

Virtual Vistas

THE DIGITAL WORLD OF TITO DUPRET



BUILT DURING THE TWELFTH CENTURY, ANGKOR WAT IN CAMBODIA IS THE MOST FAMOUS OF THE 64 TEMPLES THAT MAKE UP THE VAST HINDU-BUDDHIST COMPLEX OF ANGKOR, ANCIENT SEAT OF THE KHMER EMPIRE. DUPRET ON ASSIGNMENT IN CHINA, BELOW.

On July 4, 2001, Tito Dupret, a 30-year-old Belgian filmmaker and multimedia director, embarked on a multi-year mission to photograph all 730 UNESCO World Heritage sites, using a sophisticated digital camera and software to create 360° spherical “virtual reality” (VR) films. The purpose of this endeavor, for which Dupret formed his own nonprofit organization, is to document the sites for posterity and also to raise awareness of their fragility, importance, and irreplaceability. ICON caught up with Dupret, who is currently working in Zhongshan, China, to discuss his ambitious undertaking.

ICON: What compelled you to embark on a quest to document all of the sites on the World Heritage List?

TD: I have been a multimedia director for 12 years, focusing primarily on documentary projects. I made a film about the rock-cut Coptic Christian churches of Lalibela, Ethiopia, which is on the World Heritage List, and loved it. I have an unquenchable thirst for travel and the past. The more you see, the less you know, so the more you move. Like so many others, I was shocked by the destruction of the Buddhas at Bamiyan. I wondered just how much of our heritage might

suffer a similar fate if greater measures were not taken to safeguard it. I thought I could do my part by recording the sites digitally and making my photos available. If I could increase the visual information and knowledge about these places, maybe viewers would be more inclined to care, knowing there are fantastic places and ways of living, just a click away on their computers.

ICON: How many sites have you shot already in how many countries? How long do you expect the project to take?

TD: Since I began my project two years ago, I have covered 52 out of the 730 sites registered in 125 countries. That is 7.1 percent. All together I think it will take me about ten years, if I can find the money. I have lost a lot of time simply trying to find funding for the project.

ICON: How much time do you spend at each site?

TD: It depends on the site, of course. Some can be covered in less than a day; others require a lot more time. Angkor, for instance, took ten days. It is not possible to show an entire site, so I aim for its most representative aspects. I do a lot of background reading and research prior to shooting, then check out the site visually. I confess

that I fall in love with sites, such as the Forbidden City in Beijing, and wind up spending a lot of time there. I went back four or five times just to experience the place.

ICON: What kind of equipment do you use?

TD: For shooting, I use a monopod and a Nikon 4500 with a wide lens. I usually take 24 photos for one VR, but I can also print them. For post-production, I use a MacIntosh Titanium PowerBook, Realviz Stitcher 3.5, and Photoshop 7. I then post the images on my website with Adobe Golive 6. Essentially, I can upload material from wherever I am as long as I have access to a phone line or internet connection.

ICON: Which sites have been the most meaningful or important to you?

TD: Without a doubt, the most important to me has been the Giant Buddha at Leshan in central China, the largest in the world. It was made by a monk who died before it was finished. When I touched the carved stone, I could sense the hands that made it. Tears came out slowly, silently.



by MARTHA FLACH



I was recently in Egypt and was able to record the Sethi I tomb in the Valley of the Kings, which has been closed to the public for more than ten years. It is the largest and the best-preserved tomb of all. It was the most emotional photo session of my life. I was able to get access, thanks to an UNESCO conference in Alexandria on World Heritage Sites and multimedia. Angkor Wat is a “must go” destination for everyone. I hope my online VRs show that.

I shot the Great Wall on October 18, 2002—my birthday. I also put three VRs of Wudangshan, one of the most sacred Taoist sites in China, online. Few will see the site as I did because a recent fire destroyed a large part of it.

The more sites I visit, the more humble I feel, seeing the beauty of such exceptional places. I also find myself full of happiness, luck, joy, and hope in what nature and/or human beings have created.

ICON: What is the most challenging aspect of your work?

TD: The biggest challenge still remains to get the right information about remote places. That is always an issue. The other is probably simply getting around with all of my gear. Last year, I climbed eight mountains in China. Mountains have great importance in Chinese culture. What is amazing about them, is that all of them have stairs from base to summit. Taishan has 6,600 steps. You can just forget about feeling your knees for 72 hours after you get back.

ICON: Has the current world political situation affected your work?

TD: Yes, of course. Travel is more difficult and everyday more sites are at risk. As a result, UNESCO’s list keeps growing, and so does the scope of my project. New sites have been registered in countries like Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. I spent three months in India six years ago and was alarmed by its overpopulation. One-sixth of the world’s people live on the subcontinent. I have focused a lot on China because of pollution. To me, it’s the most important issue on our planet. Nine of the ten most polluted cities in the world are in China. Writing to you from Zhongshan, between Hong Kong and Guangzhou, sometimes I cannot see further than 50 meters from my 29th-floor apartment.

HEWN FROM LIVING ROCK BETWEEN A.D. 713 AND 803, THE 71-METER-TALL GIANT BUDDHA OF LESHAN IN SOUTHEASTERN CHINA IS THE LARGEST SUCH STATUE IN THE WORLD.

KV-11, THE MULTICHAMBERED TOMB OF THE NEW KINGDOM PHARAOH RAMESES III (R. 1194–1163 B.C.) IN EGYPT’S VALLEY OF THE KINGS IS DECORATED WITH TEXTS AND IMAGES FROM THE LITANY OF RA AND THE BOOK OF THE DEAD.



ICON: The logistics of this seem incredibly complicated. Do you get permission beforehand? How far ahead do you plan? How do you make travel arrangements?

TD: I travel as a tourist in order to avoid complications. Local authorities are always sensitive about their image and afraid of what could be said about their way of managing sites. I make no travel arrangements; I just go. For the itinerary, I travel the shortest path, following the sun and the seasons. But the shortest doesn’t mean the straightest—for instance, I was in Juzhaigou Valley in the winter and came back the next autumn, solely for photographic reasons. I have no schedule and adapt myself to every situation, trying to respect the visa periods on my passport.

ICON: Do you work with a team?

TD: No team, just two friends in Belgium who help me with accounting and hosting the website. Otherwise, I travel alone.

ICON: How is your project funded?

TD: So far, I’ve financed everything from my own pocket. I have sort of three lives at the same time. I am constantly traveling just to record the sites for the World Heritage Project. I have to maintain the website. And, I have to find time to work for other clients, telecommuting to pay the bills. I am constantly looking for funds to support the project. I would love private individuals, companies, and educational institutions to share this adventure by underwriting some of the films. I travel on the cheap, so my only real expenses are airfare and equipment.

ICON: What is your next destination?

TD: Hopefully, Lhasa in Tibet. I also need to cover South Korea and Japan, the only two countries I am missing for Asia. But only the god of money knows.

WMF has commissioned Tito Dupret to shoot several of its projects. You can look forward to seeing his work in ICON and on WMF’s website at wmf.org. To view his VR images, visit: www.worldheritage-tour.org. ■