

# CAMBODIAN DANCERS

ANCIENT & MODERN



George Groslier



# CAMBODIAN DANCERS

## ANCIENT & MODERN

George GROSLIER



Based on his original work:  
*Danseuses Cambodgiennes*  
*Anciennes et Modernes*

Edited by **Kent DAVIS**

Translated by **Pedro RODRÍGUEZ**

Featuring:  
*Le Khmérophile:*  
The Art and Life of George Groslier

**Kent DAVIS**



DatASIA  
MMXII

## About the Cover

*“Danseuse dorée (Rôle religieux)”* - **“Golden Dancer (Religious Role)”** by **George Groslier**

George Groslier (1887-1945) devoted his life to the art and culture of his birth country: Cambodia. In 1912 he assembled the magnificent graphic tribute to Cambodian dance presented in this book. His painting shows royal dancer Ratt Poss performing under a full moon, the indispensable witness of all important Cambodian festivals. See Appendix I for details.



**DatASIA Press**

**www.CambodianDancers.com**

### Production Credits

With gratitude to **Nicole Rea Groslier** for her generosity, guidance and inspiration in reissuing her father’s work.

With special thanks to the extended Groslier family:  
**Margaret Squires, Patrick Rea; Brigitte Lequeux-Groslier** and the sons of **Gilbert Groslier: Thierry, Sylvain, Antoine, Martin, Guillaume** and **Thomas**.

Edited by **Kent Davis**

Translated by **Pedro Rodríguez**

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**Published simultaneously in the United States and Great Britain**



*Dedicated to Sacred Dancers,  
past, present and future,  
whose devotion preserves  
the Khmer legacy.*





**George Groslier**

**February 4, 1887 — June 18, 1945**

**In his home study, on December 5, 1922 George works below a bust he sculpted of his daughter Nicole. Today the bust is in her home in Sarasota, Florida.**

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**Her Royal Highness Princess Buppha Devi**  
*Prima Ballerina - The Royal Cambodian Ballet - 1962*



*H. R. H. Samdech Reach Botrei Preah Norodom Buppha Devi*

It is my pleasure to introduce new generations of readers to this classic account of Cambodia's royal dance tradition by artist and historian, George Groslier.

Born in Phnom Penh in 1887, Groslier infused his love for the Khmer people and their culture in all of his work. In 1913, he published *Danseuses Cambodgiennes - Anciennes et Modernes*, presenting his study of classical Cambodian dance to King Norodom Sisowath, to the Cambodian people, and to the world.

Now, nearly a century later, editor and co-translator Kent Davis reintroduces this artistic work in English for the first time, including a personal glimpse of the author himself through the eyes of his daughter, Nicole Groslier.

With this book, George Groslier became the first Western scholar to document Cambodia's dance tradition. Recently, Dr. Paul Cravath affirmed and expanded this record with his award-winning work, *Earth in Flower - The Divine Mystery of the Cambodian Dance Drama*.

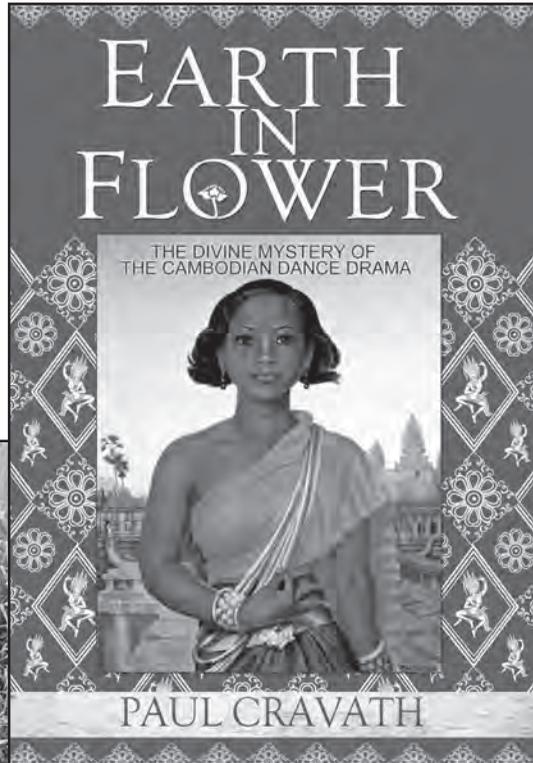
Both books come at an auspicious time in our history because there is now a reawakening of sacred dance in Cambodia.

My August Grandmother, Her Majesty Queen Kossamak Nearireath, entrusted me with the responsibility of perpetuating the spiritual legacy of Cambodia's Royal Ballet tradition. In 2006, I granted my first Royal Patronage to the *NKFC Conservatoire Preah Ream Buppha Devi* within the Angkor Heritage Site of our forefathers at Banteay Srey. Established by Ravynn Karet-Coxen and the Nginn Karet Foundation, this rural school is again recreating and perpetuating the sacred dance rituals of our ancestors.

George Groslier's historical account is especially joyful to read anew, knowing that our sacred Khmer heritage of dance is again blossoming through the children of Angkor at the *Conservatoire*.

May the pure dance of these children bring blessings to our King, harmony to the governance of our land and prosperity to our people.

H.R.H. Samdech Reach Botrei Preah Ream  
Norodom Buppha Devi



*Earth in Flower*  
*The Divine Mystery of the*  
*Cambodian Dance Drama*

**Paul Cravath**





## FOREWORD

The significance of George Groslier's 1913 text and the primary justification for this auspicious translation into English lies in the fact that it is the first commentary in any language—Asian or European—on one of the world's most refined performing arts whose roots stretch to antiquity.

As a court- and temple-based tradition, Cambodian dance can be traced to the seventh century and by the thirteenth had achieved the zenith of its refulgence in the Angkorean kingdom. By the early twentieth century when Groslier experienced Cambodian dance, control of the royal troupe (consisting of some 70 dancers) remained one of the few prerogatives available to an aging king in a small land beset by the demands of a European colonial overlord.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as in previous eras, the royal dancers could rarely be viewed by anyone and then only at the king's invitation. Groslier composed this work based on seeing just three evening performances (for the king's birthday) and three short "supplications" performed in the throne room. Fortunately he was able to consult with palace officials and a former dance teacher as well as spend considerable time sketching dance students in rehearsal and at rest. As a young, 25 year-old French painter with a passion for the dance, Groslier remained a palace outsider, but his book received the imprimatur of King Sisowath and the approbation of high French officials.

Why? Because *Danseuses Cambodgiennes* was an impressive achievement. In addition to its many wonderful drawings, the text drew upon the documentation of late 19<sup>th</sup> century scholarship and early 20<sup>th</sup> century epigraphic translations. His eight chapters delineate the major topics deserving scrutiny and into them he poured a myriad of detail.

Today some may question certain theories Groslier accepted or even espoused, but the specific details that he noted with a keen eye remain invaluable to our understanding of what the dance has been and how we perceive its meaning. For example, Groslier described the use of wires to suspend dancers mid-air during one of the palace performances he viewed. Today if one proposed suspending Cambodian *apsaras* or other characters mid-air on wires, any modern dance teacher would be more than skeptical. Moreover, any dancer who had never read *Danseuses Cambodgiennes* would certainly deny that flying on wires was ever a component of Khmer dance drama. Still, Groslier saw it in the palace and this recounting is merely one instance of the extraordinary value of his text as history. Today all scholarship concerning the performing arts in Cambodia begins with Groslier.

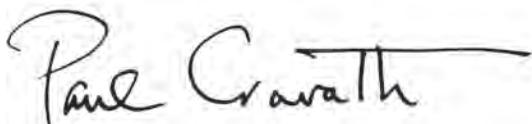
In the 1970s when I began my study that culminated in *Earth in Flower: the Divine Mystery of the Cambodian Dance Drama*, Groslier's 6-month project served as my foundation. This was inevitable because few French colonial scholars before Groslier even mentioned dance in their analyses of Cambodian culture or history. After his 1913 publication no one in any language wrote comprehensively on the subject, with the most detailed work being Sappho Marchal's 1926 illustrated booklet *Danses Cambodgiennes* (which was expanded to 95 pages when it was republished for the 1931 Colonial Exhibition). This dearth of information inspired my 10-year effort to make *Earth in Flower* a more comprehensive analysis of this sacred art.

Today I am pleased to note that Cambodian dance scholarship has continued to evolve with great depth and perception, and modern works increasingly address the profound dimensions discernible in this ancient but vital art form.

Until the present translation, *Danseuses Cambodgiennes* remained an extremely rare text, nearly impossible to procure except by loan from one of the few libraries possessing a copy. In 1975 I was able to borrow the book from the National Library in Phnom Penh which I then had photocopied onto the stiff paper used in that era. The original was the only copy of the text I ever heard about in Cambodia. Groslier's frontispiece recorded 30 copies printed; an electronic search of libraries today indicates only 46 copies available. The present translation fortuitously expands the accessibility of Groslier's work and makes it available in the English-speaking world for the first time.

*Cambodian Dancers* was written and illustrated by a painter who, apart from short articles more than a decade later, never wrote at length on the dance again. But we twenty-first century writers who share his reverence for Khmer dance and are sensitive to its near miraculous survival over the centuries, are as profoundly grateful to George Groslier for the informative and imaginative foundation his work provides, as we are for this English translation.

Publication of *Cambodian Dancers* opens a window into the scholarship, belief structures, colonial conflicts, dance practices, and court realities of Cambodia a hundred years ago. For its re-appearance in the twenty-first century may we all be, not only grateful, but...celebratory!



Paul Cravath  
Honolulu, Hawai'i



## APPENDIX III

### **The Future of Cambodia's Royal Dance Tradition**

#### **Dr. Paul Cravath interview with Princess Buppha Devi**

On January 26, 2010, Her Royal Highness Princess Buppha Devi made her first official visit to the NKFC Conservatoire Preah Ream Buppha Devi within the Angkor Heritage Park at Banteay Srey. Her visit commemorated the third anniversary of this school of traditional Cambodian dance and music, established by the Nginn Karet Foundation under her Royal Patronage. The following written queries were submitted to H.R.H. at that time. During that visit, and upon her return to Phnom Penh, Princess Buppha Devi researched and recorded her answers with the assistance of her daughter Princess Norodom Sisowath.





Photo courtesy Anders Giras

**Her Royal Highness Princess Buppha Devi** is the Royal Heir and Guardian of Cambodia’s ancient royal dance tradition, a legacy passed from generation to generation since the dawn of the Khmer civilization in Southeast Asia.

The Princess, whose name means “Goddess of Flowers,” began studying the art of Cambodian dance as a child under the guidance of her grandmother, Queen Sisowath Kossamak. By age 15, she had become a leading dancer in the Cambodian Royal Ballet. At age 18, the Princess was granted the title of *prima ballerina* and toured the world as the troupe’s principal dancer.

For the Cambodian people, royal dance rituals create a spiritual link between heaven and earth. Since ancient times, the nation’s classical dancers have performed to honor Khmer gods and ancestors, and to bring blessings and prosperity onto the land. Under the direction of Her Majesty Queen Kossamak, the Princess helped make these performances more visible to the people of Cambodia and the world.

Working with her brother, His Majesty King Sihamoni, the Princess secured UNESCO’s recognition for the Royal Ballet of Cambodia as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2003. The Princess has also served Cambodia as Minister of Culture and Fine Arts and as a Senator.



**Dr. Paul Cravath** is a scholar, actor and theatrical director with extensive Asian theater research experience. He is the tenured Professor of Theatre at the University of Hawaii-LLC in Honolulu.

In 1975, Cravath traveled to Cambodia to become one of the only Westerners in history to be given full documentary access to the teachers, dancers, archives and theater of the Royal Cambodian Ballet. Following his primary research, Cravath returned to the US for ten years of research before submitting his doctoral thesis entitled *Earth in Flower*.

In 2008, **DatAsia Press** published his thesis in book form as *Earth in Flower: The Divine Mystery of the Cambodian Dance Drama*. The book is dedicated to H.R.H. Princess Buppha Devi for her lifetime commitment to preserving and perpetuating the sacred dance tradition of Cambodia.

In 2008, *Earth in Flower* was awarded the **Kirayama Prize Award for Notable Book** and the **Nautilus Silver Award for a Multicultural Book**.



**Your Highness, it is again an honor to discuss Cambodian dance with you. In the West, dance is seen as a performance art. How is the royal tradition of Cambodian dance different?**

Thank you, it is again my pleasure to share our cultural heritage with you.

To best make this distinction, I will first note that Cambodian dance is divided into three broad styles of dance: Vernacular, Folk and Classical, the latter being the Royal tradition that we will speak of today.

As in the West, our most visible dances are vernacular dances that people enjoy at social occasions. These include the *ram vong*, also a popular dance in Thailand and Laos, and the *ram saravan*. One social dance, the *ram kbach*, is actually inspired by the distinctive gestures of classical royal dance.

Next are Khmer folk dances that tell stories of ancient legends and everyday life. Like performance arts in the West these are to entertain public audiences. Folk dancing gestures and movements are not strictly defined, as in Khmer classical dance, so individual dancers and troupes make their own innovations. Folk dancing preserves the traditions of hill tribes, farmers, Chams, peasants and all Cambodian ethnicities.

Finally we have the *Robam Preah Reachea Trop*, which means “Dances of Royal Wealth.” This is what we term Classical Dance, a sacred art that your book, *Earth in Flower*, traces to the beginnings of the Khmer civilization. In earlier times, dancers were part of the Royal Court, performing on behalf of our kings and queens to pray to our gods, divinities and spirits of royal ancestors.

In this role, our royal dancers act as divine messengers, linking the forces of heaven and Earth for our kings and our people. This art of sacred dance preserves a spiritual legacy carefully passed down to us by generations of our ancestors in an unbroken chain

reaching back to our roots in the Angkor period. It is a complex and precise art. While some say it has 4,000 gestures to express different emotions and meanings, I do not know if this number can ever be accurately counted. Sacred dance is a living tradition that evolves from generation to generation.

### **How is dance important to the future of Cambodia?**

Our harmonizing sacred dances are as important today as they were in the past. With correct training and technique, our dance rituals bring blessings to our King, harmony to the governance of our land and prosperity to our people. The dancers accomplish this by embodying the essence of purity and strength of our Khmer race.

We believe that this art empowers them to earn these blessings. Their grace and ancient choreography actually balance the universe, bringing us into harmony with the powers of nature, ensuring fertility, health and abundance for our land and people. Royal dance contains the essence of our spiritual traditions and can truly shape a positive future for our land and people.

### **How did you personally become involved in the Royal dance tradition?**

In the late 1950s, my August Grandmother, the late Queen Kossamak Nearireath, introduced me to dance as a child. Her dream, which she realized within her lifetime, was to share the dignity and beauty of our Royal dances with the public.

Through her efforts, royal dance became a celebrated icon of Khmer culture, now recognized throughout the world. My brother, his Majesty Norodom Sihamoni, was previously Cambodia's Ambassador to UNESCO. Together, we worked to bring Grandmother's vision of sharing our dance with the world to a new level. In 2003, UNESCO recognized the *Royal Ballet of Cambodia* as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

**During the darkest days of Cambodian history, notably the 15th and 20th centuries, royal dance came close to extinction yet the tradition somehow survives. How is this possible?**

As long as there is a Khmer race, our dance will survive. We guard our tradition with our lives and pass the knowledge directly from teacher to student. This tradition is in our blood and, I believe, it flows from the Khmer land beneath our feet. The power of dance surrounds us in nature. I believe this power can energize us. I see it today in young students here at the Conservatoire who are studying this ancient art.

Seeing this tradition blossoming here in these children born by the temples of Angkor fills me with great joy. They come from such simple backgrounds but I see the power of our ancestors and our royal tradition in them. They are living answers to your question of how our tradition continues.

**Your grandmother Queen Kossamak was devoted to the royal dance tradition. How did She confer responsibility to you?**

My royal bloodline made this my duty, but the responsibility was granted by divine transmission. With Grandmother's guidance, I dedicated my life to this art from a very young age. I see a young dancer here today, barely four years old, and she brings back memories of my earliest days. I did not understand the power of our dance then, but I knew I wanted to learn, and that my efforts made my August Grandmother proud.

Her Majesty was quite strict with me. I practiced for more than ten years before gaining important roles. Finally, at eighteen, she rewarded my efforts by appointing me a *Prima Ballerina* in the troupe. In that role I danced throughout the world sharing our Cambodian culture and good will.

But the true transmission of responsibility for our tradition occurred in 1962, in the royal throne room of the palace. That was the first time I performed our most sacred dance, the

*Robam Tiyae Bounng Soun*, before the eyes of Her Majesty Queen Kossamak and the court, before the eyes of my ancestors and before the Spirit of the Dance. Your country also played an interesting role in that event.

The prior year, 1961, the United States Information Service approached My August Grandmother requesting permission to film the Royal Cambodian Ballet. In her spirit of cooperation She granted the privilege and, in fact, they filmed my sacred ritual when I assumed the role to guard this tradition.

Sadly, relations between our two countries weakened shortly after that. The film vanished into American archives for many years. But it returned to Cambodia when your new US Ambassador Carol Rodley kindly presented a copy of the film to my brother, His Majesty King Sihamoni when she took her office in January 2009.

**In 2006, you granted your first Royal Patronage to this single rural school in Banteay Srey district. Why?**

Because this school, here in the Angkor Heritage Site, created an opportunity to revive our Royal Dance in a way unlike any other.

For more than ten years, I had watched the school's founder, Ravynn Karet-Coxen, working to restore suitable living conditions in Banteay Srey for more than 2,500 families. She chose this area because these families were among the last released from Khmer Rouge control and are some of the poorest in Cambodia. Her dedication and commitment to them never wavered and through her efforts, they began to have adequate healthcare, hygiene, and education for their children.

Still, there was something missing. In 2005, she came to me with a dream to empower these families by giving their children a chance to learn our noble arts of dance and music. She submitted a proposal for an arts school based on traditional Khmer values. It would be built here in Angkor, the cradle of our civilization, for

children born of that land. She made this vision very real to me. I was convinced that she could achieve her goal so I entrusted her with my patronage and granted my name to the Conservatoire.

**In the past, royal dance was an elite art, studied in palaces. Can you please compare that tradition to this simple school?**

Royal dance is still an elite art. It will always be restricted to a small group of dedicated teachers and students. That has not changed. This is a serious school in that tradition.

Understand that Cambodia has dance classes all over but they are casual. Students attend as a hobby or to learn dance to entertain the public or tourists. At the Conservatoire there is great discipline and the children study in a private place. History tells us that this art can only be taught in a controlled place. In the past, royal dancers were sequestered from the world in the palace, protected from distractions and impure influences when learning their sacred art.

**How does this school's rural location compare to a city location?**

This school's rural location is a true innovation. This is a peaceful, powerful place between the temple of Banteay Srey and the sacred mountain of Phnom Dei, with the mountains of Kbal Spean and Phnom Koulen on the horizon. This environment offers only beauty, heritage, and no distractions to studying the art.

The benefit is that these children are not immersed in outside media and ideas. They are pure. They trust our ancestral traditions and focus on their craft. When they practice these arts, it is so natural for this power to flow through them.

It is especially appropriate at this time but it does make the school much more difficult to operate. The facilities are very simple. There is no electricity. Teachers and staff must travel nearly an hour to reach the school. But many benefits come from this isolation.

**Despite the school's remote location, King Sihamoni was aware of this troupe and actually invited them to perform for him at the Royal Palace. How was this significant?**

His Majesty King Sihamoni, himself an expert in dance, had heard of this rural troupe's dedication. He invited the Conservatoire students to give him a private presentation at the Chanchhaya Hall of Dance in the Royal Palace on February 28, 2009. This was truly an historic performance.

Construction of the Chanchhaya dance pavilion began in 1913. This hall, at the front of the palace, became the primary venue for all Royal dance performances. Except for the Khmer Rouge years, it has also been used continuously for many dance rehearsals. However, I believe the last performance for a King was before 1970. So it was a splendid occasion to have these children, from such humble origins, come to privately demonstrate their skills for His Majesty. In fact, their dance was a sacred rite of blessing for the king.

**How did you know they were ready for this important presentation?**

I have received progress reports since the beginning but it was only after they arrived in Phnom Penh that I learned how hard the children had been working. The day before the Chanchhaya appearance, I personally reviewed the troupe. They impressed me with their poise, discipline and dignity. Most of these children had never left their villages, let alone come to Phnom Penh for such a presentation.

I worked on the choreography with them and refined their movements. Their discipline and precision seemed well beyond their age and they quickly adapted to my corrections. They were ready to dance for our king.

As I mentioned, it was a private performance and I did not attend. But soon I heard that His Majesty was also captivated

by their skill, synchrony and control of the precise movements of the dance. These rural children embodied the nobility of our tradition and were so calm and professional, even on their first palace visit to perform for their king!

At that point, they only had two years of training, which even surprised the king. I believe the Spirit of the Dance guided them to deliver an extraordinary performance. His Majesty later commented that the gods of *Preah Teneang Chanchhaya* appreciated the quality of their dance and blessed the children.

**What motivates children to this level of excellence?**

These children are inspired by the truth of who they are: children of Angkor. They were born to walk in the footsteps of our greatest ancestors. In Cambodia we believe that the spirits of our ancestors, we call them *Boramey*, watch over us to help our people. I believe that they now protect these children and our heritage.

This idea may not fit Western logic, but I see the synchrony and power of these country children with my own eyes. The power of our land and our ancestors flows through them. This is the only way I can explain their skill to you.

**My understanding is that sacred dance performers must maintain high moral standards in their personal lives. How important is this?**

The Spirit of Dance will only guide a dancer who is totally immersed in the teaching. They must embody the sanctity of the dance to be filled with the power of the gods, the ancestors of our land and the spirits of our kings. To perform truly sacred rituals requires total purity and discipline.

Family strength also helps maintain this purity. The rural environment that keeps these children so close to our land also keeps them close to their families. Traditional family values in Cambodia used to be very strong in the countryside. Families system gave strength and drew strength from the purity of their children. Both personal strength and family strength make this respectable vocation possible.

**This troupe dresses in an entirely unique way for ritual performances. How does this fit with a royal tradition better known for lavish costumes of luxurious fabrics?**

Perhaps the time has come to reconsider modern costume ideas. The style of Cambodian dance, especially the costumes, has been greatly influenced by Thailand since the 15th century. The elaborate costumes we see today evolved in recent times. In recapturing the sacred intent of our dances, the Conservatoire dancers must be seen as entirely different from those who perform merely for entertainment.

To accomplish this, the school's founder designs distinctive costumes that are only worn when dancers perform rituals respecting our spiritual traditions. For these sacred dances, she captures the essence of our Khmer spirit with simple white gowns. These reflect the purity and dignity of our traditions without distracting from the graceful dance movements. Also honoring ancient traditions are their hairstyles and adornments, which come from natural materials like leaves, flowers, vines, nuts and banana trunk peel. The idea of these gifts of nature is to link Mother Earth to Heaven.

The inspiration for these new costumes comes directly from our sacred women, the *devata* and *apsaras*, of Angkor Wat, the Bayon and all the other great temples of the classic period of Khmer history. Now our ancient mothers and sisters who are immortalized in stone may dance again through these children, just as Mr. George Groslier wrote in his book. In truth, these children actually *are* descended from the ancient women of the temples.

**How do you feel about these dancers conducting sacred performances in Khmer temples?**

I think our gods and ancestors have waited many generations to be shown this respect again. These dancers have the power to re-sanctify the temples.

While tourists come to appreciate the beauty of our architecture, it is still important for Khmer people to respect these sacred places for the sake of our ancestors who built them for us.

At the dawn of our history, sacred dancers celebrated, charmed and honored our Gods, keeping the heart of each temple pure and powerful. These dancers of Banteay Srey again give us the opportunity to show gratitude and respect to our ancestors and traditions.

**What do you see in the future of these children and their school?**

I have offered my ongoing guidance to the school. My August Grandmother left me with a wealth of knowledge about our dance tradition, but so little could be used with the tragedy of the past few decades. Based on the progress these children have made, I know that the time has come to share that knowledge.

My hope is that these children will master unique classical and traditional repertoires of dance and music so they have the opportunity to demonstrate our Cambodian arts around the world, as I did. For example, I know the school has started training an all-female traditional orchestra, an ancient tradition that will be a first in modern Cambodia. In addition to performance arts, I hope to see other traditional arts training so children can study crafts such as making masks, costumes, shadow puppets and musical instruments.

All these goals are in addition to all students achieving a baccalaureate level of general education with functional English language skills hopefully supplemented by French.

**Thank you, Your Highness, for sharing your insights about Cambodia's royal dance and the children carrying this tradition into the future.**

I thank you, Dr. Cravath, for your years of dedication and research compiling "*Earth in Flower*." You, like the eminent Mr. George Groslier, have done a great service for the Cambodian people by documenting our largely unwritten dance tradition.

May the gods and our ancestors look favorably upon our efforts to promote harmony, abundance and peace in our world by perpetuating these sacred Khmer rites.



# CAMBODIAN DANCERS ANCIENT & MODERN



George Groslier - 1905

George Groslier's artistic vision of Cambodia's ancient dance tradition with the complete contents of his rare 1913 publication. This deluxe edition includes an exclusive author biography, 250 photos and hand-drawn illustrations, extensive background materials, the original French text, bibliography and index.

*It is my pleasure to introduce new generations of readers to this classic account of Cambodia's royal dance tradition.*

H.R.H. Princess Norodom Buppha Devi

*You returned here as if marked by destiny, the most restless artist we had ever encountered to devote himself to Cambodian dancers and their secrets.*

Charles Gravelle-1913



"Les Danseuses" by George Groslier - 1912

*The first commentary in any language on one of the world's most refined performing arts.*

Dr. Paul Cravath—*Earth in Flower*

— FEATURING —

*Le Khmerophile*

The Life and Art of George Groslier

Working with daughter Nicole Groslier and her family, biographer Kent Davis recounts the life of the man who committed his life to serving Cambodia and her people.



Royal Dancers & Nicole Groslier

