near accentless English she learnt in Pyongyang.

The Cambodian staff are slowly getting to know their North Korean colleagues. "We try to understand each other, swap stories about our culture," Sor Sei Leang, a 26-year-old Cambodian said. "They're trying to learn Khmer too so they can go to market and talk to people. They ask us how to say hello, thank you. That sort of thing."

For the Cambodians, the museum is a win-win. Under the construction terms, North Korea will receive profits for the first ten years of the museum's life. Thereafter profits will be split for a decade and the museum will then be fully owned by Cambodia. And while some tourists may balk at an attraction that sends hard cash back to North Korea, deputy museum director Yit Chandaroat believes fascination will triumph over censure. "We are not concerned" about political issues, he said. — AFP



A Cambodian man looks at a painting at the Angkor Panorama Museum in Siem Reap province. — AFP photos



Cambodian people look at photos of Angkor Wat temple.



The Angkor Wat temples models.