LAYERS OF MEANING: VIETNAMESE LACQUER PAINTING AS PALIMPSEST

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ABSTRACT

This thesis elucidates Vietnamese lacquer painting, a unique art form, which came into being due to French and Vietnamese artists meeting in the 1920s, continuing to flourish throughout the ensuing periods of war and independence. The use of layering, combining mixed media and sanding processes differed from lacquer arts in other Asian countries at the time, and also provides a metaphor for this discussion: palimpsest.

An analysis of Asian lacquer lays a foundation to examine the inception of Vietnamese lacquer during the colonial era. The following chapters build on the discussions around the practice in relation to art historiography. The final chapter critically assesses significant works of contemporary practitioners. Applying a methodological prism that syntheses ethnography, postcolonial theory and craft studies, Vietnamese lacquer painting as a practice will be analysed in relation to modernist discourse that continues to dominate readings of artefacts categorised as art. This thesis interrogates the specific consequences of international politics on the artistic practice and trade, focusing on the production and reception of Vietnamese lacquer to offer new insights into an under-theorised field.

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NOTES ON TEXT

Vietnamese names in the text are written in Vietnamese name order: surname first and given name last (which follows Harvard referencing conventions as used in the bibliography). Where a scholar with a Vietnamese name is writing in English, references in the text follow English-language name order and conventions, and Vietnamese diacritics are omitted. The same is true for Vietnamese place names and terms: they are given Vietnamese diacritics, except where they are written without them in the publication referred to. The one exception is the country name: 'Vietnam' which is written as one word and without diacritics throughout.

Overall, I have followed the style guidelines of the Journal of Vietnamese Studies with the exception of the term South Vietnam, because as Jennifer Way (2019:3) and Christopher Goscha (2016: 310) observe…'Americans referred to the Republic of Vietnam as South Vietnam' and so both use the term. I concur that the common usage is more widely recognisable, so have used it in addition to the more formal term.

Unless another material is specified, when I refer to 'lacquer on board' the board is made out of wood (there are a variety of woods used, and processes to craft a stable board suitable for painting on or engraving, as explained in chapter 3).

Appendix 1 provides a list of Vietnamese and French art institutions – schools and trade organisations that influenced the production and distribution of Vietnamese lacquer painting.

Appendix 2 provides a directory of the lacquer artists included in this thesis. As regards contemporary practitioners, there are bound to be omissions, so this directory can perhaps be built upon in the future.

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1 INTRODUCTION

This introduction is divided into seven sections: 1.1 will outline the background to the study and positions it in relation to existing scholarship on Vietnamese lacquer painting (which will be discussed in more depth in the literature review); 1.2 specifies the focus; 1.3 sets out the context of the art form 1.4 clarifies the focus. 1.5 describes the practicalities of the methods used to carry out the research while 1.6 outlines the methodological approaches used, and 1.7 provides an overview of the structure of the chapters.

1.1 Background

> 'What has prompted me to write…is the hunch that something needs to be told, and that, if I don't try to tell it, it risks not being told.' (Berger, 2016:7)

This thesis writes a new chapter of art historiography to include a narrative previously omitted because it has been perceived as peripheral to major events and trends. Aside from colonial writings, the field of Vietnamese art has only begun to attract attention during the last couple of decades, part of the wider trend of globalisation and post-colonial scholarship 'that assess the linkages between wide-ranging imperial histories and the variegated processes that have linked local visual and material forms with emerging modernist subjectivities' (Harney & Phillips, 2018: 1). This thesis explores a specific art form in relation to dominant (albeit shifting) paradigms of art theory, asserting that language plays an important role in the understanding and appreciation of art, and thus has shaped the practice, exhibition and reception of Vietnamese *tranh sơn mài* [lacquer painting].

The decision to do a PhD in the subject was partly a response to repeatedly encountering dismissive attitudes towards Vietnamese art, along with the assumption that the only work produced there was tourist art. Anyone who has visited Vietnam in the past few decades is likely to have seen shops full of reasonably well-executed copies of well-known artists work, or what Bradford Edwards (2008:198) refers to as 'artwork made … to satisfy a more commercial-oriented consumer who mostly wanted nostalgic idealised representations of traditional Vietnamese culture' so the assumption is not without a basis. However, I am not alone in recognising that there is also a continuum of 'serious' fine art practice that deserves recognition. The combination of my education, experience and long-term interest in painting shape the focus of this discussion about a distinctive but relatively unknown art form and its reception outside Vietnam, which I assert is

worthy of academic consideration, both for its own intrinsically fascinating materiality and as an investigation into the influence of politics, ideology and language on art practice and appreciation.

However, the process has been problematic, in that there were very few academic supervisors (or examiners) in the UK willing to take on the task of supervising a subject that was about art practice situated in Vietnam. The School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS London) offers courses on a variety of Asian arts, but does not include Vietnam, only a short programme on South East Asian Art. Essentially, the topic stands outside of existing curricula and categories of subject disciplines in the UK. Additionally, in museums, libraries and archives there are comparatively few art works, books or article on the subject. The academic apparatus seemingly excludes the possibility of this subject being acknowledged as worthy of scholarly attention. Thus, in order to explore this comparatively unrecognised art form, unconventional resources have been utilised, such as unstructured interviews, blogs, reviews and materials from commercial galleries[1]. These have been cross-referenced with a range of documentary evidence.

The use of secondary resources serves two purposes: firstly, it provides references to artworks and texts that are either lost or extremely rare. Secondly, the existing documentation on modern Vietnamese painting has enabled me to trace the historiographical shifts in terms of how lacquer paintings (and artists) have been perceived. Given the timespan and the impact of war in both Vietnam and France during the period (1920s up until now) many original artwork and texts cannot be traced, and that impacts on current evaluations of these artists' achievements. Assembling information from other scholar's research, Vietnamese art historical texts, reviews, exhibition and auction catalogues, along with my own experience meeting and working with lacquer artists has enabled cross-referencing and triangulation to reveal and commemorate some lesser-known artworks and artists that are significant to the development of this art form.

Language has presented a challenge. Despite having lived in Vietnam for around seven years, I am not fluent in the language and needed to work with translators for interviews and for some Vietnamese language texts. Additionally, art terminology can be nuanced: translated vocabulary is likely to be understood differently in a different cultural context. American art historian James Elkins (2002:141) suggests that perhaps languages should be taken more seriously in writing art history; that language, anthropology and arts are related, and that the pre-eminence of English language in the subject 'is due more to world economics than to the history of art' (Elkins, 2002:140). Voicing the concern that translation is largely-one way, with many English language

[1] As explored by: Lenssen, Anneka (2020) *Beautiful Agitation: Modern Painting and Politics in Syria.* USA: University of California Press.

books being translated into other languages, rather than vice-versa, Elkins (2007:218) asserts that 'The issue of translation in art history is in a way related to the issue of historicity and backwardness.' This thesis is an effort to do the opposite: a small contribution to redressing the balance by attempting to translate an art practice and its history from Vietnamese into English, into a discourse where it is not generally recognised as being of any significance, and in so doing, revealing some of the ways in which English language has shaped the recognition and appreciation of art.

Despite recent developments in academia on the disciplines of art history, theory and practice, in the broader art market, the mainstream, well-known canon remains a constant, with feminist and postcolonial scholars adding chapters that do not substantially challenge core understanding of the historically established classifications of art (Elkins, 2002:121). This is a key point, because despite challenging the criteria for inclusion or exclusion, 'the canon' provides a reference point that holds recognition, and therefore to some extent, validity, today.

Indeed, my interest was sparked by the recognition of an art form I recognised and valued, painting: and my research was inevitably positioned in relation to my prior knowledge of that art form. Having studied a BA in Fine Art (specialising in oil painting), and an MA in linguistics, I also have years of experience working in the Higher Education Arts sector. Working in Japan, Hong Kong and Vietnam, and travelling in neighbouring countries for around fifteen years, I made a study of lacquer both by visiting exhibitions and ateliers throughout the region, in addition to formally studying at the Wajima Institute of Lacquer Arts, in Japan and (less formally) with a number of Vietnamese lacquer artists, including Trinh Tuan, Bùi Hữu Hùng, Đinh Công Đạt and Đỗ Đức Khải. During the seven years I worked in Vietnam (mainly in Hà Nội, but for one year in Hồ Chí Minh city) I visited numerous lacquer studios and exhibitions.

As a subject discipline, art history has traditionally been Eurocentric in its field of study, positioning non-western countries on the periphery, although in recent decades, postmodernist, post-colonial approaches advocate decentring, and this thesis follows that trend. Since the 1990s there has been a marked increase in English-language scholarship and a burgeoning discourse on Asian modern and contemporary art. In American and Australian universities substantial research specifically on Vietnam has been carried out and published in the theses by Nora A. Taylor (1997), Boi Tran Huynh (2005) and Phoebe Scott (2012) to which this study is heavily indebted. Focusing on the capital, Taylor (1997) used an ethnographic approach to investigate the links between oil painting, politics and national identity for Vietnamese artists. Huynh (2005) addressed the development of a modern Vietnamese aesthetic in both the north and south of Vietnam, looking broadly across art, architecture and fashion. Scott (2012) interrogated letters, reviews and articles

to analyse the role of the artist in Vietnamese society in the changing social conditions from colonialism to communism. Each of these texts have synthesised and interpreted data from political manifestos, journal articles, public and private correspondence to examine particular aspects of Vietnamese modern art, and this research maps, examines and builds upon their work.

In order to collect and curate a range of reproductions of artworks that have not been held in established collections, it was necessary to rely on a number of secondary resources, such as art books, gallery catalogues and auction sites. Several of these texts, notably Pierre Paliard, Nguyễn Xuân Việt, Nguyễn Quang Phòng & Nguyễn Quang Việt, provide excerpts of articles from rare original journals and books. This information has been triangulated with my primary research, the experience of working in lacquer studios and conversing with lacquer practitioners about their practice and their memories of their teachers and mentors. By piecing together available records, paintings are discussed and compared in terms of their formal attributes, the techniques and materials used; what is known (or considered important about) the artist; and the changing usage of language to describe art practice and display in both Vietnamese and English.

Biographical information about artists and an artist's directory (see appendix 2) have been included because this is intended to be an English-language record of artists, many of whom are not well-known outside of Vietnam. Biographies are a notable characteristic of oral histories, positioning individuals in context, as part of the collective, publicly recognised version of history. Art history as a subject has always employed biography and contextualisation to make sense of images in relation to the artist's intention and audience reactions when exhibited, so incorporating this information is in keeping with the intention to document artistic achievements and developments in this medium.

1.2 Focus of Study

Vietnamese lacquer painting is a unique art form originating in the 1920s in Hà Nội, during the French Colonial period in what was then referred to as Indochina (1858-1945). The practice of Vietnamese lacquer painting is distinct from (although related to) lacquer crafts (e.g. decorative furniture and tableware) as practised in Vietnam (Nguyễn Văn Minh, 2016:2) and by other neighbouring Asian countries, although the material (resin from indigenous trees) and many of the techniques are the same. This difference is primarily because, during the colonial period, Vietnamese artists were influenced by the French in terms of differentiating between art and crafts and so came to use the resin lacquer to produce large scale paintings, rather than decorative household articles.

As contemporary lacquer artist Oanh Phi Phi (2015:159) states, this: 'merging ancient techniques of village crafts with the expressive ideals of French romanticism' created 'a truly hybrid art form…joined to a broader genealogy of painting, one that can be described as Western and art historical.' The fact that this art form came into being thanks to an intermingling of differing cultural practices and has been written about by scholars and critics from different countries and over the better part of a century, it is inevitable that linguistic categories from a variety of languages and periods will determine understanding of it. As English is dominant in terms of publications on art (Elkins, 2007), the theory, concepts, normative traditions, hierarchies and values developed in Euro-American cultures, in particular art history terminologies, affect readings of artworks regardless of where they were produced. Attempts at a more global approach to art history has led to the dominance of modernist tropes being reassessed, so that they are no longer understood to be synonymous with newness or contemporaneity (Belting & Buddensieg, 2011: 7).

This issue has been partly addressed in a preliminary research project investigating 'the terms in which the modern and the contemporary in art have historically been discussed … in Southeast Asian vernacular languages' in which Nelson *et al* (2018: 67-8) explore the ways in which 'vocabulary in art history has been codified in Anglophone and Euro-American spheres.' The report finds that in the region's vernacular terminologies, there is no distinction between them: Scott and Huy (cited in Nelson *et al*, 2018: 73) provide Vietnamese examples: nghệ thuật hiện đại ('modern art') and nghệ thuật đương đại ('contemporary art') which both refer to something new and are used interchangeably. However, whether modernity versus contemporaneity is understood in Vietnam in the same way that Anglophones familiar with art historical discourse would understand it, is not the linguistic focus of this thesis: instead, this study traces the changes in key terminology used to describe artists, art forms, practices and institutions in Vietnamese language, with the intention of demonstrating how this reflects their cultural positioning of lacquer arts. Additionally, it explores the range of vocabulary used in English to describe pre-modern, modern and contemporary art forms in relation to lacquer painting produced in Vietnam. Dowell (1999:16) posits that art history literature tends to be 'distributed over a much wider time span than in scientific subjects' and this study conforms to that tendency.

Figure 1-1 Harvesting Resin Lacquer at Phú Thọ.[Photograph] Thomson, E. (2015) Farnham: UK

Any chosen field in art inevitably incorporates a range of other practices. In the case of Vietnamese lacquer painting, the extraction of resin from trees that are now called *Toxicodendron vernicifluum* (but in most reference books about lacquer production, were referred to as *Rhus verniciflua*) and the utilisation of it in various forms of craft has been practiced for centuries across a number of Asian countries (discussed in chapter three, which contextualises its uses), thus earning it the accolade of being "traditional." The unquestionable status of France as a leader in the art world in the first half of the twentieth century when French painters planned and delivered the curriculum taught in Hà Nội (discussed in chapter four) is noted as an important influence, along with the fact it originated as a result of a colonial intervention significantly colouring readings of its originality and status. Finally, its use in creating propaganda images in socialist realistic style and various artefacts labelled lacquer being sold in tourist shops associate it with kitsch. Thus, the prism used to critically analyse Vietnamese lacquer comprises these three layers: the indigenous, craft roots of the materials and techniques, its culturally hybrid, colonial origins and its ongoing interrelatedness with European paradigms of modern art. In many ways the practice of Vietnamese lacquer painting can be seen to epitomise the debate around the status of craft versus fine art, which is enmeshed with debates over the value of labour versus property, otherwise understood as socialism versus capitalism – values that have underpinned political ideologies throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and continue to do so to this day. These ideological dichotomies are all particularly poignant in terms of the political history of Vietnam (and therefore readings of its cultural production).

1.3 Context

Inheriting a European genealogy of painting, Vietnamese lacquer painting has come to be perceived through the theoretical prism of modern art that largely rejects the formerly privileged status of painting as an art form. Concepts in modern art are linked to technological and industrial developments, in particular the impact of various forms of mechanical reproduction on the status of artworks and artists, above all, painters. When the French painter, Paul Delaroche, declared 'painting is dead' in response to seeing a daguerreotype around 1840, his assumption was that the only raison d'etre of painting is realistic representation, and if that could be achieved more quickly with a camera, there was no motive to continue painting.

Modernity, understood as a response to technological advances, has created a number of binary oppositions commonly used in descriptions of manufactured objects. There has been an increasing emphasis placed on the difference between machine-produced items and the handmade, which has had an impact on value, but also on whether the object is perceived as 'modern' or 'traditional'.

However, both of these categories are ambiguous, and tend to refer as much to stylistic features as to dates of production. The emphasis on difference, particularly originality and newness as being modern, leads to a phenomenon that Groys (2008: 21) attributes to the establishment of museums, that act as:

> 'repositories of historical memory where images and things are kept and shown that have meanwhile gone out of fashion, that have become old and outdated. In this respect only the museum can serve as the site of systemic historical comparison that enables us to see...what really is different, new and contemporary.'

Significantly, the establishment of national art museums was closely linked to 'the modern nation-state' (Preziosi, 1996:165) and the period of history that spawned modernist dualism.

As John Clark (2005:19) emphasises, modernity was experienced in Asian contexts 'at the same time as the domination of the late Euromerican colonialism' which resulted in 'a transfer of academy styles, or in some cases a reactive appropriation of them, in part or in whole.' Vietnamese lacquer painting is one such example: it is, therefore, paradoxical that the association with colonialism and orientalist genres of painting taints artists from colonised countries during this period, so that their work is frequently referred to as being 'traditional' or, more disparagingly, old-fashioned. Additionally, the longing for an exotic 'other' untainted by industrialisation attributed to orientalist artists is conflated to include Vietnamese artists, whose nostalgia originates from first-hand experience of the loss of familiar ways of life due to the destruction of colonialism, war and bombing. This is an example of the way that dominant tropes can obscure peripheral voices.

It is worth stating here that lacquer painting is not a universally popular art form either in Vietnam or internationally: the association with French academic painting, the expensive materials and level of craftsmanship required to create the opulent surface finish, all suggest historicism and elitism. Additionally, the polished dark patina of many lacquer works is firmly associated with pre-modern tastes. The French acquired the word patina from Italian and in the early days of the auction house Drouot in Paris, it became the signified 'proof of antiquity' in the growing market for antiques between the 1830s and 1850s (Charpy, 2013:46). Gombrich (2002: 51) attributes it to the long-lived appeal of classicism, citing Pliny, in the 4th century who praised Apelle's way of toning down pigments with a dark glazing 'so that the brightness of colours should not hurt the eyes', suggesting that records such as these may have influenced later painters. However, the use of bright colours was a notable feature of modern painting, following the innovation of ready mixed oil paints in tubes. This development changed both the process and subject matter of painting. Rather than needing to grind pigments in their studios and composing

mannered, staged scenes of literary or historic importance, artists were able to paint *en plein air*, so the traditional use of chiaroscuro was all but abandoned. As a result, among contemporary art enthusiasts there is a tendency to dismiss darker surfaces, perceiving brighter, lighter colours as fresher and more appealing (in other words - more modern).

In 1933, the acclaimed writer Jun'ichirō Tanizaki (2001:23-4) opined that Japanese lacquer could only really be appreciated in shadowy, lamp or candlelit rooms, asserting that:

> 'Darkness is an indispensable element of the beauty of lacquerware...the lacquerware of the past was finished in black, brown or red, colours built up of countless layers of darkness, the inevitable product of the darkness in which life was lived...their extravagant use of gold, too, I should imagine, came of understanding how it gleams forth from out of the darkness and reflects the lamplight.'

The surface qualities of the hardened lacquer, and their interaction with the available light in its setting, is fundamental to its appreciation, which is why, exhibited in a brightly-lit white cube gallery environment, or seen (as throughout this thesis) as a reproduction, a reprinted photograph, it is difficult to understand its unique appeal. Vietnamese lacquer painting was developing as an art form at the time *In Praise of Shadows* was written, and as a hybrid form which drew on Asian lacquer traditions, more recent scholarship claims it as a form of modern art (e.g Scott, 2014: 4).

An additional reason for the comparative lack of popularity of Vietnamese lacquer painting is the association with decorative arts, a term that is frequently used loosely to refer to a hybrid oriental style of luxury ornate furnishings, that arose due to the trade from China which was stored and sold onwards to English traders at warehouses on the Coromandel Coast of India (Irwin, 1955: 114). The term decorative art is commonly used to categorise it as aesthetically pleasing and skilfully made but with no intellectual meaning (another example of the dualistic, binary oppositions commonly used in terminology eager to distinguish European fine arts as distinct from the 'mere' craftsmanship of non-Europeans).

The precedence of theoretical, text-based knowledge, which is very much a product of the European Enlightenment, has dominated the study of art (and thus readings of artworks) for the past century or so. Summers (2003: 31), for example, defines the fine arts as:

> 'purely mental occupations, neither material nor manual, pursued in the leisure time of free men, the pursuits of those with time and leisure to cultivate and refine their tastes, as opposed to the labour of slaves and craftspeople, who were either forced to work for others or had to work to make a living.'

This status-driven categorisation is inseparable from lacquer painting, in that in Vietnam, it is considered to be a fine art (a concept adopted from the French, discussed in chapter four), but the

use of Vietnamese resin lacquer as a material is generally understood as a form of craft. As Bernier (2000: 4), an American curator, recounts, he assumed lacquer painting was a 'form of handicraft' until, visiting some galleries in Vietnam in the 1980s, he learned that 'the Vietnamese regarded them as fine art on a par with oil paintings.' When he took some examples of lacquer painting back to the States and showed them to the owner of the Foothills Art Centre in Colorado, the response was that they looked like 'Chinese handicrafts' and were 'too exotic' for gallery visitors. This is a single example, but it has been echoed and repeated, even by those championing Vietnamese artists to international markets.

Terms like 'handicraft' are frequently used to indicate that artefacts described thus are 'less than' art (Clark, 2010: 445). In Vietnam there is a long-standing tradition of craft villages that specialise in utilising specific materials, such as wood, reeds or lacquer resin, and where artisans learn through apprenticeship. French intervention restructured craft production so as to exploit local resources and expertise, facilitating labour-intensive manufacture for export. For example, a vocational class, Cours d'apprentissage was as founded in 1895 in Sài Gòn (Nguyen Huu Hao, 2021: 415)[2], before any of the official art schools. Significantly, foreign intervention in craft production in Vietnam did not end when Hồ Chí Minh declared independence in 1945. Jennifer Way investigates the ways in the American state department's cold war agenda between 1955 and 1961 combined economic aid with the management of design and manufacture of craft items (including lacquer) intended for sale in the U.S.A. As Way (2019:16) argues: 'craft deserves more scholarly attention to its entanglements in politics and to political involvements in fabrication, uses and significance without and within the art world.'

1.4 Purpose

Contemporary lacquer painting in Vietnam is flourishing: there exists a huge variety of approaches to this indigenous resin, which will be explored in more depth in chapter six. However, there is comparatively little, beyond a few exhibition catalogue essays, documenting about this it: this thesis curates and contextualises a range of contemporary practice, in relation to the historical development of the art form.

Each generation writes its own history, not because the past has changed, but because contemporary understanding and interpretation has. The achievements of individual and groups of artists tend to be re-evaluated at different times and the varying perspectives offer different lenses to see the artwork through. This study reviews histories of Vietnamese painting, creating a

[2] Renamed the École professionnelle de Sagone in 1904

theoretical palimpsest which echoes the layering process of Vietnamese lacquer painting, which is painted, and then sanded, painted over, and then sanded again so that parts of the previous layer are visible, while other parts remain masked. The metaphor of palimpsest is particularly appropriate to an art practice that was invented due to colonial influence, and so has been obscured, in different ways and for different reasons, by colonial and postcolonial accounts, and perhaps most significantly, in government-produced versions of Vietnamese history which have been revised so as to present an intact national identity, free from foreign contamination.

There are many examples of artists perceived very differently during their lifetime to how they are evaluated after their death, and the reviews and accounts of Vietnamese artists are no exception. Given the patriotic fervour associated with the struggle for Vietnamese independence and the role that artists played in the endeavour, it is not surprising that in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam - DRV (1945-1976), recognition of artists was closely linked to their political affiliations, and membership of the Party and government-run organisations. Taylor (2001:131) documents the 1994 congress of the Arts Association, where a number of artists challenged the hierarchy of officially commemorated artists. For example, the work of Tô Ngọc Vân, considered one Vietnam's greatest artists for decades, was judged to be mediocre, despite his status as a war hero due to his death at the battle of Điện Biên Phủ. Four artists were nominated as being the 'four pillars' (a reference to the structure of a temple or shrine) of masters of modern painting in Vietnam. These painters were Bùi Xuân Phái, Nguyên Sáng, Nguyên Tử Nghiêm and Đường Bích Liên. Out of these four, Nguyên Tử Nghiêm was the only one who had previously been a member of the state-run Arts Association. Their nomination is particularly significant because Bùi Xuân Phái and Nguyên Sáng had been political outcasts, having been involved in a scandal which was the result of a bid for greater artistic freedom (discussed further in chapter five), while Đường Bích Liên refused to join the Arts Association: their selection symbolises a rejection of state-controlled artistic practice, and was an important turning point in the narrative of Vietnamese art.

It may seem that it would more appropriate that a Vietnamese national should curate and present this subject, (and many do, in Vietnam), but for me, an outsider who encountered an art form that excited enough interest to pursue as a subject of study, my research route drew my attention to the responses and interpretations of non-Vietnamese audiences and that comprises another layer of discussion and interpretation throughout.

1.5 On Methods

My interest in researching lacquer painting was born out of a chance encounter with contemporary lacquer practitioners while travelling in Vietnam in the 1990s, long before I had

considered making it the subject of a PhD thesis. At the time I was a fine art graduate working as an English teacher in Hong Kong. I was so impressed with the painting I saw, that I asked to be introduced to one of the artists: this led to studio visits, invitations to galleries and private views and establishing a number of friendly contacts in Hà Nội. I decided to take three months off work to study lacquer painting in the shared studio of Công Quốc Hà, his sister Công Kim Hoa and her husband, Trinh Tuan, and worked there along with their numerous apprentices, including Saeko Ando, a Japanese national whose fascination with Vietnamese lacquer led to her emigrating to Vietnam. We both went on to study lacquer painting in a number of artists' studios, but while she remains in Vietnam as a practicing artist, I, after a seven-year period of working part-time as an English teacher there, returned to the UK. It is these experiences that underpin my understanding of the material and techniques, as well as the enigmatic status and complex conceptual frameworks that lacquer artists situate their practice in (discussed in chapter six).

The perennial problem that anyone writing about artworks and artists face is the question of which criteria are used to select the most significant artworks and artists, and it is inevitable that the choices will be to some extent subjective and affected by relationships with the artists. As Joselit (2012), art critic and historian, asserts:

> 'the fact is you can't ever survey an entire rich field…To some extent the examples are always opportunistic:.. But it's a very complex problem, ethically and philosophically—what is exemplary? …Is it just a kind of effect of what my travel itinerary might've been versus someone else's?'

As I have stated, my experience visiting Vietnam led to a fascination with artistic practices there, and much of the early stages of my learning about Vietnamese lacquer painting happened while I was living, and later working there. This meant that as the ethnographer, Verrier Elwin, (1964:142 cited by Tedlock, 1991:72) observed 'I did not depend merely on asking questions, but knowledge of the people gradually sank in until it was part of me.' My time spent in Vietnam can be described in research terms as ethnographic fieldwork.

Once my application had been accepted to do a PhD starting in the Autumn term of 2015, I carried out field trips in Vietnam during the Summer and another one the following year, 2016, which built on relationships established when living and working in Vietnam for around seven years (1998-2005).

Initially, I intended to cast my net wide, and visit as many artists, studios and galleries as possible. Generally speaking, my friends and acquaintances were very helpful and introduced me to a range of practicing lacquer artists, as well as art historians, tutors, curators etc. There was a (slightly frustrating) tendency to direct me to popular artists (or their relatives, such as Bùi Xuân Phương, son of the revered oil painter, Bùi Xuân Phái) which was not always relevant to my study of

lacquer painting. Even within formal organisations such as the Art Association, or the Sơn Ta group in Hà Nội, inevitably amongst the artists there are friendships and rivalries. The socio-cultural processes that influence the interactions of individuals inevitably impact on their artistic practice, production and exhibition, and therefore the ways in which their work is understood both by themselves and others.

In addition to making my own lacquer paintings in studios, the day-to-day observing and listening to conversations about how to apply the lacquer paint to produce different effects (along with how adapt and amend the surface in subsequent layers) taught me a lot of the techniques and gave me an understanding of how integral the qualities of the material are to the ways of working with it.

Later, it was difficult to find textual back up for what I had learned. The book on technology and conservation of lacquer by Marianne Webb (2000) is rare in that it includes a section on Vietnamese practice but most other studies, both older ones, such as Edward Strange's catalogue of Chinese lacquer, or more recent studies, like Shayne Rivers *East Asian Lacquer: Material, Culture, Science and Conservation* (2011), focus on lacquerware from other Asian countries, predominantly China and Japan. A wealth of resources about lacquer from a variety of countries have been collected and published by Museum für Lackkunst (that I visited twice, for research purposes), though as yet they have published nothing on Vietnamese lacquer.

Other than in conservation studies, where understanding of the components of materials and processes of manufacture are essential to reversable repair and maintenance work, technique is rarely given serious consideration in art historical texts. However, techniques and understanding of the material qualities of lacquer resin are fundamental to lacquer painters, so chapter three investigates the techniques and effects created in China, Japan, Myanmar, Korea and Vietnam, to contextualise the practice and map its development. Linguistically, English language books on the subject of lacquer technique tend to rely on Japanese terminology (because there is no one-to-one translation for processes not practiced in Anglophone countries), and chapter three follows this convention.

In addition to investigating the technological developments in Vietnamese lacquer painting, this thesis investigates the reception of Vietnamese lacquer painting in an international context, in relation to evolving social and art historiographical constructs of fine art painting. Therefore, the use of secondary art historical resources has been fundamental to this study to reflect upon changing trends in art practice, and the politics and theories that have shaped them. While I have relied predominantly on English language sources, French and Vietnamese texts have been referred to. In her thesis on the changing role of the artist in Vietnam, Scott (2012: 14) points out:

> 'both colonial and revolutionary-period published texts were produced in circumstances of varying degrees of censorship or ideological pressure, so that they have to be understood as public forms of enunciation made in a specific historical context.'

The same is, arguably, true of any text. Linguistic translation requires an understanding of the wider systems of meaning through contextualisation. As Nord asserts 'translation involves comparing cultures' and 'translators perceive the foreign culture by means of comparison with their own culture of primary enculturation' (1997:34). This is just as true for me, as it was true of colonial writers.

As a researcher the practical issues of translation are related also to language proficiency (or lack thereof). Despite having lived in Vietnam for around seven years and having studied the language, I cannot claim to be fluent. Having initially lived in Hà Nội, I understand northern dialects (and culture) far better than central or southern ones (and while my pronunciation is not perfect, it is recognised better in the north than elsewhere). However, as with the majority of language learners, my comprehension level is better than my productive ability, and when reading Vietnamese texts, or transcribing parts of interviews, wherever I have any doubts about meaning, I ensure that my translations are also double checked by fluent Vietnamese speakers, who also speak English, as with more demanding French texts.

Unlike its neighbours, Thailand and China, Vietnam does not have any international bookshops, only government-controlled ones, although there are street book stalls that sell photocopies of books that are banned, such as Dương Thu Hương's *Paradise of the Blind* (published in the USA in English) and other books that are not allowed in the official bookshops. Conversely, books published in Vietnam are not widely available outside of Vietnam, as they do not tend to print very many (a few can be found in second-hand bookshops). Even in Vietnam, in the few bookshops that stock art books in English, there are more books about Western artists, or books with glossy photographs of Vietnamese ethnic minorities taken by international photographers, than books about Vietnamese artists or art history by Vietnamese authors. The same is true in Vietnamese language, where there are relatively few books on Vietnamese art history other than selected reproductions of famous Vietnamese painters, with little accompanying text other than biographical information. There are also a few monographs on artists that have been recognized as masters (often due to their military prowess or contributions to Vietnam's independence), but little of what would be recognised as art criticism or theory by western audiences. For example, webpages and obituaries written by friends and relatives of the Vietnamese artists are genres of art writing that do not fit into European categories or purposes (which in themselves, are not always clear-cut), and may, therefore, be perceived as unempirical and untrustworthy.

Primary research included visits to Vietnam and other sites of relevance. In 2014, I attended the international conference *Arts du Vietnam. Nouvelles approaches* at Centre de Recherche sur l'Extrême-Orient de Paris-Sorbonne (CREOPS). In 2015 I visited Hà Nội and attended the Lacquer Crafts Exchange Exhibition and Conference (presenting a poster on Vietnamese lacquer), which involved research trips to the lacquer department at Trường Trung cấp nghề Tổng hợp Hà Nội (Hà Nội General Vocational school) and networking with other lacquer artists and enthusiasts, including Oanh Phi Phi, Nhat Tran, Trinh Tuan, Dr. Nguyễn Văn Minh and Sha Sha Higby[3].

In 2016 I spent time in Sài Gòn, where I visited the studios of Nguyễn Lâm, Hồ Hữu Thủ, Thanh Mai, Nguyễn Xuân Việt (Nguyễn Gia Trí's apprentice), Đào Minh Tri, Saeko Ando and Bùi Quang Ngọc, in addition to visiting a number of galleries, including a tour with the curators of the National Gallery, and Duc Minh Private Gallery, with the grandaughter of the famous collector. I also travelled to Huế to interview the artist Trương Bé. This enabled me to learn more about the lacquer traditions in Bình Dương province, where the French established a number of vocational schools before the École des beaux-arts de l'Indochine in Hà Nội.

The same year, I also visited Adrian Jones, the British collector of Vietnamese art and founder of the Witness Collection, in Georgetown, Malaysia. Jones originally went to Vietnam in the early 1980s to make a documentary, and during that time got to know some Vietnamese artists and started collecting their work. He now has an extensive library and collection of Vietnamese artworks, and hosts two websites on the subject, Vietnam – The Art of War and Witness Collection. These experiences of visiting collections and galleries, in addition to studying lacquer painting in artists' studios in Vietnam and my understanding of the material and techniques, have served to triangulate opinion about, and response to, lacquer painting as a form of art practice.

Methodologically, interview-based research can be quite challenging in the contemporary Vietnamese context, as Huynh (2005: 2) discovered when carrying out research for her PhD, commenting how 'a veil of ideological doctrine and criticism favouring socialism', along with refusals to discuss certain topics that are perceived as 'dangerous', made it hard for her to gather accurate historical data. She notes that Vietnamese artists have had to 'negotiate between State demands and their personal vision' (Huynh, 2005:3). However, my research was conducted more than a decade later than hers, and the focus is on the practice and production of lacquer art, which in a contemporary context, is essentially uncontroversial. The majority of artists I visited or contacted were happy for their work to be included and some agreed to be interviewed. Where

[3] An American artist influenced by Japanese culture, who uses lacquer to create masks, puppets and dolls for her performances: http://www.shashahigby.com/New_Site_SourceFiles/index.html

reproducing images from public institutions much of the standing advice states that it is freely available for non-commercial or educational uses. For works which were not available in the public domain, I contacted either living artists or collectors to get written permission for their use for this research.

The context was one of a political history that made people wary of authority and officialdom, and therefore getting written consent forms seemed to intimidate interviewees and made their conversations more inhibited. Given some of the issues that have arisen regarding artists or writers that questioned government policies, this caution and reticence is understandable, although the issues of using claims and opinions of artists (and others) who do not want to publicly 'own' them is also problematic (because it reduces the authority and authenticity for my readers). However, as Whitehead (2005:4) argues, ethnographic research is less about specified practices and more about 'perceptions of research findings as … an intersubjective product constructed by the relationship between the researcher and the study population' and protecting the reputation and safety of my interviewees was always my priority.

These interview conversations informed and underpinned my understanding in relation to visual and textual documentation from different periods of history, however I have been very mindful of respecting respondents wishes in terms of using quotations.[4] For example, a number of artists refer to the difficulties of working as an artist in the 1950s, in terms of prescribed subjects for their painting, and also their homes and lifestyles being scrutinised. The land reforms meant that many homeowners lost their property and lacquer artists who ran studios and hired apprentices had to give them up, or risk being accused of being a class enemy and being sent to re-education camps in the country. Inevitably, these changes caused grief and resentment, and when giving examples of how much pressure artists were under to disassociate themselves from their urban, middle-class lifestyles, more than one person told me the story that the artist, Phan Kế An, who was pressured to marry a peasant woman to demonstrate his dedication to the Party, but they did not want to be named, so I only referenced it to a published article by Schütte (2003:9).

Several artists I met were anxious that I was an art critic (one asked me, in English, if I was an 'art complainer') and it is evident that there was anxiety about negative representation of their work. The whole subject of art criticism is viewed with distrust by Vietnamese artists, who simply see it as potentially damaging to freedom of expression, creativity and personal reputation. Generally speaking, the introductions to artists' work written in catalogues of exhibitions, or as reviews in

[4] After clarifying the purposes of the interview with the respondents and assured them that they would not be quoted unless they agreed to be, in that I would contact them for written permission if I decided I wanted to use a specific quotation (several of which were refused, when relating to specific named people).

journals tend to be written by friends, and so often include recommendations, comments such as 'best wishes for your success', which are far more personal and friendly than would be usual in English language reviews. As Elkins comments in his book *What happened to Art Criticism?* (2003), art criticism covers a huge range of different kinds of writing, published on a variety of platforms, with different audiences in mind: most of this writing is not acknowledged in English-language academia.

One of my interests, in determining the continuum of practice since the colonial intervention that instigated the practice of lacquer painting, is what artists felt inspired by and what they thought influenced their practice. Given the amount of international coverage of fakes, forgeries and copyists in the Vietnamese art world, along with the context of their interactions with foreigners it is a particularly sensitive topic and attempts to position their practice, by asking them to compare themselves with other practitioners made the artists feel uncomfortable. For example, one well-known artist said that he could not compare himself with other practitioners, because they were his friends and he wished them all success. However, in a less formal conversation afterwards, he became much more forthcoming in terms of opinions about their work. Hence informal meetings with artists and their families were more fruitful, in that participants often drifted onto stories about contemporaries, which included far more honest praise, criticism and comparisons, in terms of work and practice. Since my overall aim was to find common themes and perspectives, I adopted a largely unstructured approach, asked open questions and allowed interviewees to voice their own particular interests. There were a number of times when I either read or was told contradictory things, but I was not looking for hard facts: I was gathering perceptions on how lacquer artists saw themselves and their work in the Vietnamese and international art world.

The overall aim of this research is to collect and curate images of works of artists, and information about their lives and artistic practice that might illuminate what they have achieved and raise awareness of voices that are relatively unheard. This comprised both the production process, it is also about the exhibition and reception of Vietnamese lacquer art, and so secondary research has been important to contextualise this art form. My claim to originality is the focus of the study, along with the positioning of lacquer artists in contemporary practice. By presenting and discussing the lacquer paintings selected, I hope not only to elucidate Vietnamese lacquer painting as an art form but also to challenge some of the categories – and resulting exclusions - in the global art world, drawing and reflecting on my own cultural experience and academic practices.

> 'A genuinely (self) critical stance implies that one constantly questions both one's own and borrowed mental frameworks. Insight into the structure (the building blocks, expressive means, codes) as well as the culture of the image and the visual material world in the broadest sense (production, reception and practices)

> remains a precondition … for being able to formulate well-founded criticism (Pauwels, 2012:259).

Thus, in addition to its archival ambitions, this research will be, to some extent, reflexive and include discussion of the academic discipline of fine art in relation to the art world and its markets. It is the combination of these areas of interest that led me to investigate the enigmatic status of the contemporary practice of Vietnamese lacquer painting in relation to its inception and development.

1.6 Methodology

As with many interdisciplinary areas of research, this investigation does not fit neatly into an existing methodological framework: however, the three central theoretical underpinnings are: ethnography, post-colonialism and craft studies (all of which link - and to some extent overlap - with linguistics).

Surveying a range of recent art studies in search of a methodological framework, inevitably I referred to the seminal work of Nora Annesley Taylor, who adopted an ethnographic approach to her research. However, while her research was inspirational in many ways, I was able to identify differences in her approach and focus. In her study of the Vietnamese art world that draws together some of the significant painters in Hà Nội, focusing on how the communities of artists developed in the shifting political climate, Taylor (2004: 21) argues that focusing on the artists rather than the art enables readers to understand them as individuals, which challenges the common Western assumption that Asian artists are homogeneous craftsmen, churning out the codified designs of their ancestors. Taylor (2004: xvi) qualifies that 'in my study an "important" artist is one who contributed to the community at large and was seen as important by his or her peers.'

Firstly, her focus is on the artists' lives in relation to their national identity, and is restricted to artists based in Hà Nội, whereas mine includes the work of artists based throughout Vietnam and those either from, or based, abroad. Vietnamese lacquer painters do not constitute a single, intact, ethnic group as such: in fact, some of the practitioners in this study are overseas Vietnamese and in one case, Japanese (lacquer artist Saeko Ando, who has been resident in Vietnam for the past thirty years).

More fundamentally, ethnography is the study and comparison of groups people and their culture. Traditionally ethnographic approaches tend to focus on discrete, local communities. However, postcolonial discourse has revealed the impossibility of separating the metropolis from the colony, as there are numerous connections between them. Throughout its history as a subject discipline,

ethnographic studies were very much concerned with establishing distinctive, immutable characteristics that were associated with non-Euromerican subjects: stereotypes, in other words, and the subject of Edward Said's book, *Orientalism* (1978). The unequal nature of the relationship between colonisers and the colonised people has led, in the case of Vietnam, to a long-standing tendency to differentiate Vietnamese national identity from foreign culture. Yet the practice of fine art painting was adopted from the French, largely as a result of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts d'Indochine. As travel opportunities increased when Vietnam, along with many other ex-eastern bloc countries opened up for trade in the 1990s, globalization has become 'an inexorable supranational force that reshapes, mutilates and overturns the local' (Burawoy, 2001:149), although its effects can only be studied by observing a specific locality or phenomenon. Therefore my study is not - and could not be - focused only on Vietnamese artists and their production (and the responses to lacquer painting), because in the global art world, artists do not necessarily work and exhibit in a single country. The particular history of Vietnam, under Chinese domination from the 2nd century BC to the 10th century AD, gaining independence to the extent that the Nguyễn state 'was one of the five main powers of Southeast Asia' (Brocheux & Hemery, 2009: 10) and then in the late 1800's being invaded by the French, attests to the inevitable impact of foreign interactions. The unwelcome nature of most of these interventions has led to a tendency to deny foreign cultural influence. As Nguyễn Quân (1991:13) asserts:

> 'Vietnam has always been in contact with neighbouring powers, subject to continual wars of aggression and in constant danger of enslavement an assimilation (throughout two thousand years of history, every Chinese Dynasty conducted at least one aggressive war against Vietnam). Therefore, except for, perhaps, Pacific Buddhism and Champa art, which they integrated as victors, the Vietnamese have resisted foreign cultural influences.'

However, Jamieson (1987: 124) bemoans the tendency to attempt to establish: 'a distinctive Vietnamese identity…built upon a solid core of uniquely Vietnamese traits' suggesting instead that the focus should be on the relationships and context 'which defines (and constantly redefines) meaning and function.'

Vietnam's independence was achieved through socialist ideology (and support from neighbouring communist countries) and one of the results of the length of the wars against the French and American invaders, along with state controlled economic policies, was poverty. In the difficult conditions of war and post-war, it is not surprising that when the Đổi Mới (open door policy, which allowed international trade) was implemented in the 1990s, artists were tempted by the increased possibilities of the open market, first selling to aid workers, later to tourists. All of these factors have impacted the practice, production and dissemination of Vietnamese lacquer painting, as well as shifting interpretations of the art form.

In terms of research, tensions between postcolonial and ethnographical methodological approaches have complicated the process. It could be argued that this thesis began as what could be described (in ethnographic terms) as embodied fieldwork, largely carried out before the decision to turn them into a formal study, while later research was largely carried out with secondary, interpretive investigations (although it included field trips) from a postcolonial, art historical stance.

While the artists and their practice comprise an element of my inquiry, my primary focus is on the hybrid phenomenon of lacquer painting and the effect that its origins have on its reception outside of Vietnam, particularly in relation to existing categories in art parlance both within and outside of academic discourse. The term hybrid is used here, not in the derogatory way it was used by colonials keen to protect racial 'purity' but in the sense given to the term by translation theorists, where:

> 'a hybrid text is a text that results from a translation process which 'shows features that somehow seem 'out of place'/ 'strange'/'unusual' for the receiving culture. These features, however, are not the result of a lack of translational competence or examples of 'translationese', but they are evidence of conscious and deliberate decisions by the translator (Schaffner and Adab, 2000:325).'

This inquiry is an attempt to group and organise key themes that arise, in particular to highlight the persistence of the tropes of Eurocentric connoisseurship and modernist theory (with its enlightenment and colonial epistemes) in the discussion of both historic and contemporary painting. Yet it is difficult to depart from the established vocabulary within an academic discipline. For example, Taylor (2004: 11) clarifies that "Art" in her study 'primarily means "fine art" generally and "oil painting" specifically.' She qualifies this by adding 'this is not to suggest that all art is only painting, and painting is the only art' but by narrowing the artform and medium of her study, Taylor reveals that lacquer painting has not been studied. She also draws attention to one of the problems in discussing Vietnamese painting of any kind; the fact that the concept of "fine art" and the medium of oil paint are perceived to be European imports, and not 'native' to Vietnam. In an expanding field, where the ever-increasing plethora of experimental art forms compete to escape limiting categorisations, to focus on painting may appear to be conventional and unadventurous - criticisms that have been repeatedly directed at Vietnamese painting, due to it having adopted some of the characteristics of French academic painting (and in so doing, inheriting the theoretical historiography attached to painting as an art form).

There are conflicting opinions regarding what constitutes Vietnamese art, in relation to traditional and introduced formats, but many Vietnamese artists have adopted fine art painting, and this was combined with the use of lacquer resin and pigments. In the 1940s, artist Tô Ngọc Vân (cited in

Nguyễn Xuân Việt, 2009:427), wrote an essay and delivered a speech with the title *Sơn Mài*[5], declaring the new terminology represented a departure from past practices and elevated what had been a decorative art to a 'pure' art that had all and more of the expressive capacity of oil painting. Essentially this influential artist, teacher and art writer was asserting that Vietnamese lacquer was a modern fine art form that was traditionally Vietnamese.

MacHale (2004) investigates the impact of print journalism on Vietnamese culture, and throughout their theses, Taylor (2001) and Scott (2012) both discuss the crossover between the artists who attended EBAI and the writers, illustrators and editors of local journals in the colonial era. Huynh-Beattie, 2012:54) states: 'The close relationship between literature and art in Vietnam is suggested by the Vietnamese term văn nghệ (meaning "literature and art").' This relationship is important because it highlights the scholarly status of painters (which echoes European concerns around fine art, being conceptual and intellectual). It also elucidates the ideologies and theoretical frameworks that have influenced artistic practice in the Vietnamese context, which have been reflected and reinforced in numerous journals[6] and artworks.

However, language cannot adequately describe the materiality of lacquer, either in terms of quality or process. One of the fascinations of working with lacquer is its unpredictability: it does not behave in a uniform way, regardless of season, temperature, humidity. Considerable experience is needed to develop the ability to recognise when lacquer is workable, and how to adapt conditions and ingredients accordingly. The time and dedication required to attain this level of practical skill does not appeal to many artists but without that motivation, this art form would not exist. Thus engagement with the material is one of the key criteria for selecting lacquer artists in this study.

Artists who choose to engage with the process of working with lacquer are choosing to work with a time-consuming and expensive material. David Pye (2010:341), in his discussion (and defence) of what he describes as 'workmanship' explores how craftsmanship can be understood as 'a valuable ingredient in civilisation' with 'a deep spiritual value.' The term 'craftsmanship' encompasses the idea of mastery, expertise and a physical connection with materials and tools (without mechanical intervention): yet paradoxically, technical skill is also often associated with cold, mechanical accuracy. Modern dualistic terminology has created a number of (arguably contradictory) binary oppositions: haptic skill has commonly been considered separate from and inferior to intellectual knowledge. However, in the case of 'academic painting' which was classified

[5] Son Mài translates as paint, grind and is used to refer to both the process and product of lacquer painting.

[6] For example, *Les Pages indochinoises : revue littéraire et artistique d'Indochine et d'Extrême-Orient*

as a fine art rather than a craft, being skilled became disdained for 'hiding its presence through illusion', while 'technique-poor' modern art is thought to achieve an admirable honesty' (Claridge,1999:153). In Vietnamese lacquer painting there cannot be a disconnect between the craft and the art.

Despite the difficulty of truly apprehending the material properties of lacquer paintings in reproduced photographs such as those presented in this thesis, the analysis of artworks remains focused on the techniques and surface qualities of the medium. As a result, the artist's work selected for this study comes from artists who have an affinity with and have built up experience with natural lacquer. Obviously, the reasons artists discover an affinity with a particular material differs for individuals: for Việt kiều (Vietnamese born overseas) artist, Oanh Phi Pi (2022, personal communication, 12 May)

> 'I see lacquer as a cultural medium rather than solely an artistic one… because I was not born in Vietnam, lacquer as painting originally presented a way through which to understand this culture, and eventually has become an agency through which I can participate in its social changes.'

My research process has included elements of ethnographic-type studies, including working as an 'apprentice' (or student) alongside Vietnamese lacquer artists, observation, interviews and conversations with artists, curators and scholars in Vietnam. It was also 'hands on' in that I painted and worked with lacquer, experimenting with and applying techniques. However, since the greater part of the research I carried out was secondary, relying on libraries and archives, the final study focuses on interpretations of a specific art historiography, and investigating the changing readings of arts and crafts in the ideological shifts which occurred during the transition from colonialism to post-colonialism.

1.7 Thesis outline

Palimpsest (2000) by Oanh Phi Phi was the initial inspiration to use this metaphor to elucidate my study: her work is a sculptural light installation that displays layered 'skins' of lacquer painting, projected through glass slides. Changing the way the viewer sees the lacquer (i.e. removing the opaque board), exposes what would be have been invisible, illuminating traditional processes through the juxtaposition with camera equipment, and the lenses and screens that permeate contemporary life. In a review of the installation, Stock (2014:142) elaborates on the ways that the material and technique relate to the original meaning, of a manuscript's writing being erased so that it can be reused.

> ‘The word "palimpsest" literally means "to rub smooth again"- a process that is also applied in lacquerwork. Oanh infuses layer upon layer of translucent color into the plates, then partially negates these hues by sanding them away or elucidating them in delicate sgraflito.’

Figure 1-2 Oanh Phi Phi (2013-18) Palimpsest. [Multimedia Installation] Variable Dimensions.At: http://www.phiphioanh.com/palimpsest (Accessed on: 12.09.2021)

It could be argued that in the postmodernist art world, the metaphor palimpsest has become somewhat overused, a popular trope that emphasises eclecticism and fragmentation, and celebrates the appropriation and redeployment of tradition. Perhaps its popularity is due to its recognisability: the anti-historicism of early modernism and communism that attempted to deny or erase traces of the past has been replaced with more nuanced readings.

Its appropriateness for this subject is further corroborated by the words that contemporary lacquer artists used to describe both their work and their working processes, which are reinforced by the appearance of the lacquer paintings produced by Vietnamese artists. See figure 1-2 by Nguyễn Lâm (b.1941), which combines modern abstraction with something archaeological, almost Jurassic in terms of the eroded, rubbed and worn surface textures evocative of different types of rocks and fossils). Nguyễn Trường Linh (b.1971) held an exhibition of lacquer paintings in Taiwan (2013) with the title *Concealed Content* - a play on words, referring to both the process of lacquer painting but also to censorship that hides controversial topics in a rapidly changing Vietnam. History is continually being rewritten, but changes in perspective result in different interpretations. The official narrative of Vietnamese art is fragmented, in terms of documentation,

with many art works that cannot be traced, and artworks of obscure origins in terms of both authorship and ownership.

Figure 1-3 Nguyễn Lâm (2008) Abstract 1 [lacquer on Board] 80 x 80 cm. In: Nguyễn Lâm (s.d.) Lacquer Paintings Nguyễn Lâm. [Catalogue] Hồ Chí Minh City

Overall, the intended research output will be a thesis and artist directory bringing together some of the leading Vietnamese lacquer painters, from the inception of the art form up until the last decade. Although some of them have been included in broader surveys and reviews of Vietnamese artists, there is, to my knowledge, no other research project that focuses specifically on Vietnamese sơn mài (the practice of painting and then sanding the surface of painting).

Each chapter investigates the development of the practice, contextualized in the changing political and cultural environment in Vietnam. This, the introduction is chapter one. Chapter two surveys existing literature on the subject, focusing on the historical context and related theory. Recent postcolonial scholarship on Vietnam arts and crafts will be contextualized in the broader

dominant paradigms and terminology of Euro-American art historiography, with a particular focus on craft studies, along with a shorter section on ethnographic and linguistic research considerations.

Chapter three explores lacquer resin as a material of distinctively Asian origin, and some of the early trading of lacquer is mapped in relation to Euro-American decorative art production and exhibition (and the impact that this had on nomenclature). The techniques used to create the range of rich and varied surface qualities possible in lacquer are described and illustrated. In outlining lacquer practice across Asia, Vietnamese sơn mài is positioned within other, more long-standing lacquer practices.

Chapter four gives an overview of the colonial context in which Vietnamese lacquer painting originally emerged, focusing on the themes and techniques that were adopted and favoured.

Chapter five investigates the conflicting attitudes which led to changes of approach to the themes, techniques and materials used to produce lacquer paintings from Vietnam's first declaration of independence in 1945, and the following decades when cultural production was largely dominated by state-run departments.

Finally, chapter six explores contemporary trends in Vietnamese lacquer artworks, reviewing artists who are well-respected in Vietnam (while relatively unknown internationally) as well as those who exhibit internationally.

This thesis asserts a new critical position on Vietnamese lacquer through an in-depth investigation of this particular trajectory of modernist painting: its local contingencies and the wider context that led to the development of an art form both hybrid and unique among Asian lacquer traditions. Through study and practice of the medium, and by surveying works of selected lacquer artists and contextualizing their practice in art historiographic terms, familiar artistic categories will be interrogated so as to reveal layers of significance and raise awareness of lesser-known artistic voices in the global art world. Using the analysis of specific art works and biographies to position Vietnamese lacquer in relation to the dominant paradigms of art historiography, the resultant chapters illuminate a relatively unacknowledged area of artistic development, which builds up visual depth through layering processes, just as the historical continuum builds layers of shifting meaning: a palimpsest.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW & HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This chapter reviews literature pertaining to the practice of Vietnamese lacquer painting, from its inception in the 1920s up to its current positioning in the post-cold war global art world. Situated in the art historiographical period of modernism and postmodernism (which coincide with colonialism and postcolonialism), themes investigated inevitably link to wider subject areas, such as globalization and modernization, but most significantly, craft and its symbiotic and contested relationship to art, because the materiality, processes and techniques of Vietnamese lacquer painting are central to understanding the medium.

Given that paradigms of knowledge are embodied within existing academic conventions (one of which is a literature review), investigating an area where there is relatively little written in English language presents a challenge. As a result, the problematising of Vietnamese lacquer painting as an art form in relation to existing academic and artistic theoretical frameworks and related terminology has become an integral part of this project. Huyssen (2007:194) argues that even with recent changes in university subject disciplines, there is still unequal recognition to 'cross-national cultural forms that emerge from the negotiation of the modern with the indigenous, the colonial and the postcolonial in the "non-Western."' Vietnamese lacquer painting is precisely one such area, that does not fit neatly into existing theoretical frameworks. Revisiting the repercussions of colonialism and modernism on the readings of this particular art form offers the opportunity to trace the layers of encrustation that form a membrane that, as Adamson & Kelley (2013:1) comment: 'is not so much a barrier to content as a condition for its apprehension.'

John Clark (2016:245) asserts that parallel modernities embody 'non-art structures of dominance in the everyday world.' The collapse of the Soviet Union and end of the cold war heralded an explosion in global trade and travel, which in many cases followed colonial trade routes, making it easy to trace cultural appropriation around the world. Using the metaphor palimpsest to describe both the process of sơn mài and the ways that different aspects of history can at times be erased or obscured, then rewritten and reinterpreted so that what was opaque becomes illuminated, this study investigates the development and reception of a modern art form that is neither widely known or understood. As Huyssen (2007:191) asserts:

> 'the discursive return of modernity captures something in the dialectics of globalism, whose aporetic mix of destruction and creation, so reminiscent of modernity in the classical age of empire, has become evermore palpable in recent years.'

In addition to investigating the contextual factors that led to the invention and continuation of Vietnamese lacquer painting, the works will be discussed in relation to their materiality and the layering techniques used to create their formal qualities. Recent scholarship suggests there is a contemporary 'return to the real' (Foster, 1996), that is, to art grounded in the materiality of physical materials and geographical localities. Intrinsically linked to materiality, is the process of 'imaginative and kinaesthetic play (or struggle) with the stuff (clay, wool, reeds…) of craft [that] lies at the core of artisan identity' (DeNicola & Wilkinson-Weber, 2019:14). Materiality is linked to the haptic skills that have been increasingly neglected both in modern art historiographies and in taught arts-based subject disciplines. This idea, that manual skill can be both imaginative and experimental, is one that was for a long time overlooked in the modern definitions of craft, which was all too frequently presented as a mutually exclusive 'other' to both creative fine art and efficient mechanical production.

Craft theorists (Crane, 1892, Morris, 1877, Greenhalgh 1997, Risatti, 2007, Sennet, 2009, Frayling, 2011, Adamson, 2013, Wilkinson-Weber & DeNicola, 2016, to name just a few) have challenged the divisiveness of dualistic categorizations. In an industrialised society, handmade objects can never compete with machine-made ones in terms of price, and this is one of the factors that influence modern readings of craft: it is 'old-fashioned', and exclusive due to its costliness. Thus, craft makers are, on one hand seen as backward, luddite labourers, and on the other, the producers of bespoke, handmade luxury commodities: both of which oppose the dominant modernist paradigms of embracing progress and non-elitism.

Jennifer Way (2019:16) in her investigation into the importing of craft products made in Vietnam into American in the 1950s (during the cold war), asserts: 'Historical engagements with craft deserve to be studied in relation to all the complexities, conflicts, and discourses through which we approach works of art'. Arguing that 'its craft assistance program in South Vietnam arose not from any fascination with or knowledge about Southeast Asian craft, or from any interest in directly engaging with artisans to learn about their traditions, interests and plans,' Way (2020:4) asserts that the state-led strategy of intervention at this point in history was political, an attempt to demonstrate leadership in the free market. In her analysis of marketing slogans and strategies to attract American buyers for Vietnamese crafts, Way (2020: 73) notes how the handmade qualities of the artefacts are emphasised, so as to contrast with mass-produced products manufactured in industrialised and economically-powerful America, going on to opine that: 'the contrast of a modern, forward-advancing West to a static, less advanced Southeast Asia nourished American ideas about Vietnam's need for salvage' and reinforced the inequality of the relationship (Way, 2020: 97).

Her study demonstrates how categories of art and craft, along with how they are positioned and presented are entwined with ideas about status. The contentions around the status of the maker versus the artist is a theme that has persisted in arts and crafts movements in a number of countries over the past two centuries and has been significant throughout the development of lacquer painting. However, in Vietnam the hybrid origins of this art form cause conflicts between aspirations towards modernity and innovation, and the desire to throw off associations with French colonial influence and demonstrate a distinctively independent national identity (i.e. draw on local traditions).

While various forms of lacquerware had been produced in Vietnam prior to colonial presence, the use of resin to create large-scale pictures intended to hang on walls as art was unquestionably a new format, accredited to Joseph Inguimberty (1896-1971). With the director's support, a new department comprising a team of art students, teachers and artisans worked together to develop techniques so as to expand the range of visual effects possible. In 1932 Trần Văn Cẩn (1910 - 1994) discovered that by mixing lacquer with pine resin[7] it was easier to grind so as to create more layered effects, leading to the process and name that defines it: sơn mài.

Figure 2-1 Trần Văn Cẩn (1936) Autumn. [Lacquer on Board] 100 x 75cm. In: de Menonville, Corinne (2003) Vietnamese Painting from Tradition to Modernity. France: Arhis Pg. 83

[7] Fellow student, Lê Quốc Lộc (cited by Nguyễn Hải Yến, 2016) states that it was in 1932 that a breakthrough was made in terms of methodology, and that by adding pine resin and tung oil, the resin became more workable, and easier to grind or sand it after it has hardened, which led to the development of Vietnamese sơn mài

The painting *Autumn* (1936) by Trần Văn Cẩn (see figure 2-1) depicts domestic life on the veranda, a scene of feminine industry and nurture which shows a playful flirtation with, but lack of regard for, academic rules of perspective, combining traditional lacquer colours with a wealth of pattern and textures to create a warm, sumptuous impression of the abundance of nature, and the pleasures of living simply. The clothes might suggest tradition from a Euro-American perspective, although in fact, the áo dài was a new style, influenced by French fashions, and far more figure-hugging than evocative view of an idyllic village life represented using innovative lacquer techniques.

Discussing specific artefacts (whether classified as art, or craft or something else) provides the opportunity to explore the reasons why there are periods in history, and individual or groups of makers, who produce work of a particular type which resonates enough with the society that produces it for it to be valued and so preserved, collected, bought, sold, resold and displayed. Such is the case for what has been termed 'the golden age' in Vietnamese painting - which according to Sotheby's Hong Kong (*s.d.*), was between 1934-45 and the aesthetic legacy of that period, which exists in the form of a thriving artistic community in Vietnam (Taylor, 2004: 4). However, many of the surviving artworks have been preserved in private collections or can be found in records from commercial galleries and auctions, rather than in state-run museums or official art historiographies.

One of the dominant tropes of modernity is the belief in progress and the superiority of the new, which contrasts starkly with the Confucian ideal of the Golden Age whereby:

> 'present times are considered to be worse than the times of the past, when human society was more reasonably ordered, justice and benevolence prevailed, and benevolent rulers concerned themselves with the good of their subjects (Scollon & Scollon, 2001: 160)

Huỳnh Kim Khánh (1982: 30) argues that Vietnamese patriotism and identity is linked with ancestor worship, in which 'the dead were believed to mingle among and guide the fortunes of the living…the present is intimately linked to the past.' These two conflicting perspectives, modernity and commemoration are themes that reoccur in Vietnamese art and literature of the past century.

It is widely agreed that Vietnamese artists were and are influenced by literature, whether due to being writers or journalists themselves, or the impact of popular journals, and conversations in cafes on their thinking and work. Thus, changes in language and communication were intrinsically linked to shifting trends in art and literature.

Prior to the colonial period, Vietnamese writing resembled Chinese characters (Thompson, 1987:53). The education system had been based on Mandarin examinations similar to those in

China. As the French began to perceive the Chinese speaking elite as a threat, not least due to the Chinese reformist writings that were coming over the border and influencing anti-colonialist movements, they implemented a French language curricula and examination system in 1913, and the Mandarin system was abolished. This led to the popularity of French imported journals, however, as Marr (1981: 148) comments

> 'as Vietnamese intellectuals gained access to unauthorised publications or returned from studies in the metropole with incendiary ideas, French confidence in the "civilizing force" of the French language declined precipitously.'

Christian missionaries were concerned about how to establish a writing system which 'could easily be taught to large numbers of people in order to extend their influence beyond the momentary reach of their voices' (Thompson, 1987:53) and it was one of the missionaries, Alexandre de Rhodes, who codified an efficient writing system using Romanized text. Known as quốc ngữ (national language), because it was quick to learn (as compared to thousands of Chinese characters), its usage stimulated the production and consumption of a number of locally published journals, which were used to explore a wide range of interests, including revolutionary and communist ideologies.

Education was a key concern amongst the colonial governors. It was believed that if the Vietnamese saw the benefits to colonialism, they would be less likely to rebel against French rule. However, efforts were directed at primary-level schooling, and exams for graduating from one level to another were particularly difficult, thus ensuring that a minimum of students could graduate to higher levels. Paliard (2014: 21) cites Trinh Van Thao's study, which showed that in 1931, at the end ten years of setting up schools in the region, it 'resembled a pyramid with a very wide base' (31778 students holding a certificate of elementary studies) and a very pointed tip (78 graduates from Universities). There were two levels of primary level education, elementary and upper, and as Brocheux & Hemery (2011:223) explain, upper primary education generated the lower middle class of civil servants, and employees, whereas secondary school students were more likely to want to go on to study at universities or enter into 'liberal professions' such as journalism. However, the qualifications awarded in Vietnam were not recognised as equivalent to those of French universities (Lebovics, 1991: 118) and even when students did manage to gain diplomas or graduate from a university, there was considerable reluctance to employ qualified native Indochinese on the same terms as a French colonial. Such implementation of education suggests that its aim was not to enable Vietnamese students to fulfil their potential or to emancipate them; rather it was to exploit, to provide useful servants for the colonisers.

Victor Tardieu (1876-1937), the instigator and first director of the École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine, did not adhere to the archetypal colonial, orientalist mindset that Said (1978:233) describes as focusing on establishing:

> '…distinctive differences between races, civilisations, and languages …asserting there was no escape from origins and the types that these origins enabled…forcing attention … in the downward and backward direction of immutable origins.'

His approach to curriculum design and teaching, incorporated academic, observational drawing, composition, and oil painting (clearly based on his own educational experiences) but also explored Asian art forms, including printmaking, silk and lacquer painting. His students appreciated the fact he did not order them around and encouraged them to develop their own ideas and style (Pham Long, 2014, personal communication, 25th August). In this respect, his approach is markedly different to George Groslier, the founder of the nearby *École d'arts cambodgienne* whose 'colonial project of cultural engineering' (Muan, 2001: 2) attempted to preserve Khmer culture by stipulating that all Khmer art students were restricted to using only local materials and following ancestral designs.

Tardieu's stance challenged the European belief that Asians could only be traditional, homogenous craftspeople, i.e. copyists. His letters repeatedly affirm his belief that whatever kind of artwork is produced (drawings, sculpture, architecture, ornamental design etc.) it is not enough to be able to copy; artists need to be able to interpret, evaluate and make conscious decisions about their work.

> 'A decorative composition, even the most simple, is a work of art just the same as a painting or a statue, it is not a question of learning a recipe ready to apply, it is about creating a work of art.' (Tardieu, cited in Paliard, 2014:91)

Here Tardieu affirms his belief both in Vietnamese capability, and his belief, as a pedagogue, that creation was a process that involved both technical skill and intellectual judgement. The respect and gratitude his students felt towards him was repeatedly expressed in letters to him (André-Pallois & Herbelin, 2014:123-124).

However, in order to justify investment in the École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine, Tardieu was expected to prove that it could be profitable for the French authorities. To this end, he liaised with the Agence Économique de l'Indochine (Agindo)[8] and marketed the art produced by his Vietnamese students in Parisian galleries. His efforts to court official approval are evident in letters attempting to secure funding and support in 1924 in which he highlights how the growing popularity of oriental art in Europe might make it advantageous to educate the Annamese so that

[8] The director of this agency was Paul Blanchard de la Brosse, known to Victor Tardieu because he was a former colonial official (Scott, 2019:200)

they were capable of producing art works as beautiful as those produced in China and Japan (since the French paid almost no customs duty on imports from Indochina). Accepting a position to promote Vietnamese art in World Fairs (de Menonville, 2004: 27) Tardieu created a niche in the world market as it stood then, in relation to the fashion for oriental works of art in Europe. His argument - that with education his students could produce 'genuine' artworks that would be saleable in France - demonstrates Tardieu's shrewd understanding of key preoccupations of the times, as he would have known about other schools in the area set up to produce saleable goods.

In addition to various articles promoting the school and his students' work published in French newspapers, an anonymous translated article[9] appeared in the Japanese journal *Kokumin Biyutu* in 1942. It boasts of the achievements of the École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine and of the successful combination of modern, European art forms with traditional Indochinese crafts such as silk painting and lacquer, naming students from the early cohorts at the school, particularly those who won acclaim when their work was exhibited at the 1931 Colonial Exhibition in Paris, such as Lê Phổ, Lưu Văn Đệ, Nguyễn Phan Chánh, Tô Ngọc Vân, Trần Văn Cẩn and Nguyễn Đức Nùng, and so is attributed to Tardieu (Ushiroshoji, 2005:178).

Tardieu and his students would have been influenced by the popularity of Japanese art in Europe and elsewhere at that time. Following the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars, recognition of Japanese achievements in Europe, perhaps exemplified by the 1873 World Fair in Vienna - a 'breakthrough of Japanese art in Europe ' (Dees, 2000: 28) - led to the ensuing passion for all things Japanese, which transmuted into the art nouveau movement, 'a name derived from Siegfried Bing's shop in Paris, where he was the leading dealer in Japanese art' (Dees, 2000: 30). As 'art-philosopher, Okakura Kakuzo, cynically remarked, the West had accepted Japan as civilized only after Japan had shown its ability to engage in mass slaughter on the battlefield' (Dees, 2000: 20). The correlation between imperial power and cultural capital is noteworthy, and the strategies adopted by the Japanese government, to simultaneously modernize and promote Japanese culture abroad, proved to be highly effective.[10]

In contrast, the strategies taken by French colonials have tended to depict the takeover of Southeast Asian territories and cultures, as a morally justified by their 'discovering' and 'rescuing' a selection of architecture and artifacts to house in museums (Muan, 2001: 2, Singh, 2003: 4, Taylor, 2004: 27, 146, Scott, 2019:37), emulating classical scholarship in Rome, Athens and Cairo (Wright, 1996:128). Abbe (2021:42) describes the disorganized and largely unrecorded collecting

[9] Translated by Masakazu Horiuchi (Ushiroshoji, 2005:168)

[10] as exemplified Buckley's 1905 article *The Japanese as Peers of Western Peoples*.

and sales of pieces taken from temples and other archeological sites, under the guise of 'preserving' them. Scott (2012:38) argues that the official research institute, the École française d'Extrême-Orient was not only responsible for conducting research into philology, art and archaeology throughout Indochina, but also for 'creating colonial propaganda, by promoting its preservation of local monuments, which were represented as having been neglected by local populations.' Taylor (2000:150) goes as far as to suggest that the École française d'Extrême-Orient's 'archaeological excavations became metaphors for the Mission civilisatrice' in terms of exemplifying French rescuing, educating and modernising of the colonised culture. Thus, the trope of colonials aiding development, while representing the colonised people as backward and therefore in need of their help became firmly entrenched. Scott (2012:38) argues that the official research institute, the École française d'Extrême-Orient was not only responsible for conducting research into philology, art and archaeology throughout Indochina, but also for 'creating colonial propaganda, by promoting its preservation of local monuments, which were represented as having been neglected by local populations.' This is reflected in the way Vietnamese artists' work was exhibited in various colonial expositions, decades before, as Scott (2019:190) asserts:

> 'The works were situated as the products of French intervention, they functioned as forms of colonial propaganda, and reinscribed a hierarchy of cultural value, in which the Vietnamese artist was positioned as the recipient of colonial tutelage.

Similar positioning was used in the 1950s: in her study of what she describes as a liminal collection Way (2015) discusses how the exhibition focused on the process of collection and exhibition rather than including any information about the production or origins of the items. Way (2020:85) in her study of investigation of the process of selecting and exhibiting Vietnamese crafts in the Smithsonian, notes that:

> 'Although many works of craft that the Americans brought to the US to exhibit could claim lineages in Vietnamese, Chinese, Cambodian, Japanese, French, and American culture, none of the exhibitions explored this theme.'

She suggests that given the Japanese occupation of Vietnam, along with existing trade deals with Japan, it was 'a delicate matter'. However, due to the popularity of Japanese artefacts, with their connotations of spirituality, masterful craftsmanship and design, the association was useful in promoting Vietnamese crafts (*ibid*), much as Tardieu had done when promoting export of artworks to France.

It is inevitable that there are similarities between Vietnamese visual culture and those in neighbouring Asian countries, both in terms of practices and formats. However, there were also marked differences. A colonial scholar, Dr. Hocquard (1892, cited in Đào Hùng, 2012:5) made a number of disparaging comments about what he perceived as the poor quality of Vietnamese

painting, in comparison with Chinese and Japanese artists, although he does qualify his assertions, explaining:

> 'However, I don't mean that they are unable to paint as well as them, I think they just don't want to be bothered, because…In Vietnam… the painter who performs a remarkable work would …be abruptly removed from his family and shipped off to the capital. There he would remain sequestered in one of the King's palaces: and he'd be held for the rest of his life working for the court for a ridiculous fee, often embellished by strokes of the cane. So can we understand through such customs, why Vietnamese artists hide their talents, while workers in other countries are only too happy to display their own.'

If this observation is accurate, it would explain the lack of serious application of painting in precolonial Vietnam, which has led to the belief that the art form was introduced by colonials and 'appropriated' by the Vietnamese. The assertion that 'painting' (understood in terms of European oil painting, framed and exhibited in galleries and classified as 'fine art') had not existed in Vietnam before colonial intervention has been repeated numerous times, (Tô Ngọc Vân, 1949: 61, Nguyễn Quân, 1991:12, Hantover, 1991:20, Nguyễn Quang Phòng 1997: 247, Scott, 2012: 38, Paliard, 2014: 11) although as Scott (2012:63) asserts 'this view was only possible if the bodies of pre-colonial religious and popular painting were ignored.' There were painted screens, murals in temples and pagodas, painted ceramics, votive paintings on handmade paper, "Chinese" calligraphy and brush painting on scrolls, all of which demonstrate that the practice and process of painting existed, but colonial writers (and as a result, their students) did not classify them as painting, in the sense of being accorded the status of art[11].

Ironically, as Nguyễn Quân (1991:12) observed, painting became one of the most popular art forms amongst artists in Vietnam in the 1990s, perhaps in part because Đổi Mới policy allowed artists to exhibit and sell abroad - in fact the market abroad was considerably more lucrative than the domestic market at the time (Taylor, 2011: 116), and paintings, as a format that had been introduced due to French influence, were also familiar to buyers and a commodity that was easy to transport. However, the ambiguity of its origins and its early relationship with commodification has resulted in Vietnamese painting being haunted by anxieties about authenticity and originality.

Oil paintings are the focus for Nora Taylor's research in the 1990s. Her decision to confine her study to "fine art" specifically the medium of oil paint provides an interesting discussion point in relation to materiality and national identity. For example, in reviews of the Vietnamese artist's

[11] In in *Mỹ thuật ở làng* (Art in the Vietnamese village) Vietnamese art historians Nguyễn Quân & Phan Cẩm Thượng (1991) argue that sculpture, calligraphy, painting and woodblock printing have all existed throughout Vietnamese history, not only since the colonial period.

work (presented as 'Victor Tardieu et ses élèves') in the 1931 exhibition in Paris, a journalist[12] criticizes the oil paintings, for not following tradition, while praising the silk paintings (De Fontbrune, 2013:90), as though the medium should be dictated by the artist's ethnic origins.

Huynh (2005:129), however, viewed French influence as having had a positive effect, maintaining that the École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine, by introducing oil painting and transforming lacquer into a 'high art' had 'nurtured a new national art'. She goes on to state:

> 'the visual arts…benefitted more than suffered in the movement towards modernism. French art lecturers encouraged the continuation of traditional crafts, by encouraging its values in individual creativity' (Huynh, 2005:130).

It was precisely the focus on creativity, and the expectation that students would develop their own artistic expression that was controversial; as Paliard (2014:13) points out, Tardieu:

> 'dared to invite indigenous populations to the banquet of great art; what this means is the freedom of invention and judgment. It supports the possibility of allowing a respectful meeting of the two cultures and fertilizing an original art.'[13]

André-Pallois (2014:16) argues that it is simplistic to see all colonial scholars as unquestioning vehicles of French propaganda, and that there was a mutual cultural exchange between the French artists and their students and colleagues. Brocheaux & Hemery (2009: xiv) and Paliard (2014:23) also argue that there were elements of compatibility between the French bourgeoisie and Vietnamese intelligentsia culture, which accounts for the adoption and acceptance of the new terminology to describe artists. Hoạ sĩ: literally sĩ means scholar or doctor, as in a scholar of art, but it is usually translated into English as either 'artist' or 'painter' and it is generally used to refer to painters, as in, producers of the European fine art format. Nghệ sĩ again translates as artist, although the creative discipline or platform is not stated, it describes art as a creative profession (Ninh, 2005:54). Given that the majority of Tardieu's students were privileged sons of mandarins, colonial civil servants and other elite groups, their status would have been important to them, and the additional inequalities of colonialism (and the colonial education system) would have made the distinction even more important. Since the precolonial education system in Vietnam was based on China's, it is unsurprising that there would have been an equivalent scholar-gentry class. [14] However, the category of creative intellectual, nghệ sĩ differed from the term, Trí thức which had

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[12] Thiebault Sisson (1933) *L'Argus* cited in correspondence between Tardieu and Blanchard de la Brosse

[13] Il ose inviter au banquet d'un grand art les populations indigènes avec ce que cela suppose de liberté d'invention et de jugement. Il soutient la possibilité de permettre une rencontre respectueuse et féconde des deux cultures ouvrant à des synthèses originales.

[14] Scott (2012:92) outlines the precolonial categories of class status within the Confucian social hierarchy comprised four groupings: sĩ (scholar-gentry), nông (farmers) công (artisans) and thương (merchants). The Chinese concept of 'scholar artist' and 'literati painting' (wenrenhua) correlates to European ideas about the

generally been used to refer to intellectuals (including lawyers, professors, doctors, all those whose work involved knowledge and mindfulness). Ninh (*ibid*) claims that the term văn nghệ

> 'carries a connotation of being carefree and unconventional. More often than not, a reference to someone being very văn nghệ is praise as well as an explanation of eccentric behaviour to be tolerated, a tacit acceptance of different standards for creative intellectuals because of the nature of their work.'

This linguistic development demonstrates that, as in Europe, the contention over whether artists were 'mere' craftsmen or autonomous intellectuals was important to this new generation of Vietnamese painters. Whether or not this can be classed progress, or a positive influence is open to debate, but in art historical terms, the changes to practice and production are evident. It was a period of dramatic change, and many of the students at the École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine were privileged by the association – the graduates went on to become teachers, directors, designers, soldiers, politicians, published authors, as well as many of them continuing to be artists. International recognition of artistic achievement has continued to be important to Vietnamese artists, as discussed in chapter six.

Despite historic differences, the geographic proximity and the Japanese military coup in Vietnam (1940-1945) along with other, more social connections meant there were points of contact between Japanese and Vietnamese artistic practice, although they are not generally associated. For example, a number of Vietnamese art students did a study trip in Japan in 1943 (Ushiroshoji: 2009:23) and there are records of Vietnamese artists meeting Japanese modernist artists, such as Tsuguharu Foujita (1886-1968) who visited Vietnam in 1941 (Nguyễn Quang Việt, 2014:176)

The inequalities between the status and recognition of Japanese crafts, as compared to Vietnamese over the past century can be attributed to a number of causes, but the main reason is its entanglement with dominant political narratives about civilisations and world powers. As Davie (1979:33) observes:

> 'The French scholar Paul Mus says that Vietnam 'entered history' in 208 BC, somewhere around the southern edge of China. His phrasing raises an old question about the meaning of history, especially the history of people who live under the shadow of others and who had gathered in communities, tilled the soil, made artefacts and worshipped, long before their existence was confirmed by a superior political calendar.'

In most people's memories Vietnam has only been in existence since the 1970s, although it was a unified country before French invasion. It was subsequently divided into separate countries, along

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intellectual superiority of fine artists and fine art painting, although not, perhaps, to Tardieu's approach to marketing Vietnamese paintings.

with being grouped with Laos and Cambodia and named Indochina, a term which reflects Western Orientalist scholars' view that the area was a 'periphery zone' (Brocheux & Hemery, 2009: 2).

The contradictory themes of established, ancient civilizations (ones that are untainted by colonialism) being revered, combined with Eurocentric modern art historiographies, have acted as a double exclusion for Vietnamese art forms. Ushiroshioji (2009:23) highlights how Japanese artists who visited Vietnam in the early 1940s, as part of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, actually dedicated more time finding out about French artists and accounts of the area, than connecting with Vietnamese artists. Scott (2019: 201) suggests that the lack of interest in Vietnamese artworks in Paris at this time was partly due to Tardieu's conservatism, and his decision to exhibit his student's work in what she describes as the most conservative salon, the Salon des Artistes, while Simonetti (2016: 45) draws attention to the association between the Prix de l'Indochine, the École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine and what was perceived as colonial propaganda. Brocheux and Hémery (2009: 345) opine that the Vietnamese artists' ability to 'reconcile European and Asian artistic influences' made them less appealing to modernists who found 'primitive art' (eg African or Oceanic exhibits) appealing because 'tribal art was much more in the spirit of the modernists' enterprise' (Rubin, 1984:3). Vietnamese art could not, based on its appearance, be recognized as belonging to the 'primitive other' category: in fact, it came uncomfortably close to 'competing with' and perhaps out-performing European painting.[15]

Display and recognition, along with known provenance of artworks are hugely important factors in terms of establishing artists, and the combination of colonial followed by socialist controls on exhibitions and sales, followed by the explosion of freedom of trade in the 1990s has led to a number of controversies over fakes and copies in the art market. As a result, Vietnam has struggled to find a satisfactory position in the hierarchy of the global art world. Malaysian artist and curator, Redza Piyadasa (cited by Flores, 2012:177) asserts that: 'Art works never exist in time, they just have entry points.' Gimpel (2000:51) goes as far as to say that a completed artwork is

> 'in an embryonic state of becoming. What it becomes depends on how it is consumed but…the process of consumption takes place in, because of and through the market…no art of any significance bypasses this network because art can only reach its essential audience — that is private, corporate and public collections — through the act of exchange.'

[15] Simonetti (2016: 1) recounts how the art critic, Adolphe Tabarant, reviewed the Vietnamese students' exhibition in the 1931 Colonial Exposition and 'concluded that "indigenous" artists were as capable as the most talented French artists.'

One of the main sources of information on the teachers and painters at the École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine are publications from the Hà Nội Fine Art Publishing House (Thế Giới), established by Nguyễn Quang Phòng, who was a student in the 1942-1945 cohort. A staunch communist, Nguyễn Quang Phòng had met and been friends with many of the artists he writes about and much of what has been written about Vietnamese art history has been either authored or commissioned by him, which lends detail and colour, but also bias, in the shape of anecdotes about the artists and opinions about their work. His son Nguyễn Quang Việt now runs the business and is involved with the majority of art publications in Vietnam, the most well-known being the national Fine arts magazine: *Tạp Chí Mỹ Thuật*.

Counter-balancing the northern, official Socialist account of Vietnamese art history, Vietnamese-Australian scholar, Boitran Huynh-Beattie (2005:9) offers a powerful argument insisting that it obscured 'the extent to which Vietnamese society… not only responded to but shaped foreign or external influences' whilst also concealing the importance of 'patronage of the elite, trade and immigration.' Certainly, tensions over rights to exhibit and sell artwork have been ongoing since the colonial era. These have been analysed by both Taylor (1995:34) and Scott (2014:74) who draw attention to a rivalry that existed between two different artists associations, the Foyer des Artistes Annamites group (FARTA) and the Cooperative des Artists Indochinois (CAI). The latter had been established in 1938 by Inguimberty and Jonchère[16] in order to support the production of artworks, by advancing funds for materials. This was particularly useful for lacquer artists who required expensive materials, such as lacquer resin and metal foils. Scott (2012: 74) compares the impact of membership of these two associations on artists careers after French occupation.

> 'the most striking difference between the FARTA and CAl members is not in their colonial-period work, but in their post-colonial careers. While members of the FARTA group went on to have significant careers in Vietnamese art after 1945, the post-1945 careers of nearly all the members of CAI are completely unknown.'

Scott (*ibid*) admits there were exceptions, giving the example of lacquer artists Nguyễn Gia Trí and – interestingly - Phạm Hậu (whose career was adversely affected by post-colonial government regulations), but does not seem consider what the impact of withdrawal of support, along with punitive laws on property ownership and labour would have had on lacquer painters. This study investigates the post-colonial careers of lacquer painters, despite the lack of coverage in the official narrative.

[16] Inguimberty and Jonchère had probably heard of the success of the Corporate Association of Gia Định & Thủ Dầu Một: a marketing organisation to sell students' work from these schools in 1933

An additional challenge in mapping the careers of lacquer artists is the Vietnamese propensity for changing their name and using a variety of pen names to sign their work with. To take a single example, Trần Quang Trân (1900-1969), an early student at École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine, and one of the pioneers of Vietnamese lacquer painting, as well as being one of the co-founders of the Hà Nội School of Applied Arts, chose to change his artist's name and his signature during the mid-1930s, using Ngym or Nghi Am. Sadly, his early lacquer paintings are untraceable: there are no photographs of them, and the lacquer paintings themselves are not in any known collections. It is possible the lacquer works were among the many artworks which were lost or destroyed in the chaos of wartime conditions, but despite this artist's inspirational paintings being referred to by art historian Nguyễn Quang Phòng and the well-known lacquer artist Nguyễn Gia Trí, the whereabouts of paintings themselves is not known, and there are no photographs of them. This is not to agree, however, that he sank into complete obscurity: he went on to have a successful career, working in animation and film, in addition to teaching, while his water colour paintings sell for thousands of dollars at international auctions.

Despite there are relatively few academic texts on the subject, in Vietnamese art historiography, there are a few artists (and their work) that have attracted both media interest and scholarly research. The best known are probably: Bùi Xuân Phái (1920-1988), Tô Ngọc Vân, (1906-1954), Lê Phổ (1907-2001), Lê Văn Đệ (1906-1996), Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm (1918-2016), Nguyễn Gia Trí (1908-1993) Dương Bích Liên (1924-1988), Nguyễn Sáng (1923-1988) and possibly some of the Đổi Mới painters who have exhibited internationally, such as Đặng Xuân Hòa, Lê Quảng Hà and Nguyễn Quân. Out of these only a few are known for their lacquer paintings. The only existing literature that focuses solely on this topic is Nguyễn Quang Việt's *Lacquer Painters of Vietnam* (*Hội Hoa Sơn Mài Việt Nam),* and I have referred to both the 1995 version and the more recent one, published in 2014. The texts (and selected images) vary quite considerably, although both give valuable insights into the early developments and key practitioners in Vietnamese lacquer. Both include a wide range of artists, although comparatively little is explained about the selection of either artists or artworks.

One of the sites of encounter is established galleries, which legitimises the art exhibited there, as does ownership and sales. In Vietnam, the lack of established galleries and dealers in the art trade undermine buyers trust in authenticity, so for many Vietnamese artists, exhibiting and selling abroad are highly desirable. What complicates the decisions over which artists to include in this study of Vietnamese lacquer painting is the fact that many Vietnamese artists who have produced lacquer paintings have also worked in other media. Additionally, some who do not use it have influenced exhibitions and reception of lacquer, because lacquer painting as a practice was (and

is) not dislocated from other Vietnamese painters and writers. For example, Lê Phổ exhibited a lacquer screen depicting a Tonkin landscape at the 1931 Colonial Exposition in Paris but is much better known for his silk paintings which he continued to produce after emigrating to France.

An additional issue is the convention of using nationality to identify artists. There is not always a correlation between those creating in the Vietnamese-style lacquer, and Vietnamese nationality; The late, Alix Aymé (1894-1989) who taught lacquer at the Fine Arts school in Hà Nội created a number of lacquer paintings in addition to screens and decorative furniture. Arguably, Jean Dunand (b. 1877), who also created a number of large-scale lacquer paintings, was painting in the 'Vietnamese tradition' (albeit a very new tradition, that came about due to French influence). The colonial era and the numerous world fairs around the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth enabled encounters, borrowings, hybridity and appropriation in the arts, but much of the art produced at the time has been judged more in terms of race and nationality than other qualities. Saeko Ando (b.1968), a Japanese national, has studied and practiced Vietnamese lacquer painting for decades, and her work is distinctively different to either traditional or contemporary Japanese *urushi*. Acclaimed lacquer artist Oanh Phi Phi (b. 1979), is of Vietnamese descent, but grew up and studied art in America and Europe, while Nhat Tran (b.1962), although born in Vietnam, is an American national, who studied lacquer both in Vietnam, by herself and later in Japan.

Figure 2-2 Dunand, Jean (1925) Mountain Landscape. [Lacquer on Wood] Dimensions Unknown. In: Marcilhac, Felix (1991) Jean Dunand: His Life and Works. London: Thames and Hudson. Pg 42

The concept of hybridity used in the arts has become key to postcolonial scholars such as Bhabha (1990:1), who argues that 'nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time' and suggests that colonized nations need to find their narrative (and hence identity) in hybridity.[17] This is a deliberate reclaiming of a term that had been used in a derogatory way by colonials keen to protect racial 'purity' – in part by assigning certain forms of arts and craft to designated races, so as to protect the status of their own. Taylor (2004:23) describes Vietnamese artists appropriating 'Western-style oil painting' as a national art form, thus redefining its purpose although 'its form and content…remained the same. Many of the paintings of this period resemble ones made by the colonial teachers.' However, Brocheux and Hémery (2009:379) assert that Vietnam (the periphery) has in some ways shaped France (the Metropolis), because the colonizers have assimilated aspects of southeast Asian cultures as part of their own narrative history. As a result, European artists, such as, Jean Dunand (born in Switzerland, but working, during his lifetime, in Paris), has earned praise for being exotic and original when using Asian lacquer and motifs, rather than being criticized for being derivative - a racial discrimination based on colonial paradigms (not that biased reception should detract from the gorgeous work produced in the atelier of Jean Dunand).

Contextualising the artistic practice of lacquer painting, this study focuses on the persistence of forms and practice, and the ways that they mutate in response to wider societal demands, attitudes and beliefs. Art historiography abounds in debates on artistic autonomy and the artist's status and role in society. Hence, the fact that an artistic practice which emerged as a result of colonial intervention has evolved to serve the purposes of Vietnamese (and other) painters up until today deserves to be unpacked and evaluated in relation to its status, meaning and value.

3 THE MATERIALITY OF LACQUER: ENCOUNTERING LAYERED SURFACES

This chapter will elucidate what lacquer is, in terms of its physical qualities and the ways in which it has been used in arts and crafts: as a protective and decorative varnish, a glue for a variety of materials (including the adherence of metal leaf), and a paint medium, with pigments added for various colours. Additionally, it can also be used for engraving, carving, inlay and moulding into freestanding forms. It is organic, strong and hugely versatile; however, it is also temperamental

[17] The assertion that the colonial and traditional provide the foundation of postcolonial modernisms in reiterated in: Khullar, Sonal (2015) *Worldly Affiliations: Artistic Practice, National Identity, and Modernism in India, 1930-1990.* California. UC Press,

and demanding. Many artists find it too laborious to work with, while others become immersed in the process, which is akin to alchemy.

My own research into lacquer materials and processes has accumulated over years of both formal and informal research and experience studying lacquer at Wajima Institute of Urushi Art, as well as visiting museums and studios in Japan (1998). Travelling to lacquer workshops in China and Myanmar and working alongside lacquer painters in Vietnam in their studios including Trinh Tuan (b.1961), Bùi Hữu Hùng (b.1957), Đinh Công Đạt (b.1966) and Saeko Ando (b.1968) has informed my understanding of the resin and related techniques. In addition, I have researched in libraries, archives and museums, including specialist art collections such as the lacquer Museum[18] in Germany and the Victoria and Albert National Art Library.

Asserting the importance of understanding the processes and techniques of lacquer used traditionally and across different countries, this chapter outlines the history of lacquer practice. This is partly to contextualise the inception of Vietnamese lacquer painting as an art form, which will be discussed in the following chapter, and partly to enable comparison when discussing the works produced, in relation to art historic paradigms and international trade. Artists are not confined or defined by the medium in which they work, but as Arnold (2004: 112) contends:

> 'it is… essential that the interface between the qualities of the medium and technique and the aesthetic decisions made by the artist is clearly understood.'

Only an understanding of the materiality and techniques will allow for a true appreciation of the art form, the varied surface of which is not reproducible through the photographs included in this thesis.

3.1 Nomenclature: Lacquer and tradition.

Lacquer arts and crafts practices in a number of Asian and other countries will be referred to, so as to demonstrate its history, diversity and longevity. However, my focus is not only the process of lacquer techniques: it is their continuity within developments in terms of form and purpose that are significant. This chapter will also investigate European understanding (or lack thereof) and reception of lacquer artworks and artefacts, so the terminology used to describe both the materials and techniques will be explored, as that is central to the confusion

[18] Museum für Lackkunst BASF https://www.basf-coatings.com/global/en/our_story/museum_of_laquer_art.html

around the word 'lacquer'. Due to Japanese lacquer arts being the most recognized internationally, this thesis adopts much of the Japanese terminology to describe techniques. By considering wider readings and practices, the development of and responses to sơn mài in Vietnam can be effectively contextualized and compared with other art practices, often referred to as *urushi* (the Japanese word for resin lacquer).

Understanding lacquer as a medium is complex, in part because in the English language, the term 'lacquer' refers to range of varnish-like substances, produced for use on everything from ladies' nails to cars, and can be made from a wide variety of natural and manmade constituents. The term lacquer is often used synonymously with 'varnish' and or 'paint' and has been described as 'the earliest form of natural plastic' (*Lacquer in Asia: from technique to Art*, 2010). The fact lacquer in its raw form is a sap was not understood initially by early European traders, who believed 'that the production of the material for Chinese lacquer must be the result of complicated processes, probably aided by sorcery' (Strange, 1926: 252). During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Chinese and Japanese lacquerware became popular as an exotic import in Europe and, as a result, lacquer was often called 'japanning' and has come to be associated with glossy black furniture and the applied arts. This section will investigate some of the ways its names and uses have been established, with a focus on the use of Asian resin lacquer.

Jones (1937:1), writing in the thirties about the profusion of new types of cellulose lacquers available at that time, acknowledges that lacquers have been used 'since ancient times in Japan and China' and can be found in Egyptian tombs where natural gum resins were mixed with pigment to decorate statues. He goes on to state that as application techniques advanced, it became common to mix the natural resins with various oils and thinners, and since the diversity of resins used in different countries and the choice of mixers were not uniform, the material itself could have dramatically different chemical makeups, and appear and behave quite differently. Due to the success of these lacquers in protecting and decorating surfaces such as wood, rattan, leather and metal (which has resulted in considerable investment and experimentation in car and armament industries), a wide range of artificial lacquers have been produced, so there is a 'confusion in the nomenclature' (*ibid*). In 1935, Jean Dunand went so far as to make a legal application to restrict the use of the term lacquer to natural resin from Asia, but it was rejected, and so the confusion remains (Marcilhac, 1991: 171).

The widespread utilization of various forms of lacquer has created an issue for collectors and conservators, who struggle to identify and match materials to preserve and repair lacquer objects, and also for collectors who struggle to understand differences in prices. Examples of

lacquer crafts can be found in Russia, Iran, India, across Asia and Europe and in even Mexico, where it is called maque: Heil (2013: 3) argues there is evidence to suggest contact between Asia and South America prior to discovery of the Americas by Columbus. Originally used for utilitarian purposes, such as protecting wooden buildings, vessels and utensils from humidity and insects, the craft of lacquer has developed in complex and varied ways in different locations. Lee's 1971 book on *Oriental Lacquer Arts* (1971: 21) emphasises the importance of understanding the materials and processes and also documents how, in China, lacquer was initially used as a preservative and protective layer for objects such as kitchen and table wear, boats and various forms of furniture, but over time, developed into a form of decoration that was expensive, and so collected by nobility. Used to decorate temples, pagodas and the cult objects displayed in those buildings, it has come to be associated with spirituality and ancestry.

The origins of the practice of harvesting and using lacquer in Asia have been contested, but despite the earliest extant lacquer artefacts having been found in Japan, ca. 2000 BCE, 'the archaeological record identifies its origin in central China' (Ford, 2013). Conservationist, Webb (2000:3) states that 'the use of lacquer to coat objects predates written history' and cites several examples of excavations from Neolithic times and through the ages to demonstrate the way that the craft developed in sophistication of technique. Certainly, from the early times of maritime trade between Europe and Asia, imported lacquerware was understood to be 'characteristically eastern' (Breuer, 1914:175). Hutt (1987:159) goes as far as to say that 'Lacquer is closely associated with the far east since true lacquer is obtained from trees that grow only in East Asia'. She is referring to resin lacquer, which in practice is often combined with other oils and solvents.

Proximity and trade routes meant that Europeans were more likely to encounter Asian artefacts in India, hence the English word lacquer has most likely been derived from the Sanskrit word *laksha*, meaning a hundred thousand, the amount of insects needed to produce a pound of liquid lacquer (Heil, 2013:1). The female lac insect alights on trees indigenous to the middle East, India, Thailand and Mexico and during its reproductive cycle feeds on the sap that it sucks from the twigs of these trees. As Shah (2012), speaking of Indian lacquer crafts, states: 'shellac… is made from the resinous substance secreted by the lac insect, *Kerria Lacca* or *Coccus Laccae*, and collected from the branches and leaves of various trees.'

Figure 3-1 Gazpar, Mario (2013) Lac Insects. [Photograph] In: Heil,

Originally these insects were valued for the red dye they produced, cochineal, which was processed to produce carmine, the third most expensive pigment, after gold and ultramarine during the Renaissance in Italy. The waxy resin was seen as a by-product and it was only later that it was used as a wood finish in ancient India (referred to as lac, lacquer or shellac). However, for centuries now, that too is processed into dry flakes, sold in Europe as shellac, to be then dissolved in ethyl or ethanol and used as a wood sealer or varnish. Even today, shellac is favoured over new, synthetic varnishes by some woodworkers because it is an environmentally-safe solvent, and quicker drying than oil finishes. It is also relatively easy to remove and reapply, a vital consideration for restoration work.

However, Asian resin lacquer, harvested directly from the trees, is far more durable, providing an extremely strong and beautiful finish that is almost totally impervious to water, and highly resistant to damage by insects, acids/alkalis or abrasion. In addition to the famous Chinese terracotta army having been painted with lacquer, there are accounts of shipwrecks such as the Royal Nanhai (c. 1450 AD), the Sinan wreck (c. 1323 AD) and the Belitung wreck (c. 830 AD) being found with resin lacquer-coated objects on board, still in good condition. Archaeological findings suggest that the earliest usage was for burial items, as well as protecting buildings, boats and leather saddles in western and southern China.

Asian resin lacquer can be harvested from several species of trees in the *Anacardiaceae* family, genus *Rhus*, which are indigenous to, but not generic, across the whole continent. *Rhus verniciflua* are the main trees cultivated and used to harvest lacquer in China, Japan and Korea, but other species of Rhus found in other parts of the world include sumac and poison ivy. *Rhus verniciflua* is also known as *Rhus vernicifera*, and more recently, since being exported and causing severe allergic reactions among unsuspecting gardeners, *Toxicodendron vernicifluum*, to warn of its properties. In Myanmar, Thailand and Cambodia the sap is collected from the *Melanorrhoea usitate* or *Melanorrhoea laccifera* tree whereas in Vietnam and Taiwan, *Rhus succedanea* are used (Webb, 2000:1-8). Each of these have local names, in addition to the Latin ones (Nguyễn Lâm, 2016, personal communication, 8th August). The

ingredient in Rhus species that polymerizes it to form lacquer is urushiol (which is also the toxic element which causes an itchy rash). Throughout most of Asia the tree is specifically cultivated so as to enable harvesting. However, as Webb (2000:3) points out there are other trees of related families that can be used, one of them being the cashew tree, or *Anacardium occidentale*, which is used by European lacquer artists.

Many of the English names given to different styles of lacquer work are basically the place name where Europeans first encountered it. So, for example, carved lacquer decoration was known in England as Bantam work (referring to the name of a trading post of the Dutch East India company in Java, where lacquerwares were collected for export) or Coromandel lacquer, so-called because the wares were shipped from ports on the Coromandel coast of south-east India. In reality, most of the lacquer stored and exported from these ports was from south-eastern China, although

> 'trade was not restricted to China and Japan. Varieties of the lacquer tree also grew in other Asian countries including Vietnam, where the English had a trading post, although it has, so far, been impossible to distinguish export lacquerware made in Vietnam in the 17th century' (V&A, 2018).

Regardless of the difficulties in determining where historic carved lacquer screens were produced, the practice of carved lacquer, sơn khắc, in Vietnamese, is a traditional art form in particular areas and villages and continues to be practiced today.

The fact that it is largely the place names that are used to describe lacquer in terms of both material and technique demonstrates the inherent problem of classifying arts and crafts through either material or geographic location. As Cescinsky (1911:296) opined in 1911, in the Burlington Magazine on fine and decorative arts for connoisseurs:

> 'it is unsafe to attempt any classification of lacquer pieces imported into England during the eighteenth century, from the countries of their origin, China, Japan, Korea etc. Had the workmen of each confined themselves to the one particular method of workmanship, such classification would have been of great value.'

Cescinsky appears to have overlooked the fact that the origins were also not always accurately recorded or reported and that for centuries Asian craftsmen had visited other countries to study different techniques and styles, so that no technique, whether applied gold leaf or carved lacquer engraving was entirely specific to one location.

Additionally, presumably the Asian artists' lack of uniformity was because these lacquer exports were made by numerous artisans who experimented with materials and designs, adapting their work according to what they had available, physical and temporal conditions,

and market demand - thus refusing to remain 'fixed and frozen' in the way that Said (1972:26) argues that Orientalist scholars preferred to represent their subject.

Ironically, although trade in lacquerware and other luxury goods had existed in Asia long before trade with Europeans, a European market meant that there was an increasing demand for items of furniture that would suit European-style rooms, hence European trade resulted in further diversification. Before the Europeans began ordering specific types of furniture and designs, items had, for the most part, been made as for the domestic market, and then exported. Thus, European influence considerably altered what was being made, and thereby led to craftspeople adopting a wider variety of designs and techniques.

Interestingly, despite there being on one hand, an expectation that nameless craftspeople could churn out unvarying repetitions of their culturally instilled heritage, there was also a growing recognition that not all craftsmen created equally beautiful lacquerware. Vialle (2011:29) gives an example of the efforts made by the Dutch East India trading company in Japan, who for a short period managed to order lacquer from just one craftsman, whose work they really admired. This was prevented by Japanese trading authorities, who recognized that other lacquerers were struggling to make a living, while one was making a huge profit, so the Dutch were only allowed to give orders to groups of lacquerers, and unable to deal just with specific artisans whose work they preferred. Presumably aimed at protecting guilds of craftsmen, the Dutch complained about these policies which meant irregular standards of quality, and that they had to deal with certain lacquerers who 'did not understand the European fashion' (*ibid*).

The popularity of Asian lacquered furniture, along with the belief it was created according to some very complicated, possibly alchemical process, led to books including recipes and techniques so that European craftspeople could reproduce the glossy effect. Smith (2013:176) avers that 'technical writings are seldom able to provide sufficient information to actually engage in making an object' and suggests that the proliferation of such texts from 1400 onwards, which took place in an increasingly urbanized culture, was linked to an increase in social mobility and what could be described as 'the middle class.'

This link between textual documentation and establishing credibility that is argued throughout this thesis is apparent in the comparatively early development of crafts. Smith (2013: 178) posits that the reasons for writing these 'recipe' or 'how to' books by the wide variety of craftsmen in Europe at that time was not simply to instruct, but also to attract patrons and investors and to establish their own identity and authority.

Writing, she argues, may not be a very effective way of teaching a manual skill, but these texts 'proclaimed that 'doing' is a legitimate activity, of high status, which can be expressed in written form' (*ibid*). In fact, since the raw material was a resin specific to trees in Asia, all these recipes focused on producing an effect that imitated the resin not widely available in Europe. Some attempts at buying liquid lacquers and importing them resulted in traders complaining that Chinese craftsmen were cheating them (Strange, 1926:252), which may have been due to the Europeans not understanding how volatile raw lacquer is and how it responds to changes in temperature or exposure to light during transportation (or they may have been 'cheated' and given inferior resin).

A classic example of one of these books is George Parker and John Stalker's *A treatise of japaning [sic] and varnishing being a compleat discovery of those arts with the best way of making all sorts of varnish together with above an [sic] hundred distinct patterns for japan-work engraven [sic] on 24 large copper-plates* which was published in Britain in 1688. As the less-than-succinct title suggests, it provided blueprints of Chinese and Japanese designs for European craftspeople to copy. In addition to recipes and patterns of design, the authors comment on decorative fashions, for example the vogue for cutting up lacquer screens and using them to decorate European furniture or walls.

> 'I think no person is fond of it, or gives it house room, except for those who have made new cabinets out of old skreens [sic]. And from that large old piece, by the help of a joyner [sic], make little ones, such as stands or tables, but never consider the situation of their figures; so that in these things so torn and hacked to joint a new fancie, you may observe a fine hodgpodg [sic] and medly [sic] of men and trees turned topsie turvie [sic], and instead of marching by land you shall see them taking journeys through the air…such pieces as these can never certainly be acceptable.' (Stalker & Parker, 1688: 38)

However, the oriental-styled furniture created in Europe (either from collaging Asian lacquer surfaces, or by imitating them using other materials) is still observable in the collections in stately homes and museums, where it is often not distinguished from Asian lacquer. Furniture clearly painted in oil paint and then varnished with some concoction, hence later cracking or flaking, is labelled as oriental lacquer, thus leading to a widespread belief that lacquer as a medium is fragile and friable. In fact, the reverse is true.

The Italian Jesuit Father, Filippo Bonanni's *Techniques of Chinese Lacquer* (originally published in 1720, after decades of research and experimentation), gives recipes and instructions on the craft and techniques of lacquer; a treatise on what was then commonly known as Chinese lacquer with recipes for European alternatives. Inspired by imports by the East India company, and the growing popularity and cost of lacquerware in Europe, Bonanni

gathered information from missionary friends and fellow enthusiasts; his book was translated into French, English and Dutch, and was used by craftsmen throughout Europe. It was however, criticized in 1772 by Jean-Felix Watin in his book *L'art du peintre, doreur, vernisseur*, claiming it was just a list of recipes, many of which contained errors and inconsistencies (Perugini, 2009: xi), again demonstrating that text is not sufficient as a guide to crafts which require experience with materials and techniques.

Traditionally, in Asia, lacquer craftsmen would learn how to prepare and apply lacquer in family workshops or guilds, practices that still exist to some extent. In Japan, for example, the shokunin (craftsmen) learn practical techniques from a master and do not like to be described as artists, as they are proud of their manual skills rather than what they see as theoretical (and to them, less valuable) knowledge (Ando, 2016, personal communication, 12th August). However, Lee (1971: 22) states that traditionally in China, whilst educated boys would study calligraphy and paint scrolls, most lacquer craftsmen would be illiterate villagers. This was because the apprenticeship to become a lacquer worker was dirty, difficult, time-consuming and to some extent dangerous, because of the toxicity of raw lacquer in its liquid state and the fact people vary in the severity of their allergic reaction on first contact. Most people build up an immunity to it, but the initial reaction tends to include burning itchiness and swollen skin, particularly in sensitive areas such as around one's eyes, backs of knees and inside arms (certainly, this is what I experienced when first working with lacquer). However, it remains a fact that many artists find lacquer a difficult medium to work in.

Given that *Rhus* is related to poisonous plants such as poison ivy, it is perhaps surprising that it has been so widely cultivated. Perhaps it is because resin lacquer is resistant to water, which makes it a particularly practical material for use in the humid regions of south-eastern Asia, and this durability makes it one of the most important means of preserving evidence of longevity of Asian cultural heritage. In addition to its use in crafts, the leaves have long been used for medicinal purposes: to stop bleeding, kill internal parasites and it was considered an elixir of life in Chinese medicine despite its toxicity. In the Daoist system of 'correlative resonance' (*gangying* – the basis of what is known by English speakers as Yin and Yang) the leaves of *urushi* trees were used medicinally because of their diuretic properties, in particular by monks endeavouring to achieve transcendence, and as preparation for mummification (although *Rhus toxicodendron* is currently available as a homeopathic medicine).

The material of lacquer is renowned for its durability, hence its use for ceremonial and religious architecture and decorations. In Asia in particular, the respect for and pursuit of

longevity is of central importance in cultures influenced by Confucian and Daoist teachings. Respect for the elderly, and the preservation and celebration of long life is reflected in the arts, and thus in art appreciation. In Vietnam, the corpse of the monk Vũ Khắc Minh, who died circa 1639 during a hundred-day meditation, was found by his followers in such perfect, dehydrated condition that they believed he had reached nirvana and so painted him with lacquer to preserve his body.

Lacquer requires extensive practical experience to render it useable. The process of harvesting sap and rendering it into a workable material is complicated: refining the poisonous sap and making lacquer takes several months and requires specialized knowledge. In its liquid state, it is highly volatile too, needing experienced handling to preserve its plasticity whilst painting and ensure complete drying and quality of surface. Thus, it requires patience and skill to learn how to use it effectively to produce the desired results. As Smith (2013:179) comments, the techniques involved in making things are not usually learned by: 'following written instructions or even sometimes by language at all, but rather by working alongside experienced practitioners and observing and imitating.' Their experiential knowledge was acquired through observation and imitation rather than through texts; written descriptions could never sufficiently describe the always-changing conditions of the workshop, or the unpredictable qualities of the materials. Like any artistic practice, it is a kind of knowledge that cannot be reduced to a recipe or formula.

More recently, the majority of published writing about lacquer in English tends to focus on identification and conservation of historic artefacts, from the point of view of curators, art collectors or historians, for example, the *Phoebe Phillips Editions illustrated book, Lacquer: an International History and Illustrated Survey* (1984) *Bourne's Lacquer: An International History & Collectors Guide* (1989), the recent joint publication from the Getty Institute and the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2011, *East Asian Lacquer: Material Culture, Science and Conservation* and Marianne Webb's *Lacquer: Technology and Conservation* (2000). The attempt to encompass all international lacquer crafts in a single volume is challenging because materials and processes are different in different countries, and different parts of the same country – indeed some of the combinations of materials come down to experimentation by individual craftspeople.

As with other arts and crafts, its market value, and the possibility of earning a living by such a specialised, time-consuming means has been challenged by the onset of modernity and industrialisation. Currently, there is a widespread concern in Asian countries that traditional lacquer crafts are dying out, threatened as they are by the increasing array of mass-produced,

synthetic lacquerwares on sale comparatively cheaply (Matsura & Kopplin *et al.* 2002: 20). For the vast majority of buyers, who do not know much about resin lacquer or understand the processes involved in using it, the synthetic, gaudy lacquerware widely available in tourist shops is Vietnamese lacquer. Yet these knick-knacks do not have the individuality, longevity or authenticity of natural lacquer made by dedicated craftsmen who have experimented with their designs and techniques.

This has led to exchange programmes such as the Asian Lacquer Craft Exchange Research Project, which have been set up to enable expert lacquer practitioners to visit different Asian countries, to hold workshops and exhibitions. The Museum of Lacquer Art was established in 1993 in Münster, Germany and UNESCO published *Lacquerware in Asia, today and yesterday* in 2002. Matsura (2002:5) writing a case for the preservation of Asian lacquer crafts as a form of cultural heritage, states: 'Dating back several thousand years in Chinese history, the art of lacquer can claim to be one of the most ancient and venerable expressions of Asian culture.' This thesis argues that despite its links with ancient history, lacquer can and should be continued as an artistic practice and that spending time working with a complex material need not be seen as the antithesis to modernity. It can and is used to express contemporary concepts and perspectives, because as a material, it offers distinctive aesthetic qualities.

3.2 Refining raw lacquer

In Vietnam, *Rhus succedanea*, sometimes referred to as 'wax trees' are heliophilous and flourish in ferralitic soil when protected from severe frosts and winds (Nguyễn Quang Việt, 1994: 165). The trees and their resins vary in different areas and climates, for example, when people refer to Vietnamese lacquer, it is assumed that they are referring to the *Rhus succedanea* tree, farmed in northern Vietnam, which contains more *laccol* than the same trees farmed in cooler areas of China and Japan. The larger proportion of *laccol* means it hardens more slowly than resin with a higher proportion of urushiol. These differences are important to lacquer painters in their efforts to create textured and varied surfaces, and so much of the discussion in studios amongst lacquer practitioners focuses of the qualities of lacquer from different sources.

Figure 3-2 Nguyễn Lâm with Saeko Ando, 2016, discussing types of lacquer [Photograph] Thomson, E.(2016). Farnham: UK

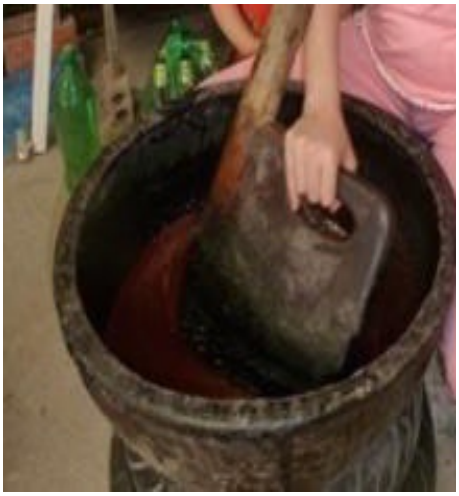

Figure 3-4 Heating and *Stirring the Lacquer to Mature it, [Photograph] Thomson, E. (2015) Farnham: UK*

The crude sap contains approximately 70% urushiol, 4% gum, 2% albuminous material and 24% water' (Cheremisinoff, 1997: 420). The consistency varies depending on season and weather, with the best quality harvested in drier months (because it contains a lower percentage of water). The fresh resin reacts to exposure to air and sunlight, so harvesting is best done at either dawn or dusk to avoid strong sunlight, because that causes oxidation at a faster rate, which means a skin forms over the surface and the colour gets darker. Freshly harvested the sap is greyish-white in colour, but gradually, with exposure to air, turns brown and gets darker. Once collected, the sap is strained to remove impurities, and stored in bamboo or ceramic containers sealed tightly with either a close-fitting lid, or by sticking wax paper on their surfaces to make them air-proof. The containers of lacquer are left untouched for several months in a cool, dark, well-aired place to let layers of different densities lacquer settle, so that lacquer of different qualities separates and is then divided into different kinds of sơn (paint). So not only are there different qualities of lacquer according to the tree tapped, but also within a single tree's resin.

The top layer is surface (oleoresin) which is used for painting final layers and top surfaces. The second layer (70-80% pure) is also used for lacquer paintings and high quality crafts, but is a paler yellow in colour. Both of these create a glossy finish. The next layer is a milky, less translucent varnish, only about 60-65% pure, so it tends to be used to do underlayers or joining. The fourth layer is a thick liquid, of a muddy yellow colour, only about 50-55% pure and is used to improve the durability of practical objects. The bottom layer is just dirty water and is thrown away (Phạm Đức Cường, 2005:40-43). The top layers of resin are then gently heated and continuously and evenly stirred with bamboo or wooden sticks for several hours (sometimes days) to get rid of vapour (to reduce the water content to make it more workable and durable). It is also during this stage that lacquer may be mixed with other resins or oils to improve manageability.

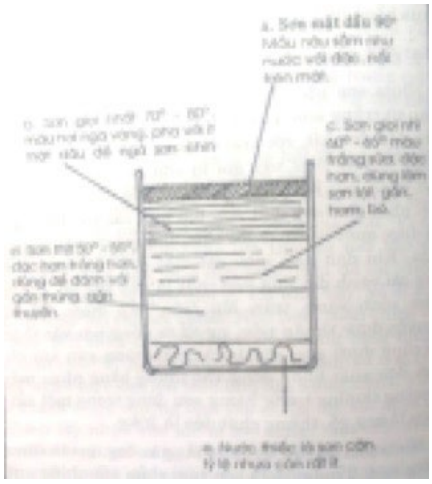

Figure 3-5 Diagram of lacquer settling into layers. In: Phạm Đức Cường (2005) Kỹ Thuật Sơn Mài *(The craft of lacquer). Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hoá P 42*

Tung oil was traditionally used in China, whereas in Vietnam, shortly after the study of lacquer had been added to the curriculum at the École Supérieure des Beaux Arts de l'Indochine (c.1926), experimentation led the artist Trần Văn Cẩn to try pine resin, rather than other oils (Nguyễn Quang Việt & Trường Hạnh, 1994:170). The results, after sanding and polishing were the best yet, perfectly smooth, but showing contrasting colours from the layers of paint. This development led to the layering process, the creation of a palimpsest surface, so distinctive of and specific to Vietnamese lacquer painting.

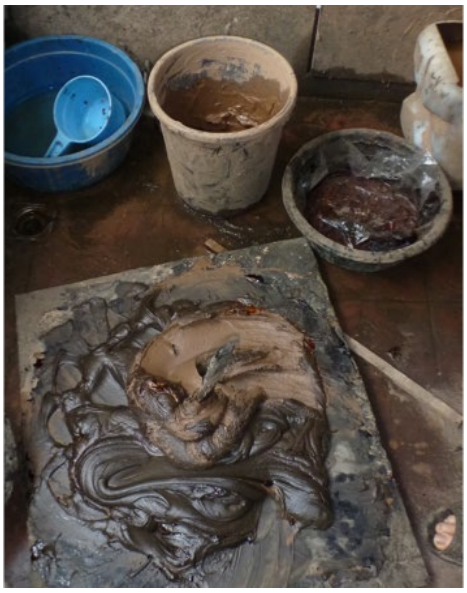

Figure 3-6 Mixing the base layer [Photograph] Thomson, E. (2015). Farnham: UK

3.3 Preparing the substructure for lacquer painting

Lacquer can be applied directly onto wood, certain metals, ceramics, leather, rattan and a wide variety of surfaces, and used as a glue, paint or varnish. Although it can be painted successfully onto a number of surfaces, it is most often painted onto wood, and 'softwood is the most common, because it is less subject to expansion or shrinkage than hardwood.' (De Kesel & Dhont, 2002:99) In order to make the base stable and flat, joints in wooden furniture are glued using poorer quality lacquer as an adhesive, and the surface of the wood is prepared, sanded, and any knots or holes are filled with lacquer mixed with various 'thickeners' such as powdered earth, sawdust, powdered ash (of bones and horns), ground shells and other less expensive materials, such as tile or brick dust (Koizumi, 1923:19).

The layers are then sanded down to a smooth surface and painted over with thin coats of lacquer, each one requiring a minimum of forty-eight hours to dry. The process is repeated, until a smooth durable substructure has been achieved. For high quality lacquerware and paintings, the wooden or bamboo surface is prepared by specialist craftsmen, who are differentiated from those who paint or carve lacquer surfaces, but seen as necessary, because unless the substructure is prepared correctly it will not provide a strong and stable base. Generally, these boards or other objects are bought from the craftspeople who make them, or from streets or villages that were historically guilds for lacquer crafts, by the lacquer painters who specialise in the surface decoration. However, some of the most dedicated artists learn to create their own bases, as strength and durability are markers of quality.

Lacquer does not 'dry' out; it polymerises and for this humidity of between 75-90% is needed. If the humidity is below 60% the lacquer may not ever dry (Webb, 2000:36). As a result, lacquer craftspeople need a warm, humid chamber, closet or in some cases cellar, to leave newly painted work for around 24 hours where the urushiol polymerizes to form a clear, hard, and waterproof surface. Without the correct conditions, drying may take considerably longer, or not happen at all. Special cabinets are built for the purpose, with humidity gauges; many Vietnamese artists use shelves with a humidifier on the lowest shelf, covered with a dampened sheet - see figure 3-7.

Figure 3-7 Hardening shelves in Nguyen Lam's studio [Photograph] Thomson, E. (2016) Farnham: UK

Figure 3-8 Coromandel screen: cross-section. In: De Kessel, W. & Dhont, G. (2002) Coromandel Lacquer Screens. Brussels: Art Media Resources Ltd. Pg 112

In: De Kesel, W. & Dhont, G. (2002)

The layers of lacquer are required to ensure strength and reduce the possibility of warping. It also acts as a sealant, not allowing sap from the wood to seep out or water to seep in (either of which may cause deformation of the substructure, and thus damage the top layer). In the case of lacquer screens or paintings, wooden boards are also wrapped in cloth soaked in lacquer to further ensure the stability and durability of the board as a ground. See figure 3-8 for an example of the depth of substructure for this 'Coromandel screen'. De Kesel & Dhont (2002:102) document how in some cases cheaper materials were used, a variety of glues and pigs' blood, which, due to being water-soluble, were less durable. Whilst there may be a variety of reasons for this, since many of those exported screens were cut up, the few millimetres of surface decoration sliced off and stuck on to various bits of European furniture, one can understand that, if the craftsmen were aware of how their work was used, they may have become less particular about the quality of their work for export.

3.4 Painting with lacquer

When the excess moisture has been removed, and the resin has been refined and processed, (described as 'ripe' as opposed to 'raw') it is ready to use. The Vietnamese describe natural lacquer as con gián (which translates literally as 'cockroach' and is used to describe the translucent, golden brown colour of cockroach wings). This can be mixed with natural pigments to create various colours.

In Asia lacquer is most commonly used as a preservative, painted over softwood and other more malleable materials such as bamboo, leather and cloth. Since lacquer can be applied directly on most materials, even some metals, and used simply as a protective layer, or a glossy finish, this is a method called 'kiji nuri' in Japan, which essentially means painting directly onto wood, without preparing a lacquered ground.

Early travellers (such as Marco Polo and Muhammad ibn Battutah) marvelled at the arts and crafts in China and admired the sheen and strength of lacquer, but it was not until the second half of the sixteenth century, that Europe established trade relations with China (Herberts, 1962: 251). This created a market in exported lacquer artefacts which impacted both on

European art and design, and on production methods and outputs. While ports in China were forcibly opened for trade with the west and the 'unequal treaties' (i.e. favouring European interests) established, in Japan the response was to modernise by introducing railways, inviting international scholars to their Universities and by building-up their military resources. However, the end of the Edo period signalled the demise of the feudal system, and this resulted in artists losing their patrons. Additionally, the increasing tendency for wealthy Japanese men to wear Western dress, meant that lacquerers who had been able to make a living making inros[19] found it increasingly hard to find buyers. Interestingly though, a revival of sorts came about due to the international fairs then so popular in Europe, and these were pivotal in the development of European modern art, perhaps most notably in Art Deco. Lacquerware, with its polished, smooth surface, its mother-of-pearl inlays and gold leaf, epitomised the love of sensuous opulence at that time and was collected all over Europe. However, the increased commercial demand for Japanese goods in Europe lead to many forms of art, amongst them lacquer, coming to be seen mainly as export products (Dees, 2000:30).

[19] (medicine boxes, worn as 'handbags' and attached to the waistband of traditional male attire, the kimono, which did not have pockets)

The term ‘nanban’ was used to describe foreign influences and is used to describe lacquerware designed for export markets. These fashions influenced European readings of Asian art, including the French colonials who travelled to Vietnam and collectors and dealers at that time.

Figure 3-9 Edo period, Namban style lacquer box. Gold makie on a black ground with shell inlay. 17 x 14.5 x 13 cm. Simon Pilling (2016), London.

3.5 Pigmentation & layering colours

The process of layering different coloured pigments and other materials offers a broad spectrum of visual effects, from subtle shifts of tonality and surface lustre to striking contrasts and clear-cut delineation. It is one of the most characteristic properties of lacquer art, hence the use of the metaphor, palimpsest, to describe Vietnamese sơn mài, which exemplifies this process, although the intentional use of contrasting underlayers of colour showing through upper ones can be found in ancient lacquer objects as well as in contemporary practice throughout Asia.

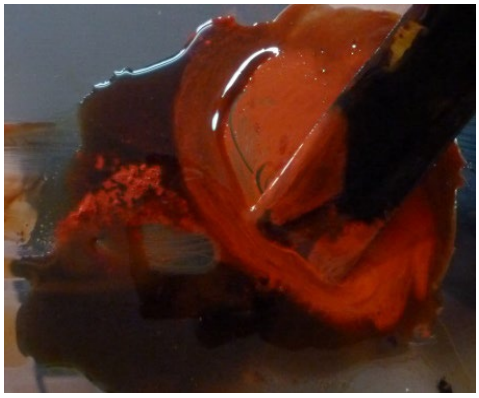

Figure 3-10 Powdered Cinnabar being mixed with lacquer. [Photograph] Thomson, E (2016)

Because lacquer is such a volatile substance, only a few additional colouring agents will combine effectively with it, which explains the limited range of colours in older lacquer art. Traditionally most objects were coloured either black or red.

Until the nineteenth century, the use of locally available natural pigments limited colour options to red (cinnabar, which is the mineral mercuric sulphide or ‘dragon’s blood’, which is a bright red resin obtained from Croton, Dracaena and Daemonorops trees), black using iron oxide or hydroxide (colcothar) or charcoal, brown (ferric oxide), yellow (from orpiment, arsenic sulphide, or ochre) and green (from chromium compounds). (Herberts,1962: 343-374, Watt & Ford, 1992:3).

Nowadays, if one walks into 48 Hàng Hòm, the paint and pigment supplier that most of the lacquer artists in Hà Nội use, there are a range of specially prepared pigments which can produce any colour desired, although some lacquer artists choose to work only with natural ones, because they prefer the colours, the tried-and-tested longevity, and in some cases link the materials with cultural heritage and identity.

Figure 3-11 Black Lacquer. [Photograph} Thomson, E. (2016). Farnham: UK

Black lacquer comes from the chemical reaction between lacquer and iron, so in some countries the lacquer is put into iron containers and stirred with an iron rod for several hours to obtain a black, glossy lacquer (in others, namely Japan, iron-filings are mixed in and then strained out). For this reason, when working with brown, translucent lacquer it is important to avoid letting it come into contact with metal tools, because it will become darker. If mixed with pigments that contain metal elements (as many do), the resultant colours will look dirty. It is also possible to make black lacquer by mixing powdered charcoal or black paint pigments with it, but it will be less glossy, and have a different surface texture.

Plain black or red surfaces were common (although often used as a contrasting background for gold decorations or mother-of- pearl inlay). However, even as early as the Song Dynasty in China, or Japan in the 14th century, both lacquer painters and carvers made use of the possibility of using contrasting colours for aesthetic effect.

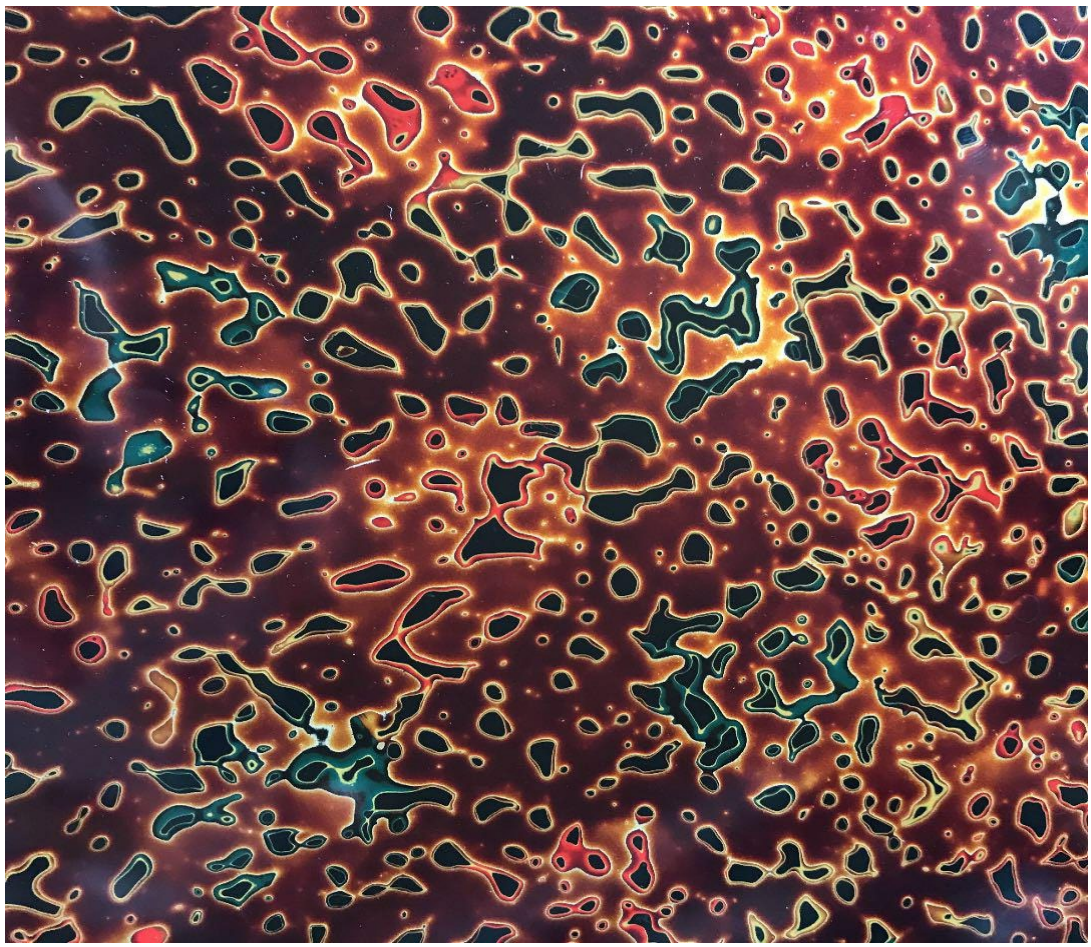

Figure 3-12 Example of Tsugaru nuri (s.d.) Japan a Go Go Athttps://twitter.com/japanagogo/status/1275760663521112064/photo/1(Accessed on 10.06.2021)

Techniques that deliberately exploit the effects of layering colours, such as tsugaru-nuri (figure 3-12) can be used to create a mottled, dappled appearance. A variety of things are scattered, such as chaff from rice, sand, broken shells etc. onto the wet base layer. Then layers of different coloured lacquer are painted over the now bumpy base level (sometimes including silver or gold leaf), and it is sanded down, so that the final surface is flat, showing the layers of colours and shapes from the under layers.

A variation of this layering technique can be found in Myanmar (formerly Burma), where black lacquer is painted thickly on to the base layer in some kind of linear design (although as shown in Figure 3-13, thick lines of lacquer never harden in rigidly straight lines, they spread out where thickest). After that has dried the whole layer is then thinly painted and covered with gold leaf. That is then covered in translucent brown lacquer. After that layer is hard, it is sanded until flush and polished. The process of grinding, sanding and polishing is the most skilled part of the process in lacquer painting, because if the craftsperson sands too much, they will lose the colour and precious metals added to the surface. If they don't sand enough the surface will be uneven and the colour will be predominantly the last layer applied. Thus the process deliberately exposes its own workings, communicating its history by creating visual depth on a (usually) flat surface.

Figure 3-13 Burmese Lacquer Box. In: Isaacs, Ralph & Blurton, T. Richard (2000) Visions from the Golden Land: Burma and the art of Lacquer. Chicago: Art Media Resources Ltd. Page 117

Another method used in sơn mài, is painting in thick layers, because the surface dries sooner than the underlayers, which results in a wrinkled effect (see figure 3-14). Then this can be painting over with other colours and gold and silver leaf etc. and finally then sanded down to the desired level. Figure 3-15 is a stunning example of a combination of eggshell inlay and wrinkled lacquer used with distinctive Vietnamese sơn mài painting and grinding techniques to expose contrasting colours.

Figure 3-14 Wrinkled Lacquer [Photograph] Thomson, E. (2016). Farnham: UK

Figure 3-15 Ando, Saeko (2018) Detail of experimental lacquer. Lacquer on Board. 4 x 5 cm. At: https://www.saekoando.com/ (Accessed on 10.06.2020)

3.6 Gold and silver leaf, maki-e (sprinkled pictures), and metal inlay

As lacquer is various densities of yellowish brown in colour, mixing it with white pigments, such as lead or titanium, does not produce a clear white; rather it produces a light beige, even when high proportions of pigment are used (which reduces the glossiness). From an aesthetic perspective, a strong contrast to the glossy black was required, and one of the ways that this was attained was through the use of metal leaf, powdered metals and metal inlays. Metals used included gold, silver, pewter, copper and bronze.

Gold and silver leaf are used on many of the Buddhist statues and altar decorations in temples and pagodas in Myanmar, China and Japan. Marco Polo (1254-1324) is reported to have described Asia as being rich in gold, presumably mistaking the lacquered gold leaf on statues, temples and palaces for solid gold (Herberts, 1962: 251).

Maki-e, the Japanese term, literally translates to 'sprinkled picture' and refers to the practice of using a dry, smooth lacquer surface to painting designs in lacquer paint, waiting until it is tacky, but not dry, and sprinkling powdered metals (gold, silver, copper and pewter) over the design. After the lacquer is completely dry, the powdered gold can be swept off, with only the new painting showing in gold.

There are a number of sub-categories of maki-e:

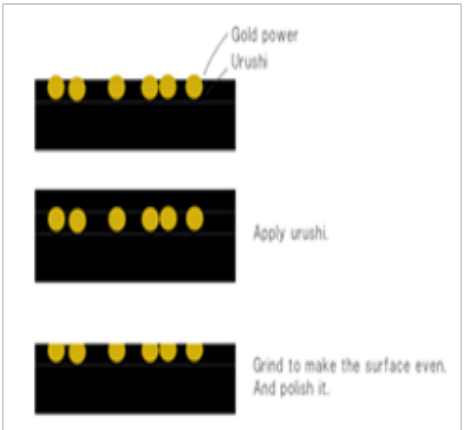

Figure 3-16 Diagram of Togidashi maki-e technique by Sugano, Kaori (s.d.) At: http://suganokaori.com/tec.e.html (Accessed on 12.02.2016

Hiramaki-e (sprinkled picture on a flat surface) which refers to the technique of sprinkling different consistencies of gold (or other metal) powder or flakes onto freshly painted, wet lacquer that has been left to slightly dry so that its surface is tacky. After hardening, it is polished. However, because sometimes gold was brushed off or worn away during this process, variations of this technique evolved.

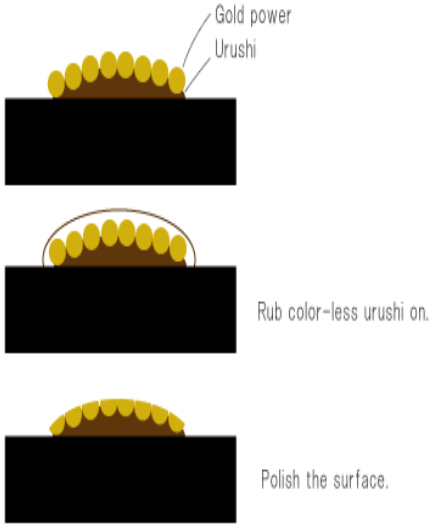

Figure 3-17 Diagram of Takamaki-e Technique by Sugano, Kaori (s.d.). At: http://suganokaori.com/tec.e.html (Accessed on 12.02.2016)

Togidashi maki-e (polished out sprinkled picture) which essentially follows the same process, but before polishing, more layers of urushi are painted over the gold, to ensure more efficient adhesion and durability.

Taka maki-e (sprinkled picture on a raised surface) the raised surface was created with extra layers of lacquer, sometimes mixed with other materials so as to bulk the paint up, but these are often combined with other techniques, such as inlay or layered painting, so as to create the desired effect. See the taka maki-e chrysanthemums on the Japanese incense box signed by Saku Komin in figure 3-18 as an example.

Variations of this technique have been adopted and adapted in different ways by different lacquer artists. For example, the French Art Deco artist Jean Dunand, who experimented with using lacquer on stucco and bas-relief carving for large scale murals and screens. Figure 3-19 shows a small (presumably trial) plan for the large-scale murals he had been commissioned to do for the luxury liner, the Normandie. The stylised horses and riders are arranged in a crescent, with bas-relief used to draw attention to their muscles and movement.

Figure 3-18 Komin, Saku (s.d.). Incense box [lacquer on wood] 3.5 x 7.6 x 10.5cm. In: Dees, Jan (2001) Ferns, Feathers, Flowers: Japanese Lacquer of the Meiji and Taisho Periods from the Baur Collections.

Munster: Museum für Lackkunst

The stylised horses and riders are arranged in a crescent, with bas-relief used to draw attention to their muscles and movement. Additionally, the impression of waves (or perhaps air or clouds) is created with guri[20] style carved scrolls motifs, a traditional lacquer carving technique using layered lacquer to form geometric spirals and scrolls.

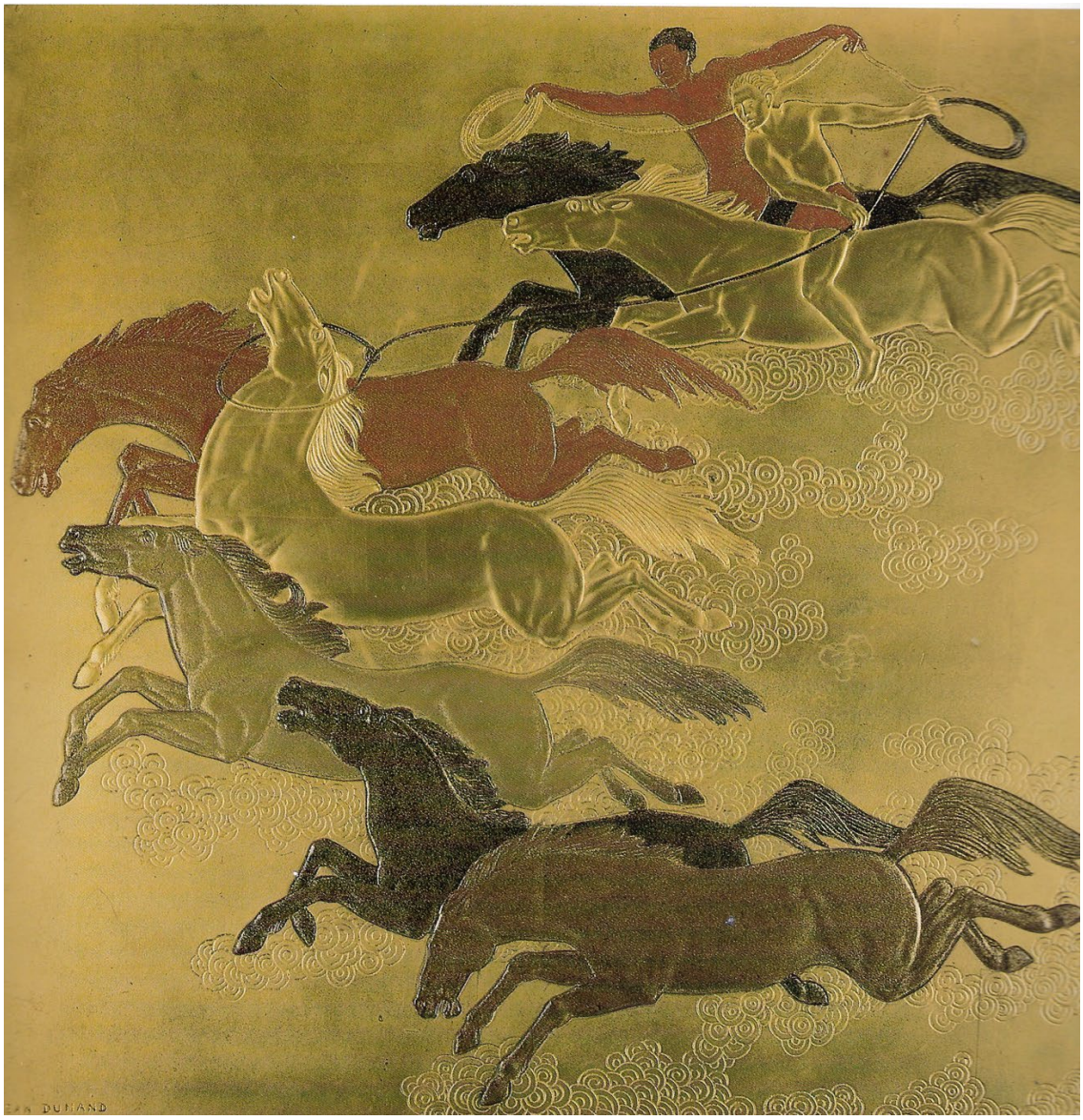

Figure 3-19 Dunand, Jean (c.1935) La Conquête du Cheval [Lacquered stucco on board] 150 x 190 x 3.5 cm In: Marcilhac, Felix (1991) Jean Dunand: His Life and Works. London: Thames and Hudson. Pg 153.

This combination of materials and techniques was also employed by Vietnamese sculptor and lacquer artist Phạm Gia Giang (b.1912- 2003) who produced a number of bas-relief lacquer paintings the most famous being *Happiness* (1937) and Nguyễn Khang (b. 1912-1988) in some of his earlier works, along with other stylistic features of Art Deco, Japanese lacquer artefacts and traditional Vietnamese carving (discussed in more depth in chapter four).

[20] The term 'guri' is Japanese, but in Chinese these scroll designs are called 'lingzhi'.

3.7 Carved or engraved lacquer

Figure 3-20 Diagram of chinkin-bori. Sugano,Kaori (s.d.) At: http://suganokaori.com/tec.e.html (Accessed on 12.02.2016)

Another way of painting designs onto a lacquer surface was by incision. Using either fine, needle like blades or chisels of various sizes (like those used for woodblock printing) craftspeople could carve designs and, after coating with a thin coat of liquid lacquer to act as adhesive, rub gold powder or dry pigments into the cut. These were usually coated with another layer of lacquer to protect the under colour, but not always. Figure 3-20 shows a diagram of a cross-section of incised lacquer, around ten layers deep before the carving was done and then with contrasting colours painted on top, before being ground down to a flat surface, showing the contrasting, 'sunken' colours.

In Japan this technique is known as chinkin-bori (sunken gold carving) and is often used for fine lines and details on decorative surfaces, which are then sanded and polished smooth, so that it is not obvious that the lines have been engraved at all.

Figure 3-21 Betel Box . In: Htun, Than (2013) Lacquerware Journeys: The untold story of Burmese Lacquer. Bangkok: River Books.

In Myanmar, coloured lacquer was traditionally engraved using a slightly different technique. The detailed linear engravings (usually done freehand, based on traditional designs but not copied from a pattern book) use powdered pigments rather than powdered metals.

> 'this style of decoration is based on the principle that, when the smoothed surface of the vessel is engraved with a design and then covered with a mixture of lacquer and colouring agent, the mixture will adhere where the design has been engraved but will not adhere - and can be wiped away - where it is not engraved.' (Isaacs & Blurton, 2000:36)

In Britain, there are a number of examples in the Victoria and Albert Museum because, during the colonial era, they were collected by the East India Company and housed in the India Museum in London (founded in 1798): much of its collection passed on to the Victoria and Albert when it closed, although some examples are held in the archives in Kew, in the

'Economic Botany' collection (which consists of plant specimens that were collected from all over the world because they were useful and therefore profitable to cultivate).

The most technically sophisticated carved lacquer processes were developed in China during the Imperial era. As Shaw (2011: 196) asserts:

> 'The Qing dynasty, which began with the invasion of the Manchus in 1644 and ended with the inception of the Republican era in 1912, was a period of relative stability. It was a time when skilled lacquerers, mobilized by imperial decree, produced many technically outstanding works.'

The carving of cinnabar coloured lacquer (diaoqi) involves carving built-up layers of thinly applied coats of lacquer into a three-dimensional design. Each millimetre requires around 17 layers of paint (Beijing International, *s.d.*). Hence the necessity of painting layer upon layer of very thin lacquer to get a surface thick enough to carve into. Each of these layers cannot be exposed to heat or light to dry (which would cause the lacquer to crack rather than creating a smooth, hard surface); as a result. the painting alone would take years. The number of layers needed for this kind of carved lacquer could be as many as three hundred, which, considering each layer would need a minimum of forty-eight hours to harden, made it extremely time-consuming and labour intensive, and it only ever really flourished while workshops were mobilised by the emperor and the imperial palaces.

Figure 3-22 Imperial throne, Qing Dynasty (1736-1795) [carved polychrome lacquer on wood] 119.3 x 125.7 x 91.4 cm. V&A

In addition to being popular with the upper classes, carved lacquer was often used to make trays on which to place incense burners, and incense containers for Zen Buddhist temples.

Figure 3-23 Kamakura-bori box (C.1600) National Gallery of Victoria. At: http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/negoro-lacquer-

During the Yuan Dynasty in the 14th Century, Zen Buddhism spread to Japan, and with it some of these antique Chinese lacquer artefacts. However, Japanese craftsmen developed Kamakura-bori, (Kamakura carving) technique (accredited to Tsuishu Yozei) where instead of carving designs into thick, hard layers of lacquer, they carved designs into wood and then painted the wood with lacquer to create a similar effect (Haino, *s.d.*).

Another example of traditional techniques being modified, which could be described as innovation but is part of the ongoing shifting priorities and values in different societies at different times; the repurposing of forms, materials and techniques is part of a very steady continuum in art history.

An additional variation of carved lacquer that was popular during the seventeenth century was lacquer screens comprising black lacquer painted boards that were carved down to a

Figure 3-24 Coromandel Screen. c. 1700 In: De Kessel, W. & Dhont, G. (2002) Coromandel Lacquer Screens. . Brussels: Art Media Resources Ltd. Pg 67

thick layer of pale-coloured primer containing ash, raw lacquer and other ingredients, the cut sections of the design are then painted with brightly-coloured oil paints to contrast against the dark, monochrome lacquer.

The same process was used in a number of Vietnamese craft villages, and has been adopted by some modern and contemporary Vietnamese lacquer painters (as will be discussed in chapter five). Sơn khắc is a particularly time-consuming process, although in a different way to sơn mài, as the artist needs to compose the design or picture first, and then accurately cut and carve the lines and shapes as needed. Unlike most painting techniques, any small errors cannot be covered with another layer, so it requires both precision and strength for the carving.

3.8 Shell inlay

In terms of technique shell inlay is closely linked with carved lacquer, where designs are carved out of a prepared lacquer board, and a layer of lacquer is painted on to act as glue in the sunken area, which is then filled with shell inlay. The base layer is carved into. The shell is flattened onto the tacky lacquer which is left to harden. More layers (perhaps in different colours) are painted over and then sanded down so that gaps between the shell are filled, and the shell's surface is exposed. Traditionally, mother-of-pearl (nacre) shell was used, but nowadays a wide variety of sea and river shells are used, along with eggshells.

The shell can be sawn or cut into different sized pieces, and it can be shaved into very thin, almost translucent layers. These thin, glasslike pieces could be applied over different wood surfaces, or over silver and gold leaf, to enhance the colour it was laid over. Korea, in particular, has a long-standing tradition of abalone shell inlay and it is associated with wealth, longevity and happiness. Traditional designs tend to include flowers, plants and curvy, guri-type arrangements.

Figure 3-25 Kuroda, Tatsuaki (s.d.) Tea Caddy. Shibuya Kurodatoen

Figure 3-25 shows a modern example, made by Kuroda Tatsuaki (1904-1982) who was awarded the title of National Living Treasure, which is awarded to outstandingly skilled artists and craftspeople in Japan. The recognition of the value

Figure 3-26 Dunand, Jean (1926) Portrait of Madame Bourdillon. [Lacquer on Wood] Dimensions Unknown. In: Marcilhac, Felix (1991) Jean Dunand: His Life and Works. London: Thames and Hudson. P21

of crafts and craftspeople in Japan, has led to a strong tradition that has continued to develop, despite the inevitable difficulty of 'competing' with mass-production.

The use of eggshell inlay can be seen on antique Japanese sword sheaths made for samurai, but enjoyed a renaissance in the 1920s and 30s, when art deco designers such as Jean Dunand popularised it by using it in his decorative pieces. As Dunand was a multi-talented artist and craftsman who visited Vietnam and was involved in curating and judging exhibitions of Vietnamese lacquer painting makes it highly likely that there was some mutual influence in terms of practice: he was, for example, the only European Art Deco artist who used lacquer to paint portraits and landscapes (see figures 2-2. and 3-27), rather than using it for furniture, like Eileen Grey or Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann.

This assertion of cultural exchange, even if only between a few practitioners, seems incontrovertible, given that the Vietnamese artists who studied at Hà Nội, and their tutor Alix Aymé, were also producing work using the technique at the same time.

The technique was valued because it allowed artists to create a bright white contrast with the darker, more muted tones of natural lacquer. Sometimes duck egg is used for the slightly different colour it offers, and both can be heated to create slightly warmer soft brown colours. The duck or eggshell is dried and for smaller areas, hammered flat onto a carved-out indentation of the required shape, painted with lacquer which is left to partially dry until it is tacky. For larger areas it is possible to use a flat surface, such as glass: see fig. 3-30. When the lacquer has hardened, several other layers are painted over (possibly of contrasting colours, or with silver leaf between them, and then they are sanded down to a smooth layer, which creates dappled patterns as the higher areas are made level.

Figure 3-26 Using glass to flatten eggshells onto the painted board [Photograph] Thomson, E (2016). Farnham: UK

Eggshell inlay can be used to create a variety of textures and patterns, as demonstrated by a number of experimental boards by Dunand (see figure 3-27)

Figure 3-27 Dunand, Jean A collection of experiments using eggshell inlay [Lacquer on Wood] Dimensions Unknown. In: Marcilhac, Felix (1991) Jean Dunand: His Life and Works. London: Thames and Hudson. P136

3.9 Dry Lacquer

Dry lacquer, or kanshitsu, in Japanese, is a technique where a sculpture or shape of either clay or soft wood is covered in layers of hemp cloth soaked with lacquer, and the surface details are subsequently modelled with a mixture of lacquer, sawdust, powdered clay, and other materials. Then the modelling material is removed leaving a hollow shell, which is light-weight, but comparatively strong, like many of the statues of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in Asia, such as the Bodhisattva Guanyin (see fig. 3-28).

The technique is still being used, by contemporary Korean designers, such as Chung Hae Cho (정해조) see the asymmetric lacquer vessel in figure 3-29. The bright red and quirky shape declares itself to be totally modern, despite the traditional materials and techniques (from the *Positions in Contemporary Korean Lacquer Art* (2016) exhibition at BASF's The Museum of Lacquer Art in Münster).

Figure 3-28 Bodhisattva Guanyin. (14th-15th century, Ming Dynasty) {Dry lacquer, gold leaf and pigments] 127x87x57.5 cm. The Walters Art Museum.

Other contemporary designers include Japanese Kanji Toki, who studied at the Surrey Institute of Art & Design in 2002 and uses lacquer to make designer furniture, including chairs that are strong enough to sit on using just cloth and natural *urushi*. These innovative contemporary designers demonstrate the versatility, utility and aesthetic possibilities of continuing to use lacquer resin.

In Vietnam, traditionally, lacquer was used on sculpture in temples and pagodas, but since the colonial period, lacquer painting has dominated artistic practice. However, in recent decades there have been a few artists who are beginning to use lacquer in three-dimensional work (other than the bowls and ornaments sold in tourist shops), such as Đinh Công Đạt (1966 -) whose quirky

Figure 3-29 Chung Hae Cho (2017) Asymetric Vessel [Dry lacquer on cloth] Variable Dimensions In: Frick, Patricia (Ed) (2015) Positions in Contemporary Korean Lacquer Art. Munster: Museum fur Lakknust

sculpture at times overlaps with interior design, and Lê Quảng Hà (1963-): their work will be discussed further in chapter six.

This chapter has brought together some of the history of Europe's trade encounters with lacquer artefacts and clarified the various nomenclature given to different techniques and forms. The variations of terms, particularly when referring to the material itself, demonstrate some of the misinterpretations that have been common in relation to this distinctively Asian material and craft, and which continue to obscure recognition and understanding.

Looking at the wider context has provided an overview of the ways lacquer has been used in Asia, and how the Vietnamese utilisation of lacquer for large-scale paintings diverges from other Asian practices, whilst also incorporating a range of traditional techniques and materials. The Vietnamese process of sơn mài adopts many of the techniques and processes outlined here, so as to build up layers and depth whether used alone or combined with other materials, to create a visual experience that is not easily captured in a photograph, in that the surface of the lacquer can include a variety of finishes that react differently to light, and change, depending on where the viewer is in relation to it. Understanding the evolution of Vietnamese lacquer painting requires an understanding of its materiality in addition to the motivations and contexts of its invention and development, which will be explored in the following chapters.

4 THE INVENTION OF VIETNAMESE LACQUER PAINTING

The European concept of fine art was adopted and adapted in Vietnam as a direct result of the establishment of the École des Beaux Arts de l'Indochine, and the influential artists who taught and studied there. Although the idea of opening an arts university in Hà Nội is widely attributed to Nguyễn Nam Sơn (1890-1973)[21] the three main teachers that will be discussed in this chapter are Victor Tardieu (1870-1937), who endeavoured to open a fine arts school in Hà Nội, Joseph Inguimberty (1896-1971) who was the longest- standing painting tutor there, and Alix Aymé (1894-1989), who was the only French teacher to work in lacquer herself, teaching in the lacquer department from 1934-1939. Additionally, this chapter will also introduce some of the Vietnamese students who went on to become influential painters, teachers and writers, recounting and discussing how each of them contributed in different ways to the invention and development of Vietnamese lacquer painting.

As has been noted by Scott (2012:2) many of the graduates continued to be influential in the production and exhibition of art in Vietnam after the French left, and so provide a lineage of the practice. This chapter looks at some of the celebrated lacquer painters of the colonial period, and discusses their achievements in relation to the shifting ideologies which were driven and framed by wider political concerns in the colonial context, and the ways in which this impacted on changing perceptions about the meaning and purpose of art.

4.1 'Beaux Arts' in Vietnam: an evolving concept.

Prior to French colonialism, there were no art colleges in Vietnam: specific crafts (that could be argued to be forms of artistic practice), such as printing, lacquer, carving etc. were practiced in certain villages or areas in cities, and were learnt in the workshop, much like the guild system in Europe. Historically, much like the Chinese, the intelligentsia, or

> 'literati served as mandarins at the Imperial court…or stayed in their villages… doing calligraphy to commemorate births and deaths…painting was a pastime, not a profession – the finest extant artwork was done by anonymous artisans for pagoda, temple and communal house' (Hantover, 1991:20).

[21] Several artists I interviewed told me this was the case, and it is reiterated in an article in the Fine Art magazine, *Mỹ thuật,* by author Tiền Giang (2020)

The concept of scholar-gentry, who painted both to demonstrate and to cultivate their virtue, saw painting as a meditation, rather than a way to earn their living, already existed in Vietnam. It was, in many ways, compatible with European ideas around the fine arts, that is, art as a personal, self-driven intellectual endeavour not dictated by external requirements. However, scroll paintings were also produced (amongst other luxury items) in workshops by craftspeople and artisans.

When the French authorities established a number of trade schools in the late 19th, early 20th centuries in Indochina, they focused on teaching functional crafts. Huynh (2005: 83) claims were designed to exploit local natural resources and expertise, for example, in the province of Bình Dương, three such schools were established. Bình Dương had a tradition of lacquer crafts and painting that went back to the seventeenth century (Nguyễn Văn Minh, 2016:6), and Thủ Dầu Một is where, in 1901, the French opened the applied arts school that specialised in lacquer, while Biên Hoà (1903) had a foundry. In Hà Nội, the *École Professionnelle de Hà Nội* opened in 1902: it trained artisans in skills such as cabinet making, pottery, embroidery, and inlay work, and the Japanese professor Ishiko Suehiko, was employed there to teach lacquer.

Figure 4-1 École des Arts Appliqués de Thu Dau Môt (1940). Aquatic scene. [Lacquer on Wood] 100cm x 85 cm. In: Musée Cernuschi (2012) Du Fleuve Rouge au Mékong. Paris: Paris-Musées. P 12

In 1913, an institution opened in Gia Đình training students in graphic art, illustration and printing, which André-Pallois (2009:3) described as 'remarkable because… it was a new step towards a fine arts school and more importantly, as early as 1922 the director was a Vietnamese

painter who trained in Paris.' However, according to Huynh-Beattie (2010: 88), it provided an arts education designed to provide employees within the publishing and manufacturing industries. In a colonial context, such a focus was to be expected. Interestingly, a number of students and teachers who studied lacquer at the École Supérieure des Beaux Arts de l'Indochine had also studied at these other schools, notably the artist and teacher, Alix Aymé, studied lacquer at the professional school in Hà Nội.

The various school names are interesting in terms of defining the status and purpose of taught activities, and demonstrate similar overlaps and distinctions between art, craft and design as exists in English language, culture and educational institutions. Officially the school in Hà Nội was known as the École Supérieure des Beaux Arts de l'Indochine, which translates into Vietnamese as Trường Mỹ thuật Cao cấp Đông Dương, although more commonly it was known as École des Beaux Arts de l'Indochine (Trường Mỹ thuật Đông Dương). 'Mỹ thuật' means art, and can be modified by prefixing it with 'Cao cấp' to indicate superior (e.g. fine) or 'gia Trang trí' to indicate decorative, or applied art.'Mỹ nghệ' also is sometimes translated as art, at other times it is translated as craft. It is not used in relation to 'fine art painting' and is more often associated with design and practical work, for example 'Mỹ nghệ thực hành' (literally 'hand on' art) usually translated to applied art. 'Kỹ thuật' also translates as art, but is associated with technology and engineering – and tends to be used in the title of courses at polytechnics and vocational schools – some of which teach lacquer.

At the time of Tardieu's endeavour, the unequal status of the terms decorative or applied arts and crafts as compared to fine art is demonstrated by the controversy that the suggestion of opening a fine arts institution in Hà Nội generated. Correspondence between Silice (the director of the Cambodian art school) and Tardieu illustrate that his approach to art teaching encouraged students to create their own designs (Pham Long, 2014[22], Paliard 2014: 14-18). By overtly following the European concept of fine art, such an institution was conceptually linked to freedom of expression and individual creativity, and because of this, Victor Tardieu, as co-founder of the École des Beaux-Arts is widely credited with opening the 'first' Vietnamese art school.

Tardieu won the Prix de l'Indochine[23], which was part of an endeavour to promote cultural exchange between France and its far Eastern colonies in 1920, after serving in the ambulance

[22] Personal communication with Professor Pham Long 25th August 2014

[23] Le prix Indochine ran from 1920–1938, a French colonial art prize established in 1910. Originally intended to be a one-off award, it continued for eighteen years, in part because after 1925 Tardeau's suggestion that it could be utilised to enable artists to travel and provide teaching at the École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine was implemented successfully.

service during the First World War. The prize provided its recipients with transport and accommodation expenses to visit Indochina for six months, although the bursary was so small (only 1000 francs) that few artists could afford to stay for long. Once in Hà Nội, Tardieu's letters to his wife document that he had been told that portraits could be sold for far higher prices in Vietnam than in France (presumably due to scarcity of professional artists in the expatriate communities) and was hoping to get a commission for work, stating 'I must have an order, otherwise it is not worth being here'[24] (cited in Paliard 2014:30). His determination to find work in Vietnam led to his being commissioned to paint two murals, one for the Indochinese University [Université Indochinoise] and the other for the Central library [Bibliothèque Centrale]. Tardieu's academic approach which entailed sketching studies of recognisable French Governors and other important colonials of the time, meant that the mural took years to complete. Paliard (2014: 33) describes it as lacking historical depth because it omitted any suggestion of conflicts in Hà Nội at that time, and was, therefore, in keeping with Tardieu's conservatism. I posit that it indicates his diplomacy, which was key to his achievements in Vietnam.

As the winner of the Prix de l'Indochine, Tardieu was of interest to the local community and was invited to a social event at the Ammanese Student Union, where he met the aspiring artist Nguyễn Vạn Thọ (who became more commonly known as Nam Sơn), who shared Tardieu's passion for painting. According to art historian Corrine de Menonville (2003:23) Tardieu had 'an open and pleasant nature', and he and Nam Sơn became great friends. It is widely believed that opening a Fine Arts Institute in Hà Nội was Nam Sơn's idea, although they worked together to realise that end. Tardieu suggested making teaching at the school for a year a condition of winning the *Prix de l'Indochine*, thus saving money whilst encouraging cultural exchange. Their letters were persuasive, and it was largely due to Tardieu's gift of self-publicising and courting official approval that he gained endorsement for the project, and the school was established. As Paliard (2014:26) points out:

> 'When Victor Tardieu received the Indochina prize, he was fifty years old. His career had been that of an official painter, if by that term we mean an artist who made his living mainly by public procurement and he was attentive to official recognition.'

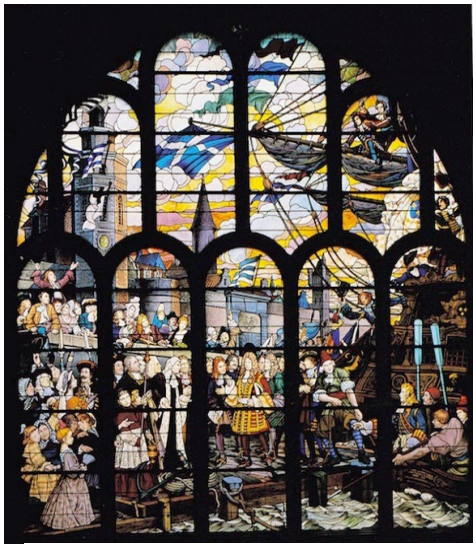

Figure 4-2 Stained Glass Window in Dunkirk's Town Hall, based on Tardieu's design (now a World Heritage Site)

[24] Il faut que j'ai une commande, sans quoi ce n'est pas la peine d'être venu

Born in Orliénas in 1870, to a family of silk traders, Tardieu became a student at the École Nationale des Beaux-Arts de Lyon before moving to Paris in 1889 to continue his artistic studies. In October 1890, he enrolled at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts. He studied with the symbolist painter Gustave Moreau (1826-1898) along with fellow students such as Henri Matisse (1869-1954), Albert Marquet (1875 -1947) and Georges Rouault (1871-1958). In 1892 he went to study at Léon Bonnat's studio (1833-1922, disciple of Ingres). He also worked in the studios of Felix Gaudin, who used sketches and compositions by Victor Tardieu for stained glass boxes and other items, one of the most famous being the windows in the stairway of Dunkirk's town Hall (see figure 4.2) depicting the homecoming of the local hero, Jean Bart. It is clear, from artists like Tardieu, and his contemporaries, Jean Dunand and many others, that the cross-over between fine art training and working for what Greenhalgh (2011: 220) describes as 'fashionable and exclusive craft firms' producing luxury goods for the wealthy bourgeoisie, was common practice.

Figure 4-3 Tardieu, Victor (c.1924) Market by the Red River [oil on board] 41 x 55.5 cm. At: https://www.auction.fr/_en/lot/victor-tardieu-orlienas-1870-hanoi-1937-laquo-vue-d-rsquo-hanoi-raquo-huile-sur-papier-7832686# (Accessed 12.10.2016)

Tardieu's reasons for travelling to, and remaining in Indochina were probably multifarious, and in retrospect, difficult to ascertain. Taylor (2004: 27) speculates that Tardieu's decision to remain in Hà Nội was 'Presumably (because) he was inspired by the exotic landscapes and colours of Tonkin, or the Northern Red River Delta, like other French painters at the time.' His son, Jean Tardieu (cited in Nguyễn Quang Phòng, 1997:146) claimed that: 'my father had welcomed this trip to the orient somewhat after the manner of Gauguin leaving Europe for the fabulous Oceania: like the liberation and a renewal.' André-Pallois (1997: 110) goes on to cite Schurr, in his *Dictionnaire des petits maîtres de la peinture*, who remarks that Tardieu's paintings during the first few years of his stay in Vietnam 'have a layout reminiscent of Gauguin (...which is) further confirmed by the polychrome of his paintings, the dominant greens and pinks.' [25]

[25] 'Les premieres années sont consacrees a la peinture que l'onqualifie volontiers de «mise en page a la Gauguin ... encore confirmee par la polychromie de ses toiles, aux dominantes vertes et roses'

Perhaps it is inevitable that Gauguin, such a well-known and admired artist who drew his inspiration from his travels away from urban centres, should be referred to and compared with other painters who travelled at that time. Alix Aymé, visiting Laos on a commission to research architecture for the forthcoming Colonial Exhibition in 1931, commented that 'The Laotians resemble the Tahitians and nature here is similar to that Gauguin depicted in his paintings' (cited in Lacombe & Ferrer, 2012: 21). Given the geographic distance and differences between landlocked Laos and the island of Tahiti, this observation seems to be based mainly on the tropical vegetation. Aymé also refers to other French ex-patriots who had become 'caught up in this tranquillity...and …no longer think of returning to France' (cited in Lacombe & Ferrer, 2012:21). The more leisurely way of life along with stunning light and landscapes must have appealed to many artists, keen to escape increasing industrialisation in Europe.

Stylistically, the reference is understandable, as Tardieu, Aymé and Inguimberty were all influenced in one way or another by contemporary trends in painting, and their work reflected this. Romanticism, impressionism, post-impressionist, fauvism, the nabi, primitivism etc. were all art movements that endeavoured to reject modernity, and the increased demands to measure production, efficiency and time in relation to profit. However, Paliard (2014: 35) discerns a difference in Tardieu's approach, arguing that he did not see Indochina as being 'seductively primitive' in the way that Gauguin perceived and depicted Tahiti. Referring to letters that Tardieu wrote to his wife from Hà Nội, Paliard points out the repeated admiring descriptions of the administrative buildings, wide avenues, the streetlights, and the pace of Vietnam's industrial development in a short period of his own lifetime. In his early paintings, Tardieu demonstrates an interest in and respect for work, industry and progress, and in Vietnam Tardieu, unlike Gauguin, rarely portrayed nudes: his focus was more on family life, daily activities, work, or, as in *La Vaccination* (c.1923), the impact of modernisation on Vietnam. Certainly, his public commissions tended towards neo-classicalism, while paintings done on his own time were impressionist in style, such as the paintings that documented his time working at the 'hospital in the oatfield.'[26]

Figure 4-4 Tardieu, Victor (c.1923) La Vaccination. [Oil on Canvas] 119 x 90 cm. At: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tardieu-Vaccination.jpg (Accessed 12/02.2019)

[26] Tardieu volunteered to work at the Millicent Sutherland ambulance camp at Bourbourg, and while there gifted some of his paintings to the Duchess of Sutherland, now housed in the Florence Nightingale Museum in London.

Having been granted funding for the art school to go ahead, Tardieu and Nam Sơn travelled to Paris, where Nam Sơn attended a variety of intensive classes at the Beaux arts, arts décoratifs, so as to prepare him for his teaching role. Meanwhile Tardieu, who argued the necessity of employing one full-time member of staff as the head of the painting department, asked around, looking for recommendations for a painting teacher. Winner of the National Prize for Painting at the 1924 Salon, Joseph Inguimberty, happened to be in Paris at the same time as Victor Tardieu and Nam Sơn. Inguimberty had previously won a number of travel grants and bursaries enabling him to travel and paint in Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, Italy, Greece and Turkey (Inguimberty, *s.d.*), demonstrating his interest in both painting and travel. Pentcheff (2012:58) suggests that it is likely that it was Eugene Morand, who had been Inguimberty's tutor, who introduced the three men. Regardless of how they met, during Tardieu's and Nam Sơn's stay in Paris they saw a lot of the National Prize winner, and it must have been suggested that Inguimberty should apply for the post of head of painting. He did and was appointed. Career-wise it is an interesting choice: Paris was, at that time, the uncontested centre of the art world, but then, Inguimberty always seemed to have been more interested in painting landscapes *en plein air* than in studio work or hosting salons.

One of his later students (in the 1942-1945 cohort), Nguyễn Quang Phòng (1997:133), argues that out of all the French teaching staff, Joseph Inguimberty had the most influence on the Vietnamese students. The fact Inguimberty lived in Vietnam for far longer than any of the other visiting lecturers (even Tardieu, who died in 1937), makes it feasible that he had a greater understanding and rapport with his students, and one assumes that must have been because he enjoyed living in Vietnam. A man of few words, who taught by example, he was a prolific painter and inspired his students with his observations and depictions of their own country as they had never seen it before. Art historian Nguyễn Quang Phòng (1996: 247) goes as far as to claim that Inguimberty 'may be considered a Vietnamese painter of French origin.' Inguimberty's honorary status as a 'Vietnamese painter' was shared by Tardieu, and the two French painters have seemingly unanimously been adopted into the narrative of Vietnamese art history. In fact, while the Vietnamese may claim him as their own, Inguimberty's oeuvre includes many landscapes of France and other European countries. However, as Pentcheff (2012:89) comments: 'When he left France, Inguimberty cut himself off from the Paris microcosm and, in the eyes of the art world, agreed to become a permanent wanderer.' Since he was in Vietnam for twenty-one years of his life, presumably it was his numerous paintings of Vietnam, exhibited in various French Salons that led to him being perceived as a colonial painter during his lifetime. As Pentcheff (2012:89) comments:

> 'It was as if the exotic subject alone of his paintings excluded any association with the movements that were building up around painters of the same generation at the time and prevented any of the intrinsic qualities of his work from being seen other than from an exotic perspective.'

Contemporary French galleries and art writers tend to describe him as a 'travel painter' or as a lesser known 'peintre de la réalité poétique.' This group, which formed just after the First World War, included: Maurice Brianchon, Roland Oudot, Raymond Legueult, François Desnoyer, Jacques Adnet and Kostia Terechkovitch, all of whom had been students alongside Inguimberty when he was studying at l'École nationale supérieure des arts décoratifs in Paris. In terms of stylistic approach, based on the discipline of observation in situ, the similarities between Inguimberty's paintings and the other réalité poétique artists' work is clear.

The Hammock (see figure 4-5) exemplifies the lack of detail, the fluid handling of paint used to indicate formations of light and shadow, that evoke the lush greenery

Figure 4-5 Inguimberty, Joseph (1938) Le Hamac. [Oil on Canvas] 201 x 301cm In: Pentcheff, Giulia (2012) Joseph Inguimberty 1896-1971. Marseille: Musee Des Beaux- Arts De Gaillac. P.113

Once in Vietnam, Inguimberty's teaching responsibilities frequently included field trips to rural locations and historic temples and pagodas so that students practised sketching and painting in situ, alongside their teacher. Comparing their approaches, Nguyễn Quang Phòng (1996: 246) asserts:

> 'Tardieu ("Old Tard") was a professor of fine arts by profession and well versed in pedagogy. Inguimberty ("M.I") , on the other hand did not like to speak of theory,

> but the students could learn much from him through his creative work. He was a kind of living model for those students who wanted to learn classical art, i.e. romantic art...'

Tardieu and Inguimberty are often praised for having provided an inspiration for Vietnamese artists, through both their own work and their teaching. Yet the romanticism so evident in Vietnamese art of this time (de Menonville, 2004: 40), which is related to the subjective individualism, unconfined by bourgeoisie societal norms, is not exemplified by Tardieu. What is less frequently referred to is the influence that Aymé had on at least some of her students.

Figure 4-7 Tô Ngọc Vân (1951) Young Woman with lotuses. [Oil on canvas] In: To Ngọc Thành (2008) To Ngọc Van

Figure 4-6 Alix Aymé (c. 1925) Les Glaïeuls [Tempura on canvas] 79.5 x 62 cm. In: Lacombe, Pascal & Ferrer, Guy

The paintings of Tô Ngọc Vân echo the subjects of Aymé's paintings, which are often of figures in interiors, in particular elegant ladies of leisure, with flowers, even if stylistically, they differ. Scott (2014:111) dismisses this subject matter as prosaic, as he sketched and painted numerous depictions of young women dressed in the modern, figure-hugging áo dài (the Vietnamese National dress), usually in a pleasant interior with flowers. Since the áo dài, a fitted dress with trousers which is a combination of a French influenced restyle of traditional North Vietnamese clothes and Cham dress, was established during the colonial era (Huynh, 2005: 111) and was worn by sophisticated and wealthy women, it was seen, at the time to be a symbol of modernity and individualism, rather than a formulaic convention. Popularized by artists and photographers in the 1920s and 30s, elegantly-dressed Vietnamese women became a common subject in painting and

Figure 4-8 Tô Ngọc Vân (1951) Lady with Lilies. [Oil on canvas] In: To Ngọc Thành (2008) To Ngọc Van (1906-

literature - a trend which Taylor (2004:33) argues was, for French colonial artists, a form of exoticism or orientalism, but for Vietnamese artists

> '…such portrayals of women are not motivated by orientalist sentiments but by a kind of Occidentalism that led the artists to imitate the visual effects created by Western painters.'

This seems to suggest that because Tô Ngọc Vân was Vietnamese, his images can only have been an imitation of the white male gaze, rather than an unmediated appreciation of his chosen subjects. Arguably, perceptions of beauty are largely socially constructed, and Tô Ngọc Vân was living in a city dominated by French cultural norms, which would have shaped his ideas of desirability. However, given that he was a young Vietnamese man, who married Nguyễn Thị Hoàn, his first model, his choice of subject matter was very likely down to a natural, if predictable, personal interest.

However, Aymé's work demonstrates that it was not only male artists who sketched and painted young women. She also did a number of studies of Vietnamese and Laotian markets, one of which is clearly one of the flower markets in Hà Nội. Although undated, like many of her works, it must have been done while she was teaching there, so Tô Ngọc Vân is likely to have seen it and been inspired by the dramatic elegance in the shapes of the lilies when combined with white women's clothing, the subject of one of his most famous paintings, *Lady with Lilies* (1951).

Included in this study mainly because he championed lacquer as a painting medium, rather than being remembered for his lacquer paintings, Tô Ngọc Vân's prolific writing also offers an insight on the experiences and aspirations of creative intellectuals at that time, which is the focus of Phoebe Scott's thesis (2012). However, his paintings, despite appearing to be of conventionally beautiful subjects, such as young women and flowers, show a subtle shift away from the work of his tutor. His female sitters take up a larger area of his compositions, which shifts their position from the periphery to centre stage.

Additionally, Aymé's flower market is set in a busy, complex scene of the female flower sellers, often with their children, amongst their wares, including the figure in the foreground, who is the centre of attention, but judging from her clothes, she is clearly a working woman. The background to Tô Ngọc Vân's *lady with lilies* is flat blocks of darker colour, contrasting with the radiance of whites echoed in the lilies and áo dài. In his reinterpretation of the young Vietnamese woman with flowers has moved from a marketplace to a bourgeoisie interior.

Figure 4-9 Aymé, Alix (s.d.) Flower market. [Oil on Canvas] In: Lacombe, Pascal & Ferrer, Guy (2012) Alix Aymé : une artiste peintre en Indochine (a French painter in Indochina) 1920-1945. Paris: Somogy Editions D'Art. P 33

In Aymé's work, the busy background scene clearly depicts the processes of moving and presenting flowers for sale, although the figures are simplified, flattened and stylized. The figure in the foreground stands out because she, and the flowers she is holding, are sculpted in light, and far more clearly delineated. The lilies are three-dimensional: as a viewer one wants to lean in and inhale their perfume as the young woman carrying them is doing. Her face is also modelled by contrasting light and shadows that emphasises her cheekbones in a way that is reminiscent of Tamara de Lempicka's dramatic, stylized art deco portraits. Given that Tamara de Lempika was a fellow student under Maurice Denis, it is probable that Aymé would have seen her work.

Paintings like these have fallen out of favour, but Aymé had a successful career as an artist: she had exhibitions in France, Monaco, Italy and Asia, her work can be found in a number of

collections world-wide, notably the Cabinet des Dessins of the Louvre and the Musée des Années Trente in Paris, the Musée des Beaux-Arts in La Rochelle, Fletcher/Copenhave Fine Art, Virginia and the Evergreen Museum in Baltimore. During her lifetime she received prestigious commissions for the 1931 Colonial exhibition in Paris, large murals for the Royal family in the Royal palace in Luang Prabang, Laos, and a stations-of-the-cross series in the Chapel of the Notre Dame de Fidélité convent, in the town of Douvres-la-Délivrande, Normandy, France (Fletcher/Copenhave Fine art, *s.d,* John Hopkins University, 2018, Tutt'Art, 2014).

The consideration of audiences and potential buyers contributed to the proliferation of such subjects, and in this respect the students' work at École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine did not differ substantially from the work their teachers produced, for similar reasons. However, as de Silva (2011:147) asserts:

> 'Bourdieu (1989) claims that …within the field of painting…a hierarchy exists by which certain genres or certain works are associated with differences in social status. Often these are historical differences derived from the popularization (devaluation) of the works across time.'

Certainly, paintings of aesthetically pleasing subjects such as flowers, attractive women, and cats (another of Aymé's favourite subjects, and one that student Nguyễn Sáng also used) have come to be devalued by their former popularity, being associated with lack of originality, and in a colonial context, derivative.

One of the frequently voiced concerns French colonials had, was that their presence in their colonies had led to 'decline' in quality of the arts and crafts in the area. In part this was due to the importation of mass-produced items from Europe, which due to their novelty were popular in the colonies. Additionally, European buyers, took advantage of the materials and skills available in the colonies and commissioned furniture and other artefacts that suited both their living rooms and their taste for exotica, and 'in the applied art schools established by the French, students were encouraged to copy popular French and Chinese works.' (Huynh, 2005: 120)

Tardieu (cited in Paliard 2014: 89). described a 'composite style' of some 'disastrous pastiches' and he was not alone with these concerns: it was a common theme in journals of the time, such as *Les Pages indochinoises: revue littéraire et artistique, bimensuelle*. For example, in a review of an Amicale Artistique exhibition in 1912, Maurice Koch (1913: 14) described the tendency to experiment with modern styles as 'deplorable'[27] . The belief that 'artistes indigènes' were at risk of

[27] Toujours de beaux meubles mais aussi un tendance deplorable a chercher le modern style. Je veux bien admettre que les ébénistes indigènes, ne fut-ce que pour mieux vendre, s'essayent a approprier leur art à nos goûts européens.

'degeneration and decadence' due to both exposure to European modernist art and design, and responses to commissions from European customers, resulting in some hybridized creations that artists, art teachers and writers judged to be aesthetically questionable. Alix Aymé (then Alix de Fautereau-Vassel, her first husband's name), who, in addition to her own artistic practice and teaching at the EBAI, also wrote articles advocating appropriate pedagogy for teaching art to Vietnamese students (cited in Lacombe & Ferrer, 2012, 14-20 and Scott, 2012: 45) which demonstrate her aligning herself with the protectionist refrain of rescue, and the campaign to educate the natives to produce tasteful works which were considered to be harmonious with their racial origins. These ideas were in line with those advocated by colonial administrators, such as Paul Beau, who opened the first University in Hà Nội, in 1906, and Henri Gourdon, the Director-General of Public Instruction in Indochina, who thus had an impact on pedagogical approaches to teaching arts in the region (Brocheux & Hemery, 2009: 220-221).

Amid the questions about authenticity, hybridity, tradition and modernity it is clear that Tardieu was trying to provide a broad art curriculum that built on his own, European knowledge, but also included Asian artefacts and practices: he suggested the examples could be used as inspiration, rather than to copy. Tardieu (cited in Paliard, 2014:93) claimed:

> 'The general idea is not to create a school which simply recreates ancient forms with neither discernment nor critical spirit. A school based on servile imitation of the past would only give rise to a lifeless art form, an eternal pastiche of times gone by. It would be more the creation of a school which, while respecting local tradition, would adapt itself to modern requirements.'

Tô Ngọc Vân (1945, cited in Scott 2012: 79), later complained about the double standards regarding cultural exchange and artistic influence. Every year he met French artists who were being funded to travel through the government scheme of the Prix d'Indochine, and saw their work – and Tardieu, Inguimberty and Aymé all had a considerable oeuvre of landscapes of varied locations. Meanwhile protectionist policies prevented Vietnamese arts students travelling abroad, with the dubious and condescending argument that 'Annamites' would lose their artistic traditions Having seen the works of other artists who travelled, he recognised the hypocrisy of the double standards. Perhaps he also recognised that Vietnamese culture, like any culture, was, as it is now, an amalgamation of local and foreign determinants.

Many of these concerns are still relevant today, with the challenge of de-colonialising the curriculum. Tardieu's approach as an educator was not that of a pedagogue demanding that his students adhere to a fixed set of expectations: there was, apparently, an effort made by the teacher to go beyond their comfort zone, and risk not being an expert, in his exploration of art with his Vietnamese students. He offered training in draftsmanship to allow his students a greater range of

choices in their creative work. His curriculum design and the subjects studied demonstrate his belief in observation and the study of nature.

Figure 4-10 Phạm Hầu (1940) Forest Landscape with Deer [Lacquer on Board] 6 x 150 x 68cm In: Phạm Gia Yên (2019) Sơn Mài Phạm Hầu (The Lacquer art of Pham Hau). Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Mỹ Thuật.P 54

The consistent theme of nature evident in the works of lacquer artist Phạm Hậu (1903-1995), whose use of traditional lacquerware colours, mainly muted reds and browns serve to portray trees, leaves, animals and flowers, crystalising transient moments.

Figure 4-11 Phạm Hầu (1940) Summer Storm [Lacquer on Board] 150 x 68cm In:Phạm Gia Yên (2019) Sơn Mài Phạm Hầu (The Lacquer art of Pham Hau). Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Mỹ Thuật. P52

The highly acclaimed picture *Summer Storm* (1940) is housed in the permanent collection in Vietnam National Fine Arts Museum in Hà Nội. As with other Vietnamese lacquer paintings of this era, it captures both the transience of wind and nature (the lotus flower losing its petal) while also showcasing the depth and variety of lacquer techniques and their effect on the patterned and rhythmic surface play of light and colour. The focal point of the white lotus contrast with subtle, muted colours and textures depicting the leaves and water.

Phạm Hậu's subjects suggest the influence of Chinese scholarly painting in his work, albeit with a distinct difference in terms of perspective, because unlike Guo-Li's teachings on the composition of painting, which advocate a 'grand view' - that is a landscape viewed remotely, Phạm Hậu's vison is close up, the forest glade almost creates an interior: there is no manifestation of the scale of the natural landscape.

In 1937, when Tardieu died, his successor, the French sculptor Évariste Jonchère (whose tenure lasted from 1938 to 1944) took over. This resulted in a shift in outlook and changes in the curriculum towards an applied arts course, so that the students graduated as 'artisans' rather than artists. Nguyễn Quang Phòng (1996:13), for example, claims that:

> 'the students were eager to learn French academic painting and highly esteemed their French teachers who were sincerely devoted to the cause of art, especially Tardieu. On the other hand, they disapproved of narrow-minded colonialist viewpoints, such as Jonchere's prejudice that the Vietnamese could only be trained as fine handicraft workers.'

In 1938, a group of students led by Nguyễn Đỗ Cung protested against reclassification of their education and status, publishing a letter in a local newspaper challenging Jonchère to compare his French style sculpture with local sculpture in Vietnamese pagodas 'for vigour, meaning and originality' (Hantover, 1991:21). Hence, Jonchère was singled out for blame, although Pentcheff (2012: 61) argues that 'the colonial administration had long been trying to curb the development of the School of Fine Art and restrict its role to the limited scope the administration wished it to have' so it is difficult to know whether Jonchère was simply the mouthpiece of current colonial strategies, or wholeheartedly agreed with limiting the school to teaching the decorative arts and crafts, as per the colonial agenda. De Menonville (2003: 27) suggests that 'the criticisms during Jonchère's tenure were probably more due to his personality, colder and less approachable than his predecessor, than they were directed towards his accomplishments.'

It is clear that the opening of the French-run institution in Hà Nội changed Vietnamese artistic practice both in terms of what the artists produced and how they went about producing it but most importantly, it instigated a community of practice which changed the ways Vietnamese artists think and speak about themselves and their work (Taylor, 2004: 14). The practice of

lacquer painting is one of the contributions to the development of Vietnamese art for which the establishment of the École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine is most remembered. Nguyễn Quang Phòng (1997: 135) asserts that:

> '...The landmark in the early development of modern Vietnam painting is the emergence of lacquer as a modern medium. There is a remarkable departure from traditional lacquer techniques to modern lacquer, marking the beginning of an era of a new paint medium that is very suitable for expressing national character."

As with many claims about artistic production in Vietnam, the significance is interpreted in the light of post-colonial concerns, which, for a Vietnamese writer, very much centre on national identity and modernity.

Contemporary international art market auction notes, such as those written by Sotheby's Hong Kong (2017), assert that during the 1940s Vietnamese lacquer underwent a 'revival' which inspired 'French visionaries and Vietnamese artists, while also becoming renowned globally as the specialty of Asian art in that era.' However, the term 'revival' suggests that it was an ancient art form that was reawakened through encounters with Europeans, which as Taylor (2007:38) and Scott (2014:64) both argue, is part of the trope of French colonialism, that, with its *mission civilisatrice*, positioned itself as 'rescuing' the people and cultures it encountered. Taylor and Scott (*ibid*) agree that lacquer painting in Vietnam, along with silk painting, were 'new traditions' invented during the 1930s, with no precedent in Vietnamese history. Perhaps it is more useful to see this period not as a revival of something lost, but a reaction to those forms, and so creation of, something new. While lacquer was used for functional crafts prior to the 1920s (and after), the use of this medium for expressive, fine art paintings is clearly linked to French influence. This was true of many of the other artforms at the time, that claimed to be new whilst – unavoidably – echoing or combining past art forms, whether in terms of the materials or techniques used, or the subject matter referred to. No language can totally depart from its existing vocabulary, and the visual arts have always been part of a wider-reaching cultural discourse.

The innovation of utilising resin lacquer as a painting medium is usually accredited to Joseph Inguimberty (e.g. Nguyễn Quang Phòng & Tuy Trần, 1996; Nguyễn Quang Viet 1995, 2011). Lacquer artist Phạm Hậu acknowledges that it was encouraged by Victor Tardieu (Phạm Gia Yên, 2019: 13), yet neither of those artists worked in lacquer themselves. Their colleague, the artist and teacher Alix Aymé (1894-1989) travelled to Japan to study lacquer, and continued to study it in Vietnam, while she both taught drawing at Lycée Albert Sarraut, and lacquer at the École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine from 1934 to 1939 (Andres-Pallois, 2009:6). Yet she is omitted from most accounts, as will be discussed later in this chapter. In fact, the innovation of lacquer painting as one of the schools most admired achievements was a joint effort, in terms of vision, and

practical implementation, and was only possible because of the enthusiasm and dedication of the staff and students who experimented with the medium so as to develop a wider range of colours and textures to enable more freedom of expression.

Nguyễn Quang Phòng (2014: 173) recounts how Nam Sơn and lnguimberty visited the Temple of Literature in Hà Nội together, where lnguimberty was 'literally struck dumb' by the decorations that 'were all covered with a layer of gilded lacquer dating back from time immemorial, shining with the passage of time and acquiring an exceptionally rich and variegated colour scale.' Inguimberty was so impressed by the skills and techniques practiced by lacquer artisans, he decided it was a suitable medium for painting, and suggested introducing Vietnamese traditional lacquer into the program of study and practice: the plan was approved by Tardieu. There may also have been an element of practicality involved: imported paints were costly, so it would be an advantage to use a locally produced material.

In workshops led by the respected artisan, Đinh Văn Thành, students were encouraged to redefine and improve the complex techniques. However, Inguimberty 'was of the view that only the Vietnamese were capable of making lacquer painting, just like oil painting was the privilege of Europeans' (Nguyễn Quang Phòng & Tuy Trần 1996:249). This claim that only Europeans could paint well in oil, whereas only Asians could produce lacquer artworks, was typical of an age obsessed with preserving racial difference and concerned with maintaining that difference under the guise of preventing 'degeneration' or 'contamination' within the trope of 'rescue'. It was an age of travel, with encounters beyond Europe which inspired and perhaps threatened European identity. Plus, if one considers the mounting tensions in Europe leading to World War Two, it is understandable that identity and nationality were key concerns.

It is also possible that Inguimberty, in setting up the lacquer studio was trying to provide his students with their own domain, aware of their need for an identity which was not seen as derivative, whilst also protecting his own speciality, oils. This may not have been done consciously, it is merely speculation, but given the fraught discourse on art, authenticity, degeneration and national identity in Europe (particularly Germany) and throughout the world at that time, it is likely that anxieties about artistic practice existed, even for those who like Inguimberty had stepped away from the hub of modern art debates. As Williams (1989:50), focusing as most art historians have done on European modernism, posits:

> 'It is important, in one kind of analysis, to trace the shifts of position, and indeed the contradictions, within complex individuals. But to begin to understand the more general complexities of the politics of the avant-garde, we have to look beyond … singular men to the turbulent succession of artistic movements and cultural formulations which compose the real history of Modernism.'

Artist Trần Văn Can is credited as being a pioneer in technical innovation. Nguyễn Quang Việt (1995: 170) describes how Trần Văn Can mixed pine resin (instead of tung oil) with red lacquer and applied a coat of it over a painting of a phoenix, done in black lacquer. When it was sanded down, the black phoenix was visible through the red coat of lacquer mixed with pine resin, and this was the innovation that made layering coloured lacquer possible. Fellow student and renowned lacquer artist, Lê Quốc Lộc (cited by Hải Yến, 2016) states that this methodological breakthrough meant that the resin became more workable, and easier to grind or sand after it has hardened, which led to the development of Vietnamese sơn mài (translated literally, this means paint and/then grind). This was a new term: previously the term sơn ta had been used to describe the resin substance, but sơn mài describes a new process. lnguimberty was so elated by this development that he broke all the bottles of other kinds of oils that had been used for mixing with lacquer (Nguyễn Quang Việt, 1995: 170). This anecdote (dated 1932) communicates some of the sense of excitement that the early students and their teacher had about the importance of lacquer painting as a new art form.

Many of the most celebrated Vietnamese lacquer artists focused on and are credited with various forms of technical innovations. For example, in their obituaries, the chairman of the Arts Association, Trần Khánh Chương (2011), praises the lacquer artist Nguyễn Khang (1912 – 1989) for inventing a new way of using flaked gold leaf and Nguyễn Văn Tỵ is admired for developing techniques to create white and light colours (Trần Khánh Chương, 2017) but for most contemporary art enthusiasts, technological developments are generally of less interest – in fact, as Markowitz (1994: 68) points out:

> ‘the rigidity and importance of the distinction we draw between the physical and the mental, between the practical and the contemplative, may be a good measure of how committed we are to maintaining a firm line between craft and art.’

Valuing materiality and technique is associated with craft rather than art, which is generally understood to be of lesser significance in Euroamerican cultures, where the combination of Christianity followed by the Enlightenment has positioned spirituality and knowledge in opposition to our bodies and materiality. Yet for many Vietnamese practitioners, working with the living resin offers a link with nature and spirituality. It is generally agreed that Nguyễn Gia Trí (1908- 1993), one of the most famous lacquer painters in Vietnam, had a special affinity with lacquer as a material, and having a philosophical and spiritualist frame of mind, he believed (along with Chinese Buddhists) that sơn ta had mysterious, metaphysical properties.

Nguyễn Giá Trị worked with other artists and craftsmen in the newly set up lacquer department, such as Trần Quang Trân, Lê Phổ, Nguyễn Khanh, Phạm Hậu, Lê Quốc Lộc, and Trần Văn Cẩn to

combine foreign engraving and inlay methods with new lacquer techniques for preparing, polishing and colouration. Given the limited range of colours initially used with traditional lacquer - transparent brown, black and a few reds - much of their time was in trying out pigments to see if they were compatible so as to gain a wider range of expression and contrast. The sensual, opulent effects he could create with it have established his reputation. As art historians Nguyễn Quang Phòng and Nguyễn Quang Việt (2000: 410) opine:

> 'In his domain, Nguyễn Gia Trí was an experienced magician, used to handling materials and colours unknown to all: dark colour as dark as shadows at night, clear colours clear as moonlight, brilliancy as that of a yellow leaf under the sun, and one has the feeling of touching velvet, satin, porcelain, shells and precious stones...'

This description exemplifies the material properties of lacquer as a medium which offers remarkable haptic sensuality: the surface can be textured, matt or polished until it is shiny and flat, creating the appearance of depth and subtle variations of the brilliancy of colour. However, as Christine Guth (2013:1) observes in her study of Japanese lacquer:

> 'The difficulty of studying the personal experience of lacquer is one of the primary reasons why its tactile qualities tend to be glossed over in modern scholarship. Sensory experiences may be universal, but they also have local and contingent histories whose critical interpretation is difficult because their effects tend to be short-lived and subjective.'

Figure 4-12 Nguyên Giá Trị (c.1936) Fairies [Lacquer on10 Panels] 280 x 440cm In: de Menonville, Corinne (2003) Vietnamese Painting from Tradition to Modernity. France: Arhis p 46.

Unlike the artefacts Guth discusses, Vietnamese lacquer painting is a format that exploits the variety of surface qualities that the resin offers, but it is unusual to touch the surface of a painting. This is due to what she describes as 'Museumisation' which privileges sight above other senses, and also tends to present artworks and artefacts behind glass, so as to prevent direct contact.

Many of the paintings by Nguyễn Gia Trí are idealized scenes of gardens, temples and young Vietnamese women in traditional dress, which contemporary readings deem to be hackneyed and lacking in import. His work is very much about exploring the expressive capability of pattern, rhythm and surface textures, hence the sumptuous appeal described by the Vietnamese art historians above. Many of his idealized landscapes of Vietnamese women in gardens do not even attempt to render perspective or distance: they are floating, ethereal, stylised visions. Andre-Pallois (2009: 10) asserts that 'The artist did not worry too much about reality. He preferred to create a poetic and dreamy space, and to perform with a very high degree of technique' while Trần Hậu Tuấn (2005: 30) suggests that these works 'catered for the typical love for lyricism and

Figure 4-13 Nguyễn Gia Trí (s.d.) Ladies with Hibiscus [Lacquer on wooden panels] 44 x 130cm In: Naziree, Shireen (2013) From Craft to Art: Vietnamese Lacquer Paintings. Bangkok: Thavibu Gallery. Pg 7

romance of the Vietnamese bourgeoisie.' Perhaps the popularity of his work with both French and Vietnamese buyers at the time when he was producing them justifies the claims that the French bourgeoisie and Vietnamese intelligentsia culture were compatible (André-Pallois, 1997, Brocheaux & Hemery, 2009: xiv, Paliard, 2014:23).

Reminiscent of arcadian depictions of nymphs in gardens, on a symbolic level this painting (see figure 4-13) seems to be a celebration of the enjoyment of flowers, of abundance, fertility, women's beauty and motherhood (note the children and baby). It would appear that the ladies are dancing in this picture, their arms raised, heads leaning back to admire the blooms on the tree (the motif echoed in the fallen flowers beneath their feet) and create lyrical, rhythmic swathes of draped clothing (depicted in gold leaf on brush stokes outlining the folds), giving the impression of movement, life. For a very time-consuming medium, that produces a static image, it captures the sense of fleeting pleasure effectively.

What it does not represent is an accurate idea of perspective, using conventional techniques to indicate distance. The balance of light and dark steer the viewer's attention, with the weight of the pure black pulling one's eyes to the central figures in the foreground, which stand out, juxtaposed as they are, against the mottled and subtle gradients of colour in the eggshell surround, which would have been lightly toasted to achieve the warm tone. Fluid gold lines and white eggshell are used to outline and depict patterns on the girls' clothing, and to suggest petals and foliage. The emphasis given to these playful, decorative elements result in an apparently haphazard composition, however the rich variety of pattern and surface textures are characteristic of Nguyễn Gia Trí's work.

Figure 4-14 Nguyễn Gia Trí (1939) Colocasia Gigantea Leaves. [Lacquer on board] 160x400cm. (8 Boards) In: Naziree, Shireen (2013) From Craft to Art: Vietnamese Lacquer Paintings Pg 14-15.

One of his most famous works, a double-sided set of eight screens (see fig 4-15) demonstrates the range of surface textures from the flecked highlights of white eggshell used to highlight the distinctive, skeletal structure of the leaves in the foreground, contrasting with both the pure black silhouettes of leaves behind and the smooth red and gold banana leaves in the foreground. While the leaves themselves have clearly been observed (Nguyễn Gia Trí seems to have heeded Tardieu's

Figure 4-16 Nguyễn Giá Trí (c.1960) Sketch of leaves [Sơn Ta on paper] 38 x 75cm In: Hồ Chí Minh City Museum of Fine Arts [Photograph] Thomson,E .(20160 Farnham: UK

Figure 4-15 Nguyễn Gia Trí (c.1960) Sketch of leaves [Son Ta on paper] 65 x 65 cm In: Hồ Chí Minh City Museum of Fine Arts [Photograph] Thomson,E .(20160

advice to draw from nature and did a number of studies of leaves and landscapes, see fig.4-16 & 4-17) their arrangement and the shadowy patterned background create a deliberate repetition of motifs that draw the viewer's eyes across the overall composition.

Nguyễn Gia Trí started studying at l'Ecole des Beaux-Arts in 1928, but in 1930 left, returning three years later, finally graduating after successfully passing his exams in 1936 (Andre-Pallois, 2009: 9). His motives for leaving have been attributed to a number of causes, but the political climate and his patriotic belief in an independent Vietnam were undoubtedly factors.

> 'Following the mutiny, in keeping with the spirit of his resistance to the French administration in Vietnam, Gia Trí decided to renounce all French influence in his life... Eventually, it was Victor Tardieu, the director of the College and an artist himself, who persuaded Giá Trị to see that his obligations as a patriot should not stand in the way of his art.' (Hubert, 2020)

Tardieu did his best to persuade him to return, but according to a letter Nguyễn Gia Trí wrote to Joseph Inguimberty years later, in 1967, his motive for returning was his love of the material lacquer and the exciting developments in lacquer painting techniques in the newly established lacquer department at that time:

> 'Do you remember how it was the lacquer that made me return to the school and continue the fourth year? Oh, that wonderful medium that I discovered in a fair at

> Hanoi when I saw Trần Quang Trân's lacquered screens[28]. It was as though I was bewitched and the spell has never quite worn off…' (cited in Pentcheff, 2012: 44)

This is further corroborated by his apprentice, Nguyễn Xuân Việt (2009:41) who compiled a book of Nguyễn Gia Trí's memoirs and advice on the art of lacquer painting, citing the artist claiming:

> 'Now I'm in the second year, I cannot stand to give up school, because the science behind lacquering would need to be relearned. Academic life drawing in the mornings is a torture for me, I only look forward to the afternoons to work with lacquer.'

When Nguyễn Giá Trị refers to the 'science behind lacquer' he is doubtless referring to understanding drying times, types of application etc. which, could not be learnt from a book or formula; as Smith (2013:176) observes: 'technical writings are seldom able to provide sufficient information to actually engage in making an object.' The practical teaching must have been done by local lacquer specialists and by Alix Aymé, a French teacher who taught in Hà Nội from 1934-1939. Nguyễn Giá Trị, among others such as Hoàng Tích Chù, Nguyễn Tiến Chung and Nguyễn Văn Tỵ would have been her pupils, all of whom were renown for their lacquer artworks. Art collector, Fletcher (Good, 2016). specifies that:

> "Aymé learned lacquer in the 1920s from a Japanese master... She introduced the use of gold and silver leaf and fragments of duck egg to produce a pure white, techniques that were unknown in the earlier Indochinese tradition. Today, lacquer is thriving in Vietnam and Alix Aymé is really responsible for rescuing that tradition."

Using eggshell inlay to provide white contrast had been used centuries earlier in Japan, but the claim of introduction in a specific context signifies authorship and originality. However, Marcilhac (1991:174) claims that 'there is absolutely no doubt that Dunand was the first to use eggshell to cover large surfaces' and according to Greenhalgh, Dunand (1983:1) '…was an extraordinary art lacquerer, reviving the ancient art of coquille d'oeuf.' Scott (2012:139) reiterates that 'Dunand's work was well-known in Indochina through a number of different channels' and since he travelled to Indochina, and had a number of Indochinese artisans working in his atelier in Paris, the introduction to eggshell inlay in the Vietnamese lacquer community may not have been solely from Aymé's teaching. It appears that this traditional technique was being adopted and adapted by a number of artists in the twentieth century. The fact remains that Aymé taught lacquer techniques in Hà Nội and produced a number of exquisite lacquer works herself. Her lacquered cabinet which was exhibited in the Cernuschi Museum in Paris in 2012 'was arguably the star attraction of the exhibition' (Fletcher/Copenhaver, *s.d.*), depicts four young women and a child, all

[28] Unfortunately, I have been unable to find where Trần Quang Trân's screens are, or any photographs of them.

apparently languid in the heat, lying or sitting in the shade beneath a tree. The clear silhouette of the leaves, a matt, browny-olive against the polished goldleaf that represents the sky (and the heat) is reminiscent of Japanese paintings, with its defined, stylised lines and 'the harmony of contrast' (Dow, 1899, 1912, 1920, cited in Williams, 2013:107).

However, the recognisable grass and flowers in the foreground, which are echoed in two of the figures patterned clothes, along with the shadowed folds of cloth create a slightly confusing juxtaposition between a floating, dream-like flat decoration and the corporeality of the figures delineated. The pale 'grass', which showcases the technique of uneven paint being applied and then rubbing away to create texture and subtle differences in hue, apparently almost swallowing up the figures.

Figure 4-17 Aymé, Alix (s.d.) Lacquer cabinet doors. In: Paris, Hanoi, Saigon : l'aventure de l'art moderne au Viet Nam (1998) [Exposition], pavillon des arts du 20 mars au 17 mai 1998: Paris-Musées pg 56.

Born Alix Angela Marguerite Hava, in 1894, in Marseille, as a young woman she studied drawing and music at the Conservatory of Toulouse. Opting for painting, she moved to Paris to study with Maurice Denis (who became a lifelong friend). As cofounder (with Georges Desvallières) of Les

Ateliers d'Art Sacré, an art movement that sought to produce religious art that was relevant to modern life, and which rejected formal, academic realism, Denis believed that beautiful, inspiring images were close to the divine. His influence on Alix is evident in both the subject matter (throughout her life she produced a number of explicitly Christian-themed paintings including a fourteen-panel series depicting the Passion of Christ displayed in a chapel in the town of Douvres-la-Délivrande) but more often, in the treatment of her work, particularly her love of gold-leaf to create halo-type effects of dark and light. In *The Annumciation* (fig. 4-17) the halos are added to an apparently contemporary scene (in the twentieth century), although the use of a limited range of contrasting colours evokes the attitudes of the figures very effectively.

Figure 4-18 Alix Aymé (s.d.) L'Annonciation. [Lacquer on Wood] At: Arthur. https://arthur.io/art/alix-ayme/lannonciation (Accessed 20.05.2021)

As with Tardieu, Aymé was effective at gaining commissions and had considerable experience designing and producing 'decorative panels' for public buildings, churches and private clients. Fletcher (2012) asserts that:

> 'as a young student… Alix worked with Denis in Paris on the murals within the dome of the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, the modern, classically inspired masterpiece of architect Auguste Perret.'

Letters record her attempts to secure a travel grant, and she was awarded a government commission in Laos, in relation to preparing the colonial exhibition of 1931. While in Laos, she was given an order from the ruling family, including murals created for the Royal Palace, today classified national treasures. It was also while she was in Laos, that Alix met her second

husband—General Georges Aymé, who later became the Commander of the French Forces in Indochina.

Aymé travelled widely throughout her life, and her cosmopolitan lifestyle impacted both on the subject matter of her paintings as well as their style. Influenced by Gauguin, the Nabi and other Modernist painters of that era, she also would have seen the work of Jean Dunand, and seen art deco works. Most of her paintings are representative: still lives, landscapes, and most often, sensitively observed people. The themes of women and children, mothers and babies are explored through numerous sketches and paintings, as it was by many of the students at the École des Beaux-Arts in Hà Nội.

Figure 4-19 Aymé Alix (s.d.) Mère et son enfant [Lacquer on Board] 48 x 43 cm. At: https://arthur.io/art/alix-ayme/self-portrait-with-francois-asleep (Accessed 20.05.2021)

In this self-portrait with her youngest son, there is an interesting contrast between the detailed treatment of François's nightshirt, and the patterns on the bed cover, both with crisp folds of fabric, as compared with the blurred, dreamy faces, and the window which reflects the warm dim light of streetlights, yet hints at the dark beyond.

Her treatment of lacquer and the use of gold leaf as a device to contrast light and shadow is particularly effective against the matt, bluey-green, grey tones of lacquer mixed with clay powder. Red is used as contrast, with relatively little in the way of dark lines to define features or details. The effect is what perhaps she, as a mother, was experiencing, drowsy tiredness in a loving intimate situation. It is a sensuous painting, as many of her paintings are, and it is this quality that perhaps led her to work in lacquer.

In a letter on the subject of her teaching, Aymé herself (cited in Lacombre & Ferrer, 2012: 15) wrote that:

> 'There are the Annamite pupils who are quite gifted…I attempt to make them keep the ancient Annamite style, which in the past produced some very beautiful things, and to make them rediscover and study in nature the stylized flowers and animals that one finds on the old pottery and the old bronzes. I am also studying the art of lacquer with a Japanese fellow so as to be able to form a class with a few pupils…It (lacquer) is produced in this country, but very poorly used until now by the Annamites.'

It is worth discussing what she describes in this excerpt: firstly, the 'Japanese fellow' would have been professor Ishiko Suehiko, the only lacquer expert and teacher recorded in Hà Nội at the time, who taught at the École Professionnelle, which again illustrates the ambiguous status of lacquer, the crossover between applied, and in the Vietnamese context, fine, art. Additionally, it suggests that Aymé was involved in the planning and delivery of the curriculum at the École des Beaux-Arts, and that she believed in the colonial project for the 'restoration' of Vietnamese culture.

Finally, this excerpt also gives, to contemporary readers, the uncomfortable impression that she was in the habit of making rather racist generalisations, which although typical of the colonial era, would probably not have endeared her to her students. For example, she makes no reference to individual names of either her students or her tutor, and no justification for her assessment of Vietnamese lacquer practice. However, as another colonial woman in Indochina, Emmery-Rous de Fenerols (interviewed by Ha, 1999:119), asked to reflect on her own reports of colonial life, comments:

> 'Rereading these letters, I wonder how today's readers will react to the feelings of superiority expressed…to their abrupt judgements and this outmoded vocabulary – so very 'colonialist'…All this corresponds to what was our truth in the time…'

Aymé's attitudes were of their time, and she was a woman working in a largely male environment, in that both her colleagues and her students were predominantly male, which must have created a sense of distance and difference.

It is somewhat strange, then, that in the earlier edition of *Vietnamese Lacquer Painting* (1997), the only published book recounting the development of this art form in Hà Nội, Nguyễn Quang Việt makes no mention of her, only of Victor Tardieu and Joseph Inguimberty. In *Painters of the Fine Arts College of Indochina*, author Nguyễn Quang Phòng (who was a student at the École des Beaux Arts de l'Indochine) disparagingly comments that: 'Mrs Aymé painted in Gauguin's manner but so stupidly that Inguimberty shrugged his shoulders when he saw Mrs Aymé's pictures' (Nguyễn Quang Phòng & Tuy Trần, 1997: 249).

Inguimberty's dismissiveness clearly resulted in at least one of his students believing her work was worthless, what prompted it is less easy to discover. It could have been due to chauvinistic attitudes to women artists at the time, or the belief that European artists ought not to work in the traditional Asian resin. Alternatively, there could have been some kind of professional or personal antipathy between the two. Records show she taught alongside Inguimberty, for a number of years (Andres-Pallois, 2009:6), and the portrait of her on horseback during a trip to Sapa (then written as Chapa) dated 1942 testifies to their having spent leisure time together during those years. It also suggests that if the two travelled together they must have had an amicable relationship (at least at times). With so little documentation on either side, clarification is problematic, but as with much of history, it is the male contribution that has been recorded and remembered.

Figure 4-20 Inguimberty, Joseph (1942) Portrait of Alix Ayme on Horseback [Oil on Canvas] 48.89 cm x 65.40 cm

The burgeoning of recent literature on post-colonial and subaltern studies prompts a rereading of the period, particularly an investigation into the 'unheard voices'. In the case of artists like Aymé, as Corbin (1992:106) asserts, 'women's history is like an echo, perceived with the help of a whole range of male data…written by men in positions of responsibility.' In particular, colonial conquest and domination tends to be assumed to be a male endeavour, rather than a female one (Ha, 1999: 95). Ha (1999: 117-8) goes on to illuminate the difficult situation for colonial women in Indochina, making the point that French women were encouraged to work (as teachers, secretaries etc.) in the colonies, partly because 'mixed race progeny were perceived by the colonial government as a challenge to the neatly defined racial hierarchy underlying the colonial power structure' but then were accused (by male

colonial writers) of destroying amiable relationships between colonisers and natives, by making 'concubinage both unnecessary and unacceptable' (*ibid*), thus creating an unlikable harsh female stereotype in novels of the time. In terms of power and relationships, it must have been an awkward position to hold, which perhaps is why colonial women may have been tempted to emphasize racial stereotypes, as a means of differentiation and of escalating their own status.

Interestingly, it was not only in Vietnamese accounts that Aymé's work was overlooked, and it is only recently, in 2012 a retrospective exhibition at the Cernuschi Museum in Paris, that the reason was acknowledged.

> ' "We could not have had this exhibition ten years ago," said Christine Shimizu-Huet, director of the Cernuschi. "The loss of their colonies, especially Indochina, was so painful for the French that no one wanted to think about anyone who had anything to do with what happened there." ' (Fletcher/CopenhaverFineArt *s.d.*)

Perhaps enough time has passed to reconsider artists during the colonial era. Currently, American art collectors, Fletcher and Copenhaver are gathering research so as to create a documentary commemorating her dramatic life and artistic achievements. Alix had lived and worked in French Indochina: it was where she met her second husband, General Georges Aymé, and after the August Revolution in 1945, while her husband was in a Japanese prison, her eldest son was found

Figure 4-21 Phạm Hậu (1934) Villagers (Dân làng) [Lacquer on Board] 8 x 124.5cm x 33cm. In: Phạm Gia Yên (2019) Sơn Mài Phạm Hầu (The Lacquer art of Pham Hau). Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Mỹ Thuật. Pg 62

murdered in the red river, presumably during one of the anti-French riots which occurred during those first, heady days of national independence (Fletcher, 2019, personal communication, 19th January). Thus, her last months in Vietnam must have been traumatic, and perhaps that the bitter end to her stay is why she has been omitted from many records: it is unpalatable, too painful to discuss.

As one of the few teachers at the École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine who specialized in Asian lacquer, Aymé must have been a key influence on many of the first generation of Vietnamese lacquer painters, and there are marked similarities between her work and theirs.

For example, see fig. 4-22 for an unusual painting by Phạm Hầu, featuring – unusually – small groupings of women and children. Despite their ornate clothing, it is the delicate treatment of the foliage in this painting that attracts the viewer's attention. The birds' eye perspective of the river and landscape behind the figures does not quite match that of the women in the foreground, giving the appearance of a stage set behind them. It seems he could not resist having a water buffalo, the peaceful hooved creature that is so integral to agricultural life and food production in Vietnam.

This investigation into a few of the complex individuals who came to influence the beginnings of modern painting in Vietnam, as well as the Vietnamese artists and practitioners who went on to develop lacquer painting demonstrates the significance of the contributions from these three tutors, although given Aymé's experience and input in the area, it seems rather unfair that it is Inguimberty who is generally credited with having achieved the colonial mission of 'reviving' the Vietnamese tradition of lacquer. However, it is important to contextualise prevailing ideas and values on art practice, which were rooted in Tardieu's adherence to academic study of drawing and composition, along with Inguimberty's setting an example of observation and spontaneity, painting *en plein air*, and perhaps most importantly, the emphasis they both made on their Vietnamese students finding their own voice, not being copyists.

It is inevitable that the Vietnamese painters adopted similar subject matter as their teachers (observations of the world around them) and approaches to composition in their paintings: pictorial language, as any language has a vocabulary. However, it was part of the colonial agenda to want to differentiate between the production of colonisers and the colonised. As Scott, (2012:8) asserts: 'the reception history of silk, lacquer and oil painting in the colonial period was complex and fraught with ambiguity, due to the hybrid origins of these techniques.' The tensions around exhibition and reception will be explored in the next part of this chapter.

4.2 Exhibitions and reviews in Vietnam and France

Tardieu, Inguimberty and Aymé all submitted their works to competitions, and courted recognition from institutions that could offer commissions or grants that would enable them to continue to practice. Both Tardieu and Aymé accepted positions to promote Vietnamese art in World Fairs (de Menonville, 2004: 27), and Tardieu in particular, worked to create a niche in the world market as it stood then, in relation to the fashion for oriental works of art in Europe. His argument that with (a French) education his students could produce 'genuine' artworks that would be saleable in France, may be contradictory, but Tardieu demonstrates his shrewd understanding of key preoccupations of the times, and it is thanks to him that Vietnamese artists participated in international exhibitions during that period. As a result, there are a number of Vietnamese artworks housed in European collections, galleries and auctions, which is particularly important from an art historical perspective, given the number of artworks damaged or destroyed in Vietnam during war time bombing. Arguably, it also positioned Vietnamese lacquer painting as high-end interior decoration (which arguably is what fine art painting also is), even if the material of lacquer was most strongly associated with Japanese arts and their influence on the numerous arts and crafts movements that occurred in the early twentieth century.

In Vietnam, exposure to European art influenced practice, but not to the extent that artists identified themselves with the manifestos or 'isms' that defined specific movements. Simonetti (2016:8) argues that Tardieu influenced his students encounter with French art, promoting the continuation of an academic, painterly approach that was perceived to be threatened by the avant-garde, a conservative approach.

However, while the subjects of his students' paintings are judged not to be political, their struggle for control over curation and publication were. In 1934, Tardieu formed a group called Société d'Encouragement à l'Art et à l'Industrie (SADEAI), to provide opportunities for the exhibition and selling of his students' work. It is worth noting that the Corporate Association of Gia Định & Thủ Dầu Một had been established to provide sale outlets for students' artworks in 1933 (Brocheux & Hemery, 2009: 231), so Tardieu was following a precedent. SADEAI exhibitions were held in 1935 and 1937 (Scott, 2012:71), which effectively established the careers of artists such as Tô Ngọc Vân, who went on to become one of the most influential artists, art writers and teachers of his generation. Thanks to the wide range of subjects and formats being published in journals and the press (MacHale, 2004: 18), there is considerable documentary evidence of artistic production: reviews of exhibitions, articles and essays written about the status of artists in their transition to modernity (Scott, 2012:14-16) etc. Many of these names are those of influential teachers and

practitioners, suggesting that it was a close-knit group who generally supported each other, despite there being differences of opinion.

After Tardieu's death, there were a number of disagreements between Jonchere and the students, so exhibitions with SADEAI were problematic to organise. Hence, a group of Vietnamese artists established another exhibiting society in 1940, called the *Foyer des Artistes Annamites* group (hereafter FARTA) (Taylor, 2004:34). Members of the group included Trần Văn Cẩn, Nguyễn Khang, Tô Ngọc Vân and others. FARTA had been founded so that the Vietnamese artists (all EBAI students or graduates) could establish control over curating their own work. In addition to being an attempt at establishing greater autonomy, it was also in keeping with trends among modern artists elsewhere. As Williams (1989:50), in *The Politics of Modernism*, argued:

> 'Initially, there were innovative groups which sought to protect their practices within the growing dominance of the art market and against the indifference of the formal academies. These developed into alternative, more radically innovative groupings, seeking to provide their own facilities of production, distribution and publicity.'

In Europe, modernist artists who deliberately partook in exhibitions like the Salon des Refusés, and decided not to conform to the requirements of academic painting were attempting to assert their independence and autonomy, rather than relying on the patronage of the elite, as artists had for centuries. In a colonial context, however, this was inevitably problematic. FARTA was undoubtably an attempt to control curation and publicity, but after holding exhibitions in 1943 and 1944, they were banned from any further public displays. Scott (2012:73) cites artist Lương Xuân Nhị who reports the FARTA members having been summoned to the Governor-General to be told that organising exhibitions was the privilege of the French protectorate government.

In a letter to Picasso that never received an answer, but has been published a number of times in Vietnamese journals, Tô Ngọc Vân attested to the importance of freedom for artistic expression, asking 'Can you believe that the French rulers prohibited us to exhibit in Hà Nội? The subject matter of these paintings was women, fruits and landscapes.' (1951, cited in Huynh, 2005:143). It is understandable how frustrating it must have been, to have been banned from exhibiting even when producing paintings that were not controversial and conformed to bourgeois aesthetics and subject matter, because the French Government chose to exert their power to control exhibitions. Ironically, however, the constraints on the exhibition of art did not end with French rule, although the criteria changed dramatically.

Another organization, the *Cooperative des Artists Indochinois* (CAI) had been established in 1938 by Inguimberty and Jonchère. The cooperative was formed so as to support the production of artworks, 'by advancing funds for materials as well as a proportion of the asking price of the

work.' This helped artists to produce work that required expensive materials, or was particularly time-consuming to complete, such as lacquer.

> 'The CAl claimed to have had a significant economic effect on the sale of lacquer: sales climbed from $600 in 1934 before the existence of the cooperative, to $7,180 in 1939 and $25,799 in 1940.' (Scott, 2012: 74)

Scott (2012:74) states that some artists, such as Nguyễn Gia Trí, exhibited with both associations, but there was a rivalry between the two groups (Taylor, 1995:34) which was based on the 'decorative' versus 'fine arts' division that had been adopted in Vietnam, with CAI members seen to be artisans, supporting Jonchere's changes to the curriculum, while the FARTA members strived

Figure 4-22 Maison des Beaux Arts de L'Indochine (1939) View of a Landscape of The Middle Region of North Vietnam [Lacquer on wood] 76 by 103.5 cm At: https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/VIEW-OF-A-LANDSCAPE-OF-THE-MIDDLE- REGION/03837928AC339F71

for a greater degree of autonomy and status. While colonial intervention had created exhibition spaces and a market, the continued, heavy-handed control caused tensions for and between the Vietnamese artists.

As discussed in chapter one, many of the artists in the FARTA group went on to have comparatively high-profile careers in Vietnam, unlike the artisans in CAI (Scott, 2012: 74). Although, Scott (*ibid*) mentions there were exceptions, she fails to consider several factors as to why many of the artists in CAI appear not to have continued to pursue a career in lacquer painting. One factor is the trope of the individual genius who signs his work. During what Sotheby's (Hong Kong, 2017) describes as 'The Golden Age of Vietnamese Paintings (1930-1945)' a period marked by 'exquisite works of art that aimed to capture the essence of Vietnamese aesthetics' many

paintings were produced by individuals, who signed them and are thus remembered, but many more were produced by collaboration with teams of artists, and signed by the Maison des Beaux Arts de L'Indochine (such as fig.4-23), the Ecole Nationale de l'Artisanat de Hà Nội, and the École des Arts Appliqués de Thu Dau Môt. Sales notes on auctions tend to attribute the works as being under the guidance of Joseph Inguimberty, and the two most famous Vietnamese lacquer painters, Phạm Hậu and Nguyễn Gia Trí, rather than mentioning all their co-producers, which would have included a number of lacquer artists highly-regarded in Vietnam, such as Hoàng Tích Chù (1912-2003), Nguyên Tiên Chung (1914-1976), Nguyễn Khang (1912-1989), Nguyễn Văn Ty (1917-

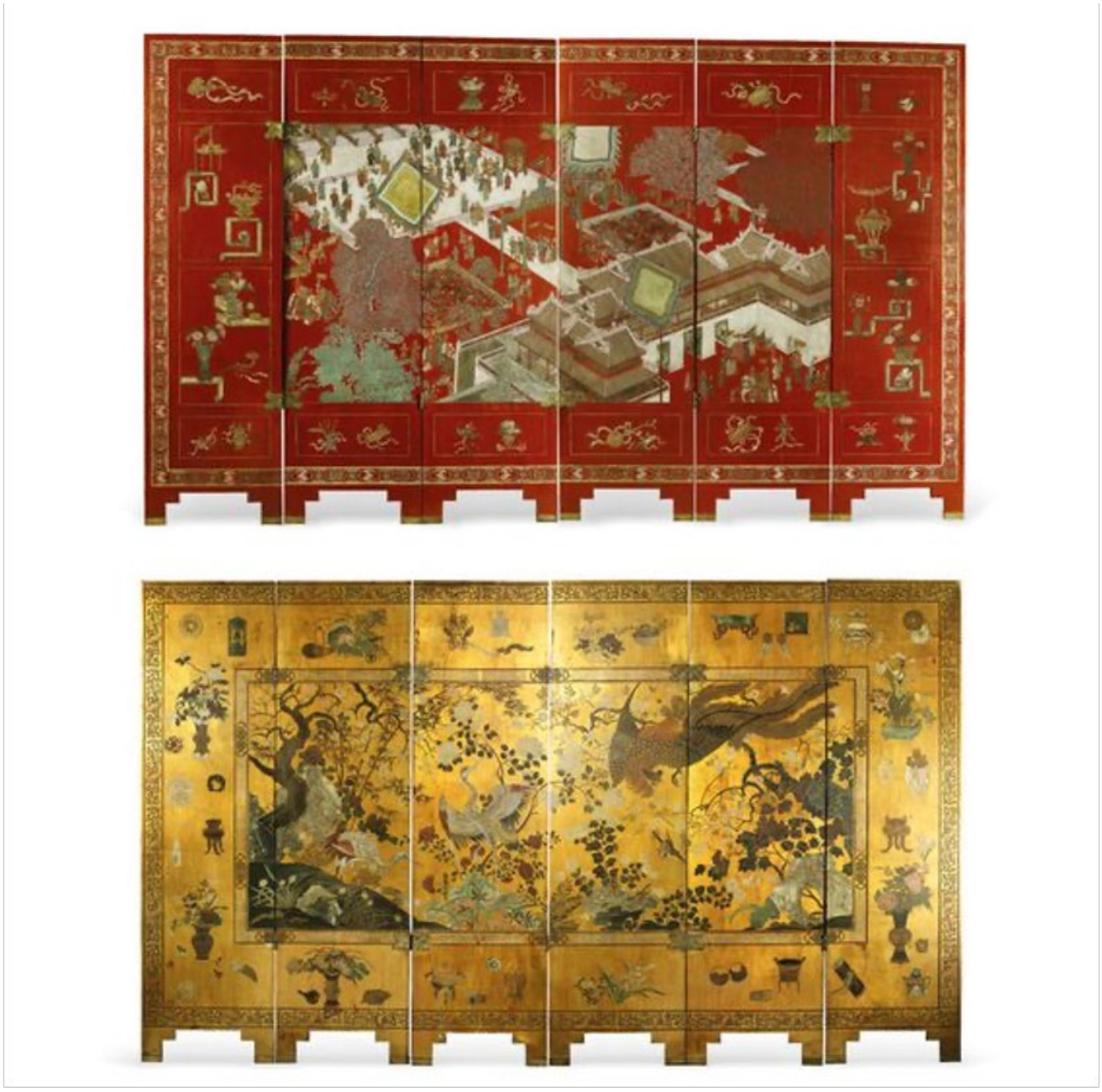

Figure 4-23 L'Ecole Des Beaux Arts De L'Indochine (c.1938-1940) Double-sided coromandel six-panel lacquer screen. [Lacquer on wood]180 x 300 cm. At: http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/lot.90.html/2010/modern-and- contemporary-southeast-asian-paintings-hk0327 (Accessed 25.07.2019)

1992) Trần Đình Thọ (1919-2011), Lê Quốc Lộc (1918-1987) among others. Due to the laborious, and necessarily (because of the time required for lacquer to harden) slow process of lacquer painting, it is common for artists to work on more than one painting at a time, and for a number of artists to work together in workshops, so this signature represented the fact it was a collective effort. Historically, it was common practice in both Europe and Asia for established artists to have a number of students or apprentices working with them, some of whom later turned out to be as talented, and perhaps more admired than the original master. Tensions over credit and authorship are inevitable, but to admit to them is more honest than denying that works of art are often produced by more than one person.

The six-panelled, extravagantly ornate lacquer screen in figure 4.23 is almost a showcase for a variety of lacquer techniques and materials, although the subject matter appears to be very much borrowed from Chinese tradition (which is, inevitably, closely related to Vietnamese tradition, but also, perhaps an attempt to be recognisable to potential European buyers). It is likely that students worked on the designs and composition after studying Chinese examples. Large-scale screens, which require layers of painting and pumicing are generally worked on by a team, even if design decisions are made by certain members within the team (or by teachers). One side of this screen is 'coromandel' or sơn khắc a particularly demanding form of lacquer. Signed with a seal of Maison de l'Ecole des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine, this exemplifies the commercial awareness of popular taste at the time. This was how the school justified their existence to the French government, and the quality of the work is exquisite. In market terms, referring to the better-known artists, who 'brought public attention to their skilled and intricate works, and soon gained a reputation for being the Les Maitres Lacquers de Hanoi' (Sotheby's Hong Kong, 2017) was, and has continued to be important (much like branding). This is partly due to gaining public attention: for example, Phạm Hậu and Nguyễn Gia Trí

Figure 4-24 Nguyễn Gia Trí (1940) Landscape of Vietnam (Bamboo Grove) [Lacquer on board] 119 x 159 cm In: Naziree, Shireen (2013) From Craft to Art: Vietnamese Lacquer Paintings.Bangkok: Thavibu Gallery Pg 9.

exhibited together in 1944, at the prestigious Tràng Tiền Gallery in central Hà Nội. The following year Phạm Hậu was awarded Annam Dragon medal and Certificate of Hanlin Academy by the Emperor Bao Dai, as recognition for his contribution to the development of Vietnamese lacquer painting, (Pham Gia Yen, 2018: 19).Nguyễn Gia Trí's works were much admired in SADEAI exhibitions and in 1938, he was given his first official commission from the Governor-General Brévié, to decorate his palace in Hà Nội, the present-day residence of the President of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. He sold paintings to French buyers from the late 1930s onwards. Since one of the aims of the school was to increase the cultural value of France's colonial acumen, the fact that artists like Nguyễn Gia Trí achieved popularity in the World fairs and colonial expositions held at the time was celebrated, as were the many commissions from dignitaries, some of which he (controversially) turned down claiming to be too busy with existing works. A member of Vietnam Democratic Party, Nguyên Giá Trí participated in the resistance against the French, mostly by providing shelter for fellow soldiers and supplies. When hidden weapons were discovered in his workshop, he was arrested and while in jail tortured, leading to a suicide attempt. However, he told his apprentice that one of political activities he was arrested by the French government, and put under house arrest in a remote, mountainous area of Son La, where Muong minorities live.

Figure 4-25 Nguyên Giá Trị (1941) Village Scene in Vietnam [Lacquer on Wood] 105 x 165 cm. At: http://www.findartinfo.com/english/art-pictures/4/56/1/Lacquer/page/8.html (Accessed on 30.07.2019)

Figure 4-26 Phạm Hậu/or Atelier D'Évariste Jonchère (s.d.) Landscape of the middle region in the North of Vietnam (Phòng cảnh Trung đi Bác Bỏ) [Lacquer on Cupboard Doors]160 x 60 x 98 cm.

Việt, 2009: 345). Because of his materials and painted a number of landscapes, often depicting lush vegetation and wooden huts with thatched rooves which appear all over rural Vietnam.

These landscape paintings, for example fig. 4-24 and 4-25 were arguably some of his finest works, with meticulous attention to detail. They are not simply accurately painted landscapes though: they show his characteristic aptitude with using rhythmic, echoing shapes and patterns across the plane of the panel, using the traditional colours, black, red and gold to create an evocative and harmonised image of the village environment in a mountainous area.

Even when groups of lacquer artists worked on large-scale paintings together, the work of both better and lesser-known lacquer artists is often obscured by paintings not being signed or being accredited to a school or studio, rather than an individual. For example, Phạm Hậu's undated lacquer painting (fig 4-25), *Landscape of the middle region in the North of Vietnam.* is listed in the exhibition of *Vietnamese Modern Art, Paris, Hanoi, Saigon* (1998) as being the work of *Atelier d'Évariste Jonchère*. Phạm Hậu's work reflects his aspirations towards affluence, peace, love and hope (Pham Gia Yen, 2019:41): indicated by his repeated use of symbolic animal subjects, particularly hooved (therefore non-predatory) animals such as deer, buffalo and horses. In this exceptional composition covering two doors of a cabinet, the small group of horses in white eggshell stand out against the browns, blacks and golds of the paddy fields and foliage of this gentle, rhythmic, asymmetrically balanced arrangement. Accrediting the painting to the studio of a well-established French artist may have been a means of establishing recognition for European viewers but using this label obscures the Vietnamese artist's achievements.

Figure 4-27 Aymé, Alix (s.d.) Landscape (Pasayage) [lacquer on wood] 100 x 25 cm. (Overall 100 by 150 cm) At:

Some of these collective lacquer paintings are remarkably similar to individual artist's works, with many of the landscapes repeating a number of distinctively Vietnamese motifs – the limestone formations of mountainous regions in the north, rivers, boats, bamboo and thatched villages; temples and pagodas often feature too, along with traditionally celebrated events such as mandarin graduations or Emperor's returns (both of which are nostalgic, as the French had dramatically changed social and educational hierarchies). This is not to suggest they are copied, or unoriginal, there are variations of composition, and varying degrees of detail and breadth of techniques, but given the complex and time-consuming process involved to create multi-panelled paintings, it is likely that even some of the individually signed paintings were the result of a team effort in a co-operative studio.

For example, in figure 4-27, the landscape is signed by Aymé, and while it is obviously not a copy – there are a number of distinctive female figures in the foreground – the treatment of foliage, the details of the village and perhaps most of all, the scale of this six-panel screen, make it highly probable that more than one artist worked on it.

Along with the popularity of landscape paintings of Vietnam, another recognisable reoccurring theme is fish, fishing and aquatic scenes. Given that Vietnam has a long coastline, and much of the country is below sea level, meaning that daily life in both the countryside and cities is based around rivers, river deltas, paddy fields, lakes and ponds, it is unsurprising that fish are such a common motif in a variety of different types of paintings.

The goldfish in particular signifies wealth and abundance. If brought up with Christian ideologies, where 'it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God' (Matthew, 19:23) it is difficult to understand that wealth is considered both desirable and virtuous in Buddhist cultures, because it enables one to provide for others.

The theme of goldfish and aquarium coral and plants reoccurs in paintings attributed to the southern school, the École des Arts Appliqués de Thu Dau Môt (see figure 4-1) which specialised in lacquer and sold under the collective name, as continues to be the case in contemporary art exhibitions and auctions. Other works on the same theme are attributed to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts de Hà Nội, Jean Dunand, Nguyễn Gia Trí (exhibited recently at the Du fleuve Rouge au Mékong exhibition in Paris, 2013) and other artists of the time, most notably Phạm Hậu. Since most of these paintings are undated, it is difficult to decide who was influenced by who, particularly as fish are a popular folk art motif in Vietnam. It is easy to see why images of fish and underwater foliage were a popular subject for lacquer painting, as they offer a particularly rich variety of patterns and textures.

Figure 4-28 Phạm Hậu (1940) Goldfish of Abundance [Lacquer on wood] 100.5 by 45 cm. At: https://alaintruongdotcom.wordpress.com/2015/03/27/pham-hau-1903-1995-goldfish-of-abundance-circa-1940/ (Accessed on 16.09.2019)

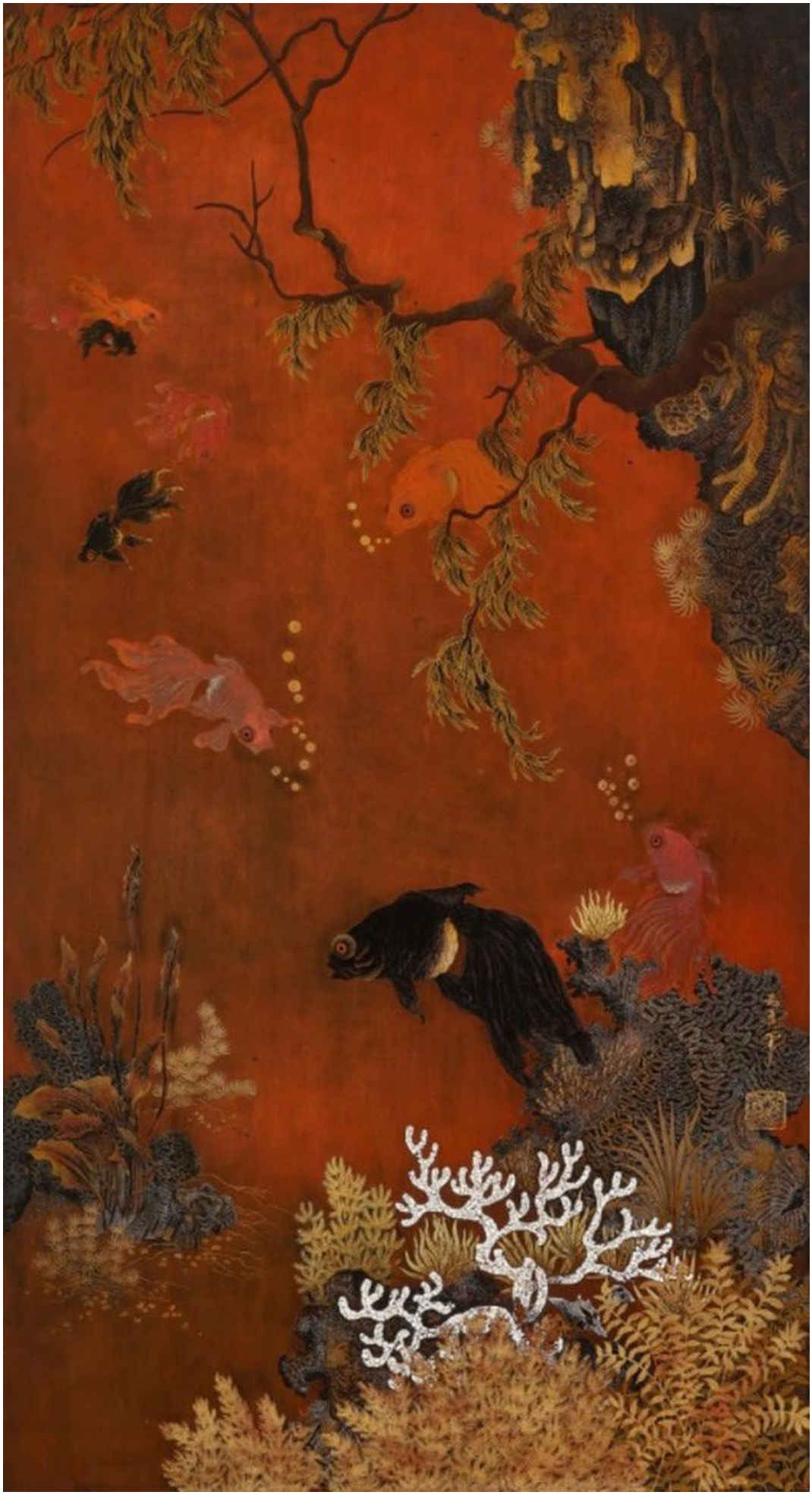

Figure 4-29 Phạm Hậu (s.d.) Gold Fish. [Lacquer on wood] 130 x 72 cm At: https://baodauthau.vn/18-sieu-pham-cua-danh-hoa-viet-len-san-dau-gia-quoc-te-post114200.html (Accessed on 16.02.2022).

In addition to watercolour and ink sketches, Phạm Hậu's oeuvre in lacquer consists of elegantly composed landscapes and waterscapes, densely populated with foliage motifs and symbolic animals. Tardieu encouraged his ornate paintings, and when his work was exhibited with SADEAI during the 1930s, he won the 1935 Salon Gold Medal and his work was favourably reviewed in the popular journal *Này Ngày* (*Today*). Victor Tardieu also helped Phạm Hậu to get a commission for fifty lacquered cigarette boxes, which enabled him to open a workshop, after he graduated (Nguyễn Quang Viet, 2007: 99). It is likely that Tardieu's contact may have been either Jean Dunand, or one of the other designers he worked with, because as Marcilhac (1991:65) asserts:

> 'Dunand was the first to suggest the idea of smoker's accessories lacquered and inlaid with eggshell. Such articles were so much in fashion between 1923 and 1926 that many of the Indo-Chinese craftsmen employed in Dunand's workshop were enticed by rivals to work for them.'

Whatever Marcilhac's loyalties, his observation demonstrates that a number of Vietnamese craftspeople worked in collaboration with French designers while Art Nouveau and Art Deco fashions for opulent, decorative surfaces were popular.

The impact of these 'Great Exhibitions' on European Modernist artists has been well-documented: in particular, the 1937 Exposition Internationale in Paris has been perceived as encapsulated some of the most divisive dualisms between the political left and right parties, which impacted on attitudes towards France and her colonies, and the reception to colonial art exhibits. As Morton's analysis of the 1931 colonial exhibition points out, during the 1930s the Communist Party was the principle anti-colonialist organization in Paris, and when colonized peoples were brought in to be displayed, along with their artisanry and models of their architecture, 'security around the Exposition grounds was particularly tight in natives' living and working quarters' to prevent infiltration by militant anti-colonialist protesters (Morton, 2000: 123).

In 1920, Hồ Chí Minh, (then known as Nguyễn Ái Quốc) was a founding member of the French Communist Party, and was campaigning against colonialism, presenting papers at conferences and publishing articles in the socialist journal, *L'Humanité*, which was gaining support with the Parisian left bank. For the government, therefore, keeping these Indochinese students and protesters away from the exhibitions must have been a key government concern, considering:

> 'Colonial expositions were… displays of the results of colonialist expansion and expression of the innate superiority of Western civilisation. The physical and moral "backwardness" of the conquered people was exhibited to justify the conquest and to show the necessity of rescuing these people from their degeneracy' (Morton, 2000: 119).

Figure 4-30The Young Ho Chi Minh [Photograph] At: https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/09/vietnam-paris-

The opposite perception was described by Brocheux (2007:9) when the young Hồ Chí Minh disembarked at Marseilles in 1911, and upon observing hooliganism and prostitution in the town, asked himself: 'why don't the French civilize their own people instead of trying to civilize us?'

The colonial exhibition was where Picasso's famous encounter with the African masks which so impressed him with their 'presence' (Rubin, 1985: 260) took place, inspiring one of the most controversial modern art movements, 'primitivism'. At the time, the idea must have appeared a welcome alternative to Western civilization and its claustrophobic belief in rational progress amid widespread destruction. The Surrealist group, with its interest in Freud and the subconscious, became collectors of Art nègre, displaying sculptures and fetishes in the counter-exposition held in 1931, which as Norindr (1996: 53) states:

> 'As the name Countre-Exposition clearly suggests, the Surrealists wanted to delineate and mark their opposition and hostility to the Exposition Coloniale Internationale de Paris with their own subversive display of colonial documents and ethnographic objects.'

Norindr (1996: 53) questions the motivation for omitting any artefacts from Indochina in the exhibition, if its purpose was to raise awareness of the brutality and exploitation experienced in countries colonialized by France. It would appear that Vietnamese art did not meet expectations in terms of "otherness." In art history, the term 'primitive' had generally referred to all early (e.g. before the Renaissance) art, but by the 1920s that Japanese, Egyptian, Persian, Cambodian and most other non-European court styles were no longer included in the category, which came to be applied to tribal art… usually African or Oceanic art (Rubin, 1984: 3, Torgovnick, 1990: 19) demonstrating a shift in artistic taste and understanding. Rubin (1984:3) goes on to claim that:

> 'pre-Columbian court art enjoyed...a relatively limited interest among early twentieth-century vanguard artists. Picasso was not unique in finding it too monumental, hieratic and seemingly repetitious. The perceived inventiveness and variety of tribal art was much more in the spirit of the modernists' enterprise.'

To take this description of 'court art' loosely, to describe art form cultures with courtly traditions, Vietnam would have been perceived as belonging to that category, rather than being the 'primitive other' that so excited avant-garde artists at the time. It is not surprising, then, that in catalogues and other reviews of the Parisian exhibitions held during the 1920s and 30s, there is little record of European interest in art from what was then called Indochina.

In terms of the Vietnamese work that had been exhibited in Paris, it was presented 'under the rubric of tutelage' (Scott, 2012: 60), while Simonetti (2016: 14) argues that:

> 'the interwar French government tried to… revive the nineteenth-century vogue for orientalism through the creation of colonial art schools and exhibitions of colonial art, which was promoted at the Exposition in 1931.'

She goes on to argue that the kind of work presented was outdated, and an attempt to promote an idealized, timeless, static vision of and exotic 'other' to contrast with European modernity.

Ironically, Tardieu and his students had exhibited at the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes (International Exposition of Decorative Arts and Modern Industries) which suggests their work was aligned with the decorative arts. The brief for potential exhibitors was that they 'should be modern' (cited in Greenhalgh 2011: 220), with the result that 'designers who had never previously wrestled with the problem of contemporaneity engaged with styles for the new century and applied them to objects of all kinds' …the common features allowed them to be defined as a single style, 'later named Art Deco after the Exposition itself. ' (*ibid*)

The exhibition was dominated by designers and exclusive craft firms, such as designers like Jacques-Emile Ruhlmann, Pierre Ligroin, Edgar Brandt, Jean Dunand, the Jallot Brothers, Clement Rousseau, Sue et Mare, Eileen Gray, Gaston Suisse and Rene Lalique. Since Tardieu and Dunand had worked with several of these, it is reasonable to assume that the EBAI students encountered this milieu. Arguably, Art Deco was not a modernist movement, as such, in that practitioners published no manifestos, stated no claims of originality, and therefore was not taken seriously as an artistic form. As Claridge (1999:113) asserts:

> 'Art Deco's easy accessibility, its mass appeal, its feminine allegiance to figurative art, and its technical allusions to classical norms all emphasised the movement's obvious relationship to the marketplace.'

Figure 4-31 Nguyễn Khang and Đinh Văn Thành at the 1937 Paris Exposition In: Nguyễn Quang Việt (2014) Hội Hoa Sơn Mài Việt Nam (Lacquer Painters of Vietnam). Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Mỹ Thuật p 20

A graduate from the first cohort, Lê Phổ (1907-2001) had been appointed as the coordinator for the Vietnamese art exhibition. Lê Phổ, on the year of his graduation, 1930, was given a commission by

the General Governor of Indochina for folding lacquer screens, and one of his lacquer landscape paintings was exhibited in the 1931 Colonial Exposition in Paris: later he left Vietnam and settled in Paris, focusing on silk painting rather than lacquer. Given that it was the Swiss-born Art Deco artist, Jean Dunand, who was the vice-president of the arts and crafts section, it is inevitable that the Vietnamese artists would have met him, and others involved in the organisation of the exhibition.

Artists like Nguyễn Khang, who were at the early stages of his own artistic career, were likely to see the visit to Paris as an opportunity to see other artists' work and develop his own ideas. Certainly, his series of *Fishermen by Moonlight* would appear to have been influenced by Dunand's mural for luxury cruise ships photographs of which had been published in the French and Vietnamese press (Scott, 2012: 160). Nguyễn Khang's paintings are distinctive when displayed next to most of his fellow students at the Fine Arts College in Hà Nội. Embossed so as to create a relief surface, using the Japanese technique known as Taka maki-e (raised lacquer), his paintings show a marked Art Deco style, once again highlighting how this period was a hotbed of intercultural influence. Along with lacquer draftsman and teacher, Đinh Văn Thành, who was dressed in an old-fashioned traditional costume and had to demonstrate lacquer techniques to visitors, Nguyễn Khang attended the 1937 Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne (the International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life), and in Paris, his work was awarded the Honorary Medal for Lacquer. He was also invited to be a member of the "international jury" in San Fransisco's Golden Gate International exposition in 1939 - although unfortunately he was not able to attend (Designs.VN, 2017)[29]. However, it is clear that Nguyễn Khang and other Vietnamese artists such as Lê Văn Đệ (1906-1966), Vũ Cao Đàm (1908-2000) and Lê Phổ found an audience in Europe (the latter two emigrated to Paris), and this had an impact on fellow Vietnamese artists.

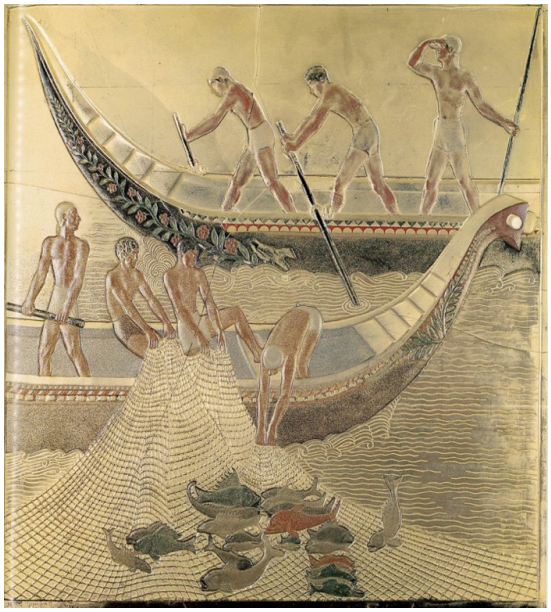

Figure 4-32 Jean Dunand (1935) Fishing. [Photograph of part of a lacquer mural for the smoking room in a cruise ship] In: Marcilhac, Felix (1991) Jean Dunand: His Life and Works. London: Thames and Hudson. Pg 160

Back in Vietnam, Nguyễn Khang went on to win the SADEAI Exhibition award in 1939, and the first Honor Award in 1943. However, the philosophical and aspirational themes he chose, along with the

[29] Năm 1939, Ban tổ chức triển lãm San Francisco (Mỹ) đã mời Nguyễn Khang tham gia hội đồng chấm giải, nhưng rất tiếc ông không tham dự được.

sumptuous gold leaf and stylized art deco forms he adopted, which were so admired in Vietnam, were not particularly remembered in Europe, beyond a small group of lacquer enthusiasts. I have not been able to find even a photograph recording the painting that was exhibited in Paris and for which Nguyễn Khang won his prize.

Figure 4-33 Nguyễn Khang (1943) Fishing by Moonlight. [Lacquer on wood] 79 x 182 cm In: Bixenstine Safford, Lisa (2015) 'Art at the Crossroads: Lacquer Painting in French Vietnam.' In: The Journal of Transcultural Studies. Pg 138

The stylized figures and boats on Dunand's lacquer screen seem to have been influenced by Greek or Hellenic paintings, although Marcilhac (1991, 144) describes them as 'Egyptian' and 'more sedate' than many of Dunand's suggested designs. But then Art Deco was an eclectic mixture of influences, and Dunand's talent was for borrowing and combining so as to produce images that appeared modern while referencing other art and cultures. Interestingly, as Scott (2012:159) points out: 'Khang's work also evokes forms of Vietnamese đinh (communal house) relief carving, which particularly in the 17th century, included vivid representations of day-to-day activities.' A number of Vietnamese artists such as Nguyễn Khang and Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm (1922-2016) reference their own 'pre-modern' village art, which has enabled them to lay claim to being both authentically Vietnamese and modern at the same time (Taylor, 2004: 74, Nguyen-Long, 2007:128). Like Kandinsky, their use of folk and 'primitive' inspirations was not a desire for an exotic, imagined other, but rather 'based upon…intimate knowledge of "context, function and meaning' (Weiss, 1995: xvii), and like Kandinsky, this drawing upon familiar ethnological roots has been described as modern by reviewers who do not share the same visual vocabulary. Again, the reinterpretation of existing cultural influences, whether from geographically or temporally remote cultures is interpreted as a feature of modern art.

Certainly, the *Fishing by Moonlight* completed in 1943 is stylistically similar to Vietnamese folk carvings. Bixenstine-Safford (2015:143) draws comparisons between Nguyễn Khang's figures and folk arts, most particularly water puppets, an ancient Vietnamese tradition. The performances are given after dark, with puppets controlled from under the black water which reflects the brightly-coloured lacquer that the various characters are painted in. The effect is visually dramatic, in part, because of the contrast between the dark water and the use of lanterns to highlight the vivid puppets. The slightly oversized heads, and stylized gestures to symbolise activities in Khang's painting are reminiscent of the puppets.

The second version, completed in 1945, seems to have borrowed some Japanese stylization, in terms of the gold ripples and treatment of faces and hairstyles, which perhaps was due to Japan's increasing contact with Vietnam, just before their occupation of the cities, in 1945. However, since Art Nouveau and Art Deco both borrowed extensively from Japanese art, it is difficult to pinpoint specifically where influences, techniques or particular art forms originated. Additionally, as Claridge (1999:113) claims:

> "Art histories have typically been written as if "Art Deco painting" is an oxymoron; post-1968 accounts use "Art Deco" only to refer to objects, interiors and architecture. Those unfortunate painters consigned to its boundaries…play no significant part in Modernist canons as a result.'

Nguyễn Khang can perhaps be classed as an 'art deco painter' if one is willing to accept the term as a description of style, rather than of a specifically European phenomena. Marrying up the traditional elements of Vietnamese village art with the luxurious appearance of Art Deco, he follows the trend of eclectic appropriation that enabled such a dizzying array of beautiful applied

Figure 4-34 Nguyễn Khang (1945) Fishing by Moonlight. [Lacquer on wood] 80 x 181.5 cm At: http://www.artnet.com/artists/nguyen-khang/les-pecheurs-au-clair-de-lune- fishing-under-the-Ms8nBTE8bclA81DsV_0KLg2 (Accessed on 30.07.2019)

arts in the movement. However, as a Vietnamese lacquer practitioner, he encounters the same problems of Art Deco painters: that they are widely perceived as being designers or craftspeople rather than their work acquiring the status of art.

The importance attributed to the innovation of lacquer painting is rooted in Tardieu's understanding of fine arts, which combined his French education with his pan-Asian research and experience and informed his attempts to encourage students to develop their own distinctive, expressive artwork. This aspiration was further kindled by a fierce desire for national independence, hence a tendency to deny influences from other cultures amongst the Vietnamese. Combined, these factors have led to the argument that lacquer painting is unique to Vietnam, quintessentially Vietnamese, and the ideal medium to express national character.

The most acclaimed Vietnamese lacquer painter of all, Nguyễn Gia Trí (1993: 10), claimed that: 'I think sơn mài cannot be done by foreigners because they do not have the patience of the Vietnamese. But we have, and so it embodies our nationalistic character'[30]. A subjective overgeneralisation about the Vietnamese character, but another example of how this art form has become symbolically linked to national identity. The relationship between lacquer resin and national identity may seem tenuous, or somewhat irrelevant now, but the claims around this connection affected the attitudes towards lacquer painting in Vietnam both during the colonial era, as discussed here, and after, which is the subject of the next chapter.

[30] Nghề sơn, theo tôi nghĩ, người ngoại quốc không làm được, vì họ sợ lở sơn mà không có tính kiên nhẫn như ta. Nhưng ta làm được, vì chính những lý do ấy mà nó mang dân tộc tính.

5. SCHISMS AND SCANDALS: THE PAIN OF BREAKING WITH THE PAST.

This section explores the tensions caused by the shifts in ideology for artists, art students, graduates and teachers in Vietnam and the artworks produced during the 1940s up until the economic reforms that enabled international trade, in the 1990s. Despite the many ideological and institutional changes, this thesis asserts both the continuation of modern artistic sensibilities initiated during the 1920s and 1930s, and the close relationship with long-standing craft practices to be significant to the development of lacquer painting in Vietnam during this period.

5.1 Deploying tradition to realise a modern, independent nation state.

Scott (2012:2) emphasises the fact that 'the leading artists of the revolution and anti-colonial war (the First Indochina War of 1946-1954) were also among the leading artists of the colonial period' which is surprising given the opposing political ideologies. Given that the majority of Vietnamese adults at that time had been through a French education system, it is inevitable that the French influence could not be instantly and completely cast off. Indeed, the importance of the French-introduced writing system quốc ngữ (national language) and its effect on literacy, print journals and the dissemination of political ideology has been recognised by many (perhaps most notably by Huỳnh Kim Khánh, 1982, and MacHale, 2004). However, it is only recently that the impact French education had on the success of artistic production after independence has been fully acknowledged. As Swinburn (2019: ix) asserts, work that has been generally dismissed as simplistic propaganda, was in fact a sophisticated, modern visual language, that had evolved through adoption and adaptation, and which had been deliberately deployed by the new government.

In 1945 Hồ Chí Minh founded the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). When the Japanese ousted French administration, imprisoning and executing numerous French officials in the process, they took over urban areas of Vietnam, but did not attempt to take over civilian administration; instead, the Vietnamese emperor, Bảo Đại, was installed as ruler of the unified state of Vietnam (he abdicated when the Japanese surrendered). Hồ Chí Minh[31] and under his leadership the nationalist League for the Independence of Vietnam party, Việt Nam Độc Lập

[31] Hồ Chí Minh had chosen chosen his name, meaning 'He who Enlightens' to signify his role in introducing communist ideology to Vietnam

Đồng Minh Hội (more commonly known as the Việt Minh) were mobilised to rally support, using rural areas to organize troops and the August revolution. Predictably, one of the most popular subjects of paintings at that time was Hồ Chí Minh himself: he is often depicted reading or writing, to emphasise his scholarly achievements, or greeting villagers or children to demonstrate his benevolence.

Figure 5-1 Đoàn Văn Nguyên (1990) Uncle Ho composing a poem (Bác làm thơ) [Lacquer on Board] 90 x120cm. In: Nguyễn Quang Việt (2014) Hội Hoa Sơn Mài Việt Nam (Lacquer Painters of Vietnam). Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Mỹ Thuật Pg 111

Whilst images like these could be described as propaganda, compared with portrayals of Mao or Stalin, they are understated, in keeping with Hồ Chí Minh's legendary modesty. The artists all include a variety of other elements, rather than focusing on a figurehead. In this unusual lacquer painting (see figure 5-2) by Lương Xuân Nhị, an artist better known for his landscapes in oil paints, the composition and contrasting colours dominate, with the president a diminutive figure in the distance. The detailed attention given to the foliage, with the sketchy treatment of the buildings and people offer a thought-provoking perspective on the political turmoil of the time.

Figure 5-2 Lương Xuân Nhị (1982) President Ho Chi Minh [Lacquer on Board] 65 x 110 cm.In: Bucarelli, Angelo (2006) Il drago e la farfalla Arte contemporanea in Vietnam. Roma. Gangemi Editore. Pg 108

In his declaration of independence Hồ Chí Minh: 'deliberately used quotes from the 1776 American Declaration of Independence and the 1789 French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen' (Huynh, 2005: 132). However, as Kunzle (1992: 21) pointed out, he avoided 'any equivalent of the term "merciless Indian savages" as used in the original. Given his experience as a Vietnamese under French rule, Hồ Chí Minh must have understood that the mountainous areas were not controllable without gaining the support of the many ethnic groups living in those areas.

National solidarity was essential, despite the considerable cultural and economic disparities between the people living in coastal regions and highlands in Vietnam. The new government initiated a number of policy programmes to ensure 'that cultural institutions would serve the interests of the nation' (Taylor, 2005: 45). Among them were departments designed to manage the production and exhibition of various forms of cultural production, including painting. In fact, as Swinbank (2019: ix) asserts even before declaring independence, the Việt Minh had begun recruiting French-trained Vietnamese visual artists to produce visual communication materials. Inevitably this signalled an ideological shift, but it is significant that a number of art schools and programmes were sanctioned, and many of them were led by alumni of the prestigious French institution in Hà Nội.

In 1949, lacquer artists (both graduates from EBAI) Phạm Hậu and Trần Quang Trân were authorised by the Ministry of Education to establish the National Fine Arts School in Hà Nội (Trường Quốc gia Mỹ nghệ[32]). The name of the art school changed a number of times after Vietnamese Independence, but the term 'fine' refers to the quality, not European designated art forms and the curriculum focused on vocational craft and production design: art that was functional and which served the needs of the people. In a sense it followed the crafts schools of the colonial era, and the changes to the curriculum at EBAI students had protested against Jonchère about: the important difference was the intended audience or consumer. The curriculum was designed to '…to stream students into courses appropriate for the requirements of industry as opposed to individual career choice' (Naziree, 2006). Despite this, many of its tutors were established artists and many graduates went on to become artists, including contemporary lacquer painters, Trịnh Tuân and his wife Công Kim Hoa.

The majority of EBAI graduates who taught and managed in the new college seem to have either specialized in lacquer or been in the Cooperative des Artistes Indochinois faction of the French school, organized by Jonchère. Succeeding Phạm Hậu and Trần Quang Trân was Nguyễn Khang, who joined the school in 1962. That was also when its name changed to the College of Industrial

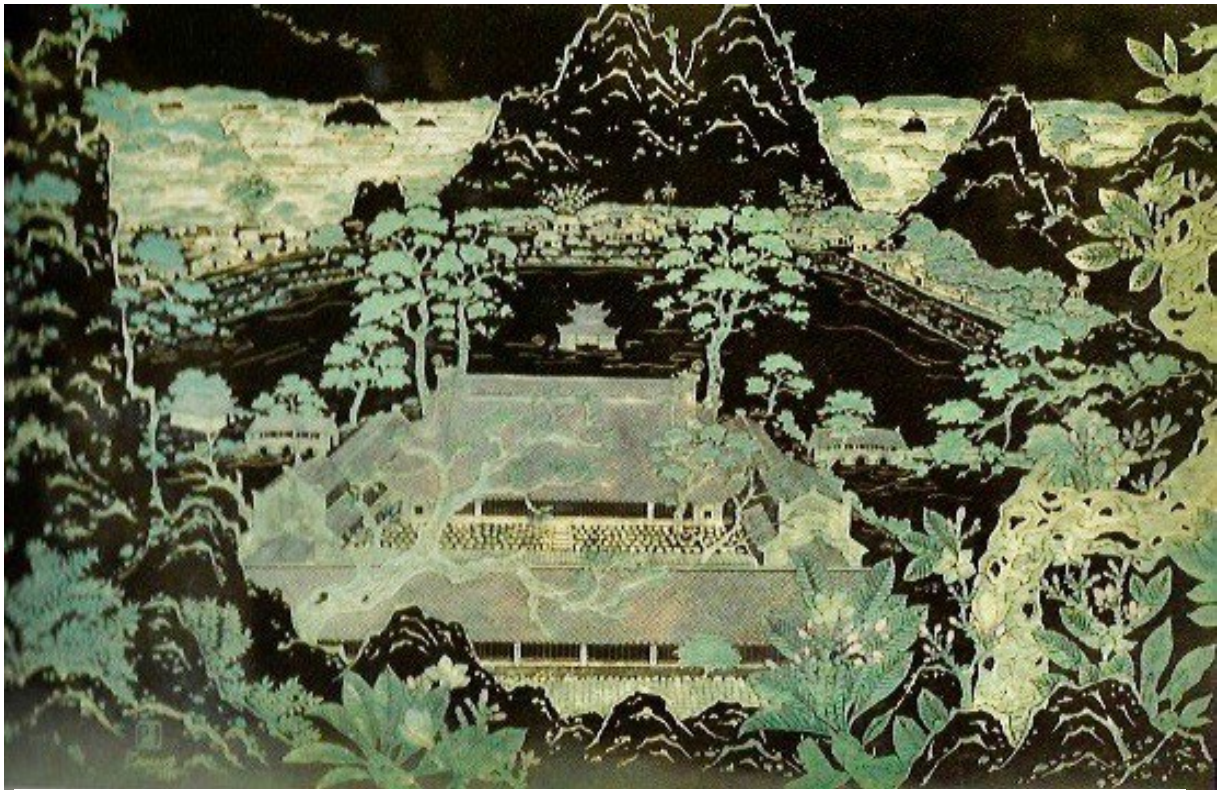

Figure 5-3 Công Văn Trung (1990) Saigonese Landscape. [Engraved lacquer on Board] 90cm x 140cm. In: Nguyễn Quang Việt & Trường Hạnh (1994) Tranh Sơn Mài. (Lacquer Paintings). Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Mỹ Thuật pg.49

[32] Although it is translated as Fine Arts, it uses mỹ nghệ which usual translates as crafts rather that mỹ thuật (usually translated as art). It has also been translated as the National school of Applied Arts, or the National School for Plastic Arts

Arts (Cao đẳng Mỹ thuật Công nghiệp), and its moniker remains the University of Industrial Arts (Trường Đại học Mỹ thuật Công nghiệp) today. Other EBAI graduates that taught there include Công Văn Trung (1907-2003), (whose name was sometimes spelt Công Văn Chung, the phonetics being similar) who had been one of the very first cohort and had taught at EBAI and elsewhere. He specialized in sơn khắc, a Vietnamese lacquer technique (the method is described in detail in chapter two) that had traditionally been practised in just a few specialised craft villages. Given the continuum of both influential practitioners and approaches to practice (despite efforts to relabel them) it is clear that in terms of artistic practice, independence, communism and modernism did not bring about a complete break from the past.

It is something of an anomaly that sơn khắc, a particularly labour-intensive form of lacquer art that has been practised in Vietnam for centuries, became very popular during the war years, amid the rhetoric of modernization and attempts at disassociation with tradition. The technique of carving into lacquered screens was developed in historic Chinese workshops to produce intricate lacquer carvings for emperor's palaces (and later became known as coromandel in Europe) so in many ways could not be more opposed to the vision that the government of the newly independent DVL wanted to project, in terms of the priorities and lifestyle of the new nation.

One of the contentions in art theory during the modernist period is the dualism between instrumentalism and aesthetics. Closely related to status, certain art forms were recognised in the public sphere, while, others were excluded. As Rozsika Parker (1984: 11) notes, embroidery, which in medieval times was of equal status to art forms in Europe, such as painting or carving, was sidelined so that it has come to be seen as quintessentially feminine, being done by only by unpaid women in the domestic sphere. In Vietnam, efforts to modernise and be more efficient continued, as a 1978 Vietnamese government policy regarding the hill tribes demonstrates: stating its intention to be eradicating differences in economic and cultural levels, the

> 'socialist industrialisation (of crafts) will mean that the work of each must conform to strict norms…and in some ethnic groups, the women will no longer have enough time to make embroideries to adorn their jackets or skirts. Some pieces formerly required six months to finish' (Kunzle, 1992: 24).

It is interesting that in this attempt to address social inequality, poverty, and to modernise, the policy dictates what is worth spending time on, and what is considered mere frippery. Ironically those condemned traditional embroideries have been immortalised in the most time-consuming type of Vietnamese lacquer painting, sơn khắc, in works of Trần Hữu Chất. This artist, as with many other soldiers and artists and journalists, was stationed in rural areas, and encouraged to get to know and understand the hill tribes who supported soldiers on the move. Hồ Chí Minh

was passionate about equality and freedom, and his vision of Vietnam as a unified nation was that of assimilation, despite traditional rivalries. Promoting a vision of unification in the resistance to foreign invasion became a very popular theme for painters during the war years, in particular, villagers helping soldiers. Trần Hữu Chất's depictions of the minority people of the central highlands are important for both historical and contemporary reasons, in that there are over fifty different ethnic groups in Vietnam, and there is considerable cultural and economic disparity between the people dwelling in the coastal regions, and the minorities who tend to live in the highlands. His work epitomizes the unification of the many disparate peoples and cultures in north and south Vietnam, marrying a demanding traditional technique with an auspicious vision of multicultural national unity.

Trần Hữu Chất (1933 -2018) studied in the resistance class, with Tô Ngọc Vân, and served as a soldier in the central highlands (during this time he also worked as a journalist and wrote poetry under the pen name Hồng Chính Hiện). He went on to work in the Fine Arts Museum until retirement. He studied ceramics and tapestry in China and Vietnam and trained in the restoration of oil paintings in France in 1985, all of which gave him an unusual breadth of technical and design skills.

Based on his encounters in the central highlands, Trần Hữu Chất's intricate and meticulously executed compositions commemorate wartime events that he witnessed and pay tribute to the contributions to the revolutionary cause made by the Bahnar people. His vision of village life is busy: in that the viewer needs to take some time looking at the activities and interactions between the individuals and groups of people to understand the overall scene. Kunzle (1992:27) draws attention to the flattened perspective, and the fact that figures in the foreground are the same size as those at the back, suggesting classical Chinese influences, as does the use of black as a background for the people and their activities. However, unlike most Chinese panoramic *sanshui*[33], perhaps Trần Hữu Chất took his inspiration from the outline paintings of Zhang Zeduan (1085–1145), which depicted festivities or folkloric illustrations of markets and day-to-day life.

Like many painters of his generation, his works are based on observation (as advocated by Tardieu) and experience, that also happen to capture moments of world-changing history. Kunzle (1992:24) states:

[33] Sanshui refers to Chinese ink paintings of mountainous landscapes, which adhere to formal design rules intended to stimulate philosophical thoughts, rather than attempting to represent nature as observed by the artist.

'Chất's work is an act of faith that a unique people with distinct and colorful customs, crafts, and costumes could survive the fury of this war. And not only survive as a tribe of the Bahnar, but as an integral part of the new nation of Vietnam.'

Figure 5-4 Trần Hữu Chất (1962) Springtime in the Tây Nguyên Highlands [Engraved Lacquer on Board] 120 x 97cm. In: (2005) 50 Years of Modern Vietnamese Painting. [Exhibition Catalogue] Tokyo. Sankei Shimbun. P 81

However, as with many traditional techniques and materials, sơn khắc can be used to depict more modern subjects, such as construction, and the process of industrialisation. *In Construction of a Town* (see figure 5-5) by Đặng Tin Tưởng, the geometric composition asserts the power of rapid urban transformation. Nguyễn Quân (cited by Bảo Thoa, 2019) describes how Đặng Tin

Tưởng's large-scale sơn khắc paintings of factories and industrial production dominated official galleries in the age of socialist realism.[34]

The hard lines and sharp contrasts of the technique have a visual similarity to woodcuts, another traditional folk art, yet both lend themselves to imagery focusing on an idealized vision of machine construction and industry. The process is more like doing wood-cutting for printing, and which, like any form of engraving, requires the sketching and planning of the exact positioning of lines to be done before even beginning the carving of the specially prepared board. The incisions and indentations are then painted with oil paint to create high contrast colours. Many of the artists that work in sơn khắc were trained in graphic communications (e.g. to produce posters and propaganda), or come from Hạ Thái village, which has a strong tradition in lacquer, particularly engraving techniques.

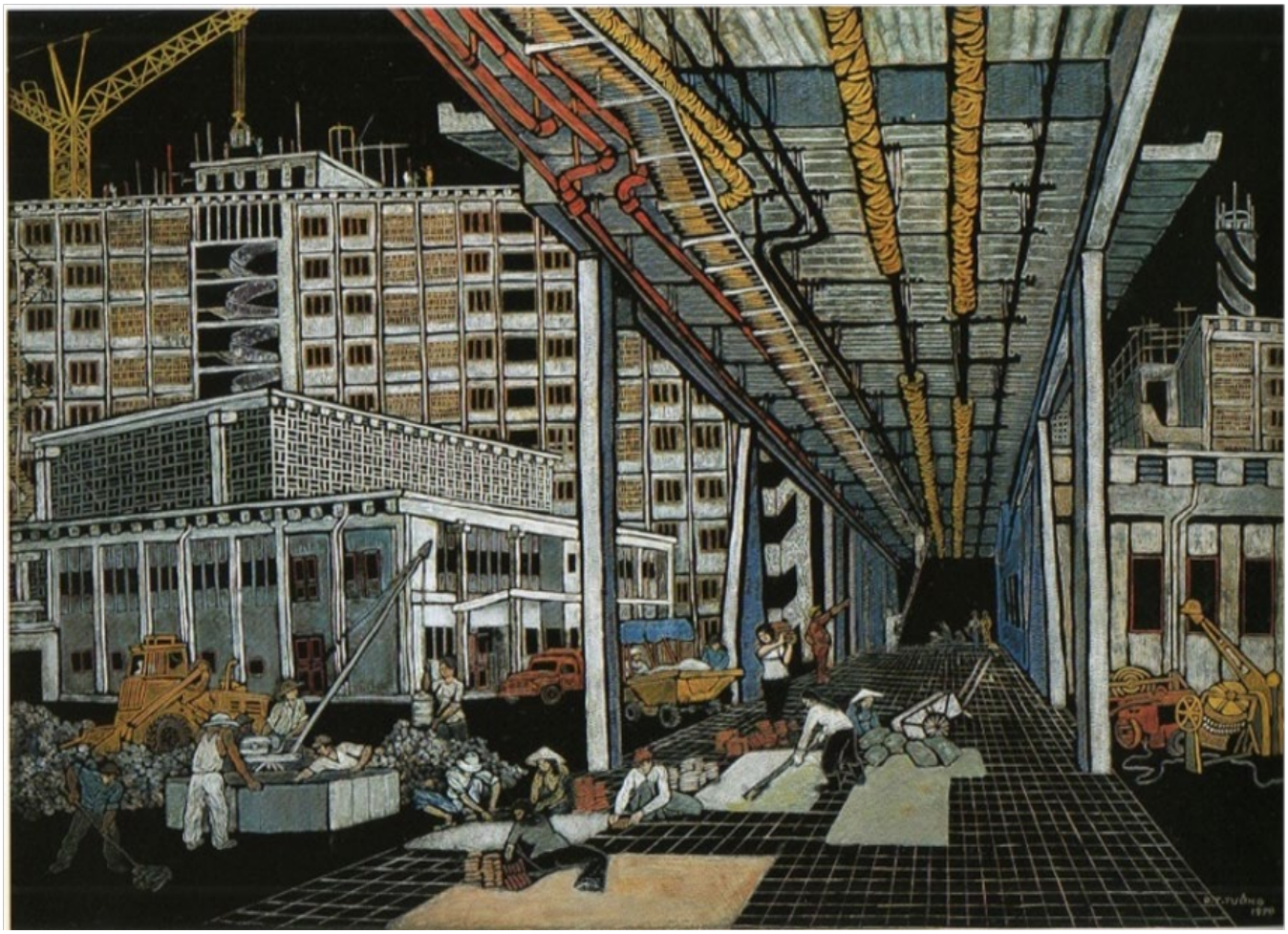

Figure 5-5 Đặng Tin Tưởng (1979) Construction of Town. [Lacquer Engraving on Board] 90.3cm x 120.8cm In: Ushiroshoji, Masahiro (2005) 50 years of Modern Vietnamese Paintings 1925-75. Tokyo. Sankei Shinbun Pg120

[34] Họa sỹ Nguyễn Quân nói về tranh của Đặng Tin Tưởng: "Trong thời kỳ hiện thực xã hội chủ nghĩa là dòng chảy duy nhất được chấp nhận các tranh sơn khắc khổ lớn của Đặng Tin Tưởng về các nhà máy và hoạt động sản xuất công nghiệp.

The art produced within the State-run cultural departments necessarily depicted an optimistic view of the newly independent nation, and much of what was produced were posters, badges, along with the imagery to be used on the new currency and stamps etc. For example, Huỳnh Văn Thuận (1921-2017) studied at the École des Dessin at Gia Định, before going on to be a member of the last cohort to be completed at EBAI (1939 - 1944). Better-known for his posters and prints (including designs used on bank notes) he won a number of national graphic arts awards, but continued to develop his sơn khắc practice, suggesting a link between the engraving technique and the printing processes used to produce propaganda material.

Figure 5-6 Thái Hà (1974) U Minh Forest. (Engraved lacquer on board] 90x130cm. In: Nguyễn Quang Việt & Trường Hạnh (1994) Tranh Sơn Mài. (Lacquer Paintings). Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Mỹ Thuật Pg 34

In the last cohort to be able to complete the five-year course (1939-1944), Thái Hà also followed a prestigious army career, joining the resistance, producing reportage of soldiers in the field, and being sent to the U.S.S.R to study film so as to produce propaganda films to support the cause in Vietnam. He is remembered as being one of the best sơn khắc practitioners, continuing to work in the medium until his retirement.

However, until very recently, these artists have been largely neglected, arguably because they have been labelled (and therefore dismissed) as either craft (due to the materials and techniques) or propaganda (due to the subject matter). Both of these categories have become associated with kitsch, as a result of divisive definitions positioning 'genuine' avant-garde

culture (epitomised by formalism and abstraction understood only by the rich and cultured elite), in opposition to representative painting which is a 'debased and academicized Simulacra', an imitation, constituting an accessible, easily recognisable imagery, popular with the 'ignorant masses' (Greenberg, 1939:10). Anxieties about 'pure' 'authentic' art are understood to be a product of the industrial revolution and the increase in ease and speed of mass production, however, in the context of Vietnam, an added concern was its unequal relationship to European art as a result of colonial intervention.

5.2 Art for art's sake, or art for the people?

Official Vietnamese art histories as published in Hà Nội have largely ignored the National Applied Arts School, focusing instead on Tô Ngọc Vân, who urged the Party to authorise the reopening of the École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine. Due to financial difficulties, this was not approved until 1950, when it was established in the north-eastern hills of Việt Bắc. The area was being used as the base for the revolutionary army, and the art school became known as Khoa Kháng Chiến (the Resistance Class), which meant it acquired considerable prestige from the association and involvement with revolutionary activities. Tô Ngọc Vân, (cited in Trần Văn Cẩn, 1983:10) famously declared that 'tradition starts now' clearly demonstrating the ideological aspiration of severing links with their colonisers (whilst at the same time, embodying many of their values and practices, such as autonomy, originality and fine art painting). In operation for nine years, Taylor (2004: 112) asserts that the 'thirty-some artists who graduated from this class were seen as having contributed some of the most important works in the history of Vietnamese modern painting.' It reopened in Hà Nội in 1957 after the victory over the French at Điện Biên Phủ and the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

The first secretary of the communist party, Trường Chinh, was an influential leader in cultural affairs, and he emphasized the importance of casting off past influences so as to build an independent Vietnam. In 1948, at a National Cultural Conference, he argued for 'socialist realism' as a method of artistic creation which portrays the truth in society evolving towards Socialism according to objective laws' and described modernist art movements such as Cubism, Surrealism and Impressionism as 'gaudy mushrooms … sprouted from the rotten wood of imperialist culture' (Huynh, 2005: 139). Since the transition from colony to independence had necessitated accepting aid from the Soviet Union and China, this dissociation followed policies in those countries.

The term 'socialist realism' was first coined in Moscow by the Union of Soviet Writers: originally, it was an attempt to offer a viable alternative to its unpopular precursor, Proletkult

(proletarian literature), which, due to its poor quality had 'provoked a backlash amongst readers' (Hue Tam Ho Tai, 1984:67) so that an alternative was required. Kirpotin (1933, cited in Hue Tam Ho Tai, 1984:68) argued that socialist realism was in no way opposed to revolutionary romanticism, only that it should be a 'true and accurate expose of life…in both its positive and negative sides, with socialist elements triumphing.' However, in addition to the eternal problem that 'truth' is difficult to define, due to their recent victory, there was a great deal of revolutionary fervour and optimism amongst communists in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, alongside an extreme intolerance of criticism. In both art and literature, the lack of tolerance of nuance and ambiguity resulted in a number of simplistic and stereotypical representations of the heroic proletariat.

The impact on artists and writers in Vietnam was profound. Since it was recognized that art communicates to the public and can, therefore, further a cause, or stimulate social unrest, artists were taken under the wing of the state and paid to produce propaganda. Artists who had volunteered to support the resistance against the French were given work (although salaries in most cases were meagre, and many artists took on additional work out of necessity). Despite their patriotism, for artists educated in the l'Ecole des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine, this shift in ideology was problematic. It was not that they had produced any artworks which demonstrated a particularly critical stance (although many of them drew satirical cartoons for the local press), it was more that, having established the idea of văn nghệ sĩ, that is, creative artists and writers who were understood to be unconventional, spontaneous and romantic, it was paradoxical to then be expected to produce a uniform, nationally-approved vision, particularly when it may not match one's own experiences. The autonomy of the Chinese artist -scholar (*wenrenhua*), and the focus on aesthetics rather than content was, in many ways, compatible with the French ideas of artists as romantic outsiders. Boudarel (1990: 155) describes the dilemma that faced Vietnamese artists and writers at the time:

> 'Torn between his Vietnamese ego which drove him to accept anything in pursuit of national independence and his Western education which made him aspire to a utopian freedom for the individual, the Vietnamese intellectual lived through all these years both as an exalting epic and as a corrosive drama.'

These contradictory desires were a continuation of earlier 'pen-fights' published in local journals between the 'art for art's sake' and the 'Art for humanity's sake.' The former, generally held to be 'idealists' who championed individual expression (the European concept of a universal aesthetic, a 'pure' art that is not debased by serving a function) and the latter, 'materialists' who took the view that art should serve society, and have a purpose (Marr,

1981:361, Ngoc Tuan, 2004: 57-64, Scott, 2012: 113-114). However, as Hue Tam Ho Ta (1984:64) asserts, this debate needs to be contextualized in the international art world:

> 'After World War I, European artists and writers had become fired with the notion that art could be employed as a weapon to remould society and politics… Vietnamese intellectuals eagerly followed the trends that clashed with one another on the international artistic scene through an avid perusal of French newspapers and journals.

The distinction between 'pure' art and kitsch propaganda had been discussed in the broader context of material culture and it is probable that Vietnamese intelligentsia and artists encountered these arguments, that are so damning of artistic appropriation from a 'mature' culture. The political context in Vietnam may suggest that it would be a straightforward class divide between communist defined classes: the proletariats and the bourgeoisie. However, the discussion in the Vietnamese press did not fit into neat political categories as those supporting both sides of the argument were members of the Indochinese communist Party (ICP) according to Hue Tam Ho Ta (1984:63).

Given that during this period of extended warfare against foreign invaders, it is understandable that the main political endeavour allocated to cultural workers, such as artists, was to try to create a unified society that would work towards that end. As the influential General Secretary of the Communist Party, Trường Chinh (1950: 55-58, cited in Schütte, 2003:12) stated:

> 'cultural workers "must aim at welding our people into one bloc, in support of the government, with firm confidence in national salvation, not losing heart when faced with difficulties and hardships." '

This attempt at uniting what had always been a diverse and to some extent segregated society was unquestionably a challenge given the mandarin hierarchy, ethnic minorities living in mountainous regions, large numbers of Chinese immigrants, plus the urban Vietnamese who had collaborated with colonialists.

Socialist realism, in both art and literature, was seen by many patriots as a political tool and enthusiastically adopted as such (Nguyen Ngoc Tuan, 2004: iv). Marxist theory focuses on the importance of conscious action to change society and a move away from expressive individuality in the arts to a politically engaged model, which, for Vietnamese artists and writers who had adopted the role of văn nghệ sĩ, entailed a loss of identity. In theory, the Marxist inspired idea of employing 'art workers' was supposed to unify communities of artists, although Taylor (2005:43) argues that 'oppositions between art and artisanry were replaced with the contrast between state art worker and the non-state sponsored artist.' The audience had changed and so did the artworks produced. The shift in some ways was the same as in Europe

and worldwide: the message was commonly believed to have become more important than the medium, and perhaps even more importantly the audience (or consumers) of any artistic production were themselves, increasingly categorised as to their taste, political affiliations and ethics.

In 1949, a conference was held in the Việt Bắc to debate how best to establish popular literature and visual arts, in keeping with current political priorities. As Ninh (2002: 88-9) points out, it was a turning point, 'before unanimity became the cornerstone of public discourse' but indicative of the party's tightening of control over intellectuals, so as to 'make sure that the tools were available to inspire the people to the level of sacrifice necessary for the resistance.' Despite the problems that this change in direction entailed, the majority of artists and writers embraced the idea of producing a 'new' Vietnamese art, untainted by colonial influence, in order to serve the building of a newly independent nation.

The influential poet, Tố Hữu seems to have dominated in the debates (de Menonville, 2003:81), insisting that 'culture is the product of the working class' and that this view stood in direct opposition to the ruling class belief that culture was produced by individual geniuses for the entertainment of 'those who eat and do nothing' (Ninh, 2005:167). This focus on the division between manual labour as opposed to recognizing intellectual work which may involve research and planning (which are often important components in design or construction of practical projects), reinforces binary classifications of social class, even as it attempts to reverse rankings of status. This simplistic categorization obscures the idea that many of those who work making artefacts may not feel alienated from the products of their labour, even if they produce what are generally understood to be commodities. In addition, it suggests that work is the only meaningful behaviour in life, and that leisure, entertainment and pleasure should be disdained as self-indulgent, which problematises both the production and consumption of art.

Much of the process of forging a 'new' national identity, involved vilifying the past, so as to justify the changes that for many were difficult. This did not just mean rejection of French influences, it also meant undermining traditional ways of life, including spiritual beliefs, such as Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism, and 'eliminating the old patrimony qualified as mandarin, feudal and reactionary…emphasis was placed on national and popular culture, a class culture for a people who were mostly of rural origin' (de Menonville, 2003:81).

Artists and writers were sent to the countryside, to 'become one with the people' although Tô Ngọc Vân protested that artists and writers had always been sympathetic to the people, including tribal minorities, even before the revolution, through working and living with them

(cited by Ninh, 2005: 76). The significance of villages in relation to Vietnamese culture and art has been written about by art theorists Nguyễn Quân & Phan Cẩm Thượng (1991)[35] and certainly supported the nationalistic narrative of Vietnam's independence. However, Huynh (2005:9) challenges the view that pre-colonial is a 'purely Vietnamese village art', pointing out that Chinese, Neo-Confucian and Buddhist influences were infused into traditional rural arts, and that Southern Vietnam had long been a successful trading region with many migrants who settled in the region, bringing a variety of artefacts and cultural traditions that have been assimilated into the Vietnamese way of life. Initially, most of the new leadership in Vietnam came from the old elite, in terms of those who were educated, informed, and had the confidence and time to engage with politics. However, as Moise (1983: 198) observes, the 'DRV was building up a dangerously oversimplified view of rural society. The poor peasants and labourers were idealised, while the landlord class was seen as a repository of all evil.'

This created an obvious tension when urban intellectuals were encouraged to be involved in campaigns, such as the rent reduction campaign, a precursor to the land reform, intended to redistribute land among the people, and reduce the wealth gap between them. Tô Ngọc Vân and his former student, Nguyên Tử Nghiêm were among the artists commissioned on this campaign (which also served as a re-education for artists suspected or accused of having bourgeois sympathies). Scott (2012:253-256) explores how they and other artists were encouraged to produce representations of landowners showing them as greedy, lazy, cruel class enemies who exploit the masses, and therefore should be rightfully punished. In 'struggle sessions' landlords were made to kneel and were deliberately humiliated. Left to the mercy of local councils, whose decision-making could be biased by self-interest and avarice, the outcomes varied, but landowners lived in fear, and many moved south, leaving their land and possessions.

The land reform, lasting two years from 1954 to 1956, was a genuine attempt to give the peasants some power, so that they were not on the verge of starvation (Moise, 1976:79). While the bloodbath described in the anti-communist propaganda produced in South Vietnam is likely to be exaggerated and accurate records of the numbers of deaths are not available, there were many more executions than expected. Day (2010: 135) claims 'the influence of China and Mao Zedong's ideas…stimulated class warfare.'

> 'In practice it attacked many peasants only moderately better off than their neighbours. Poor peasants who refused to treat such people as enemies were likely to be attacked themselves. Perhaps worst of all, from the viewpoint of the

[35] Nguyễn Quân & Phan Cẩm Thượng. (1991) *Mỹ thuật ở làng (Art in the Vietnamese village).* Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Mỹ Thuật.

> Party, was the damage done to itself: thousands of experienced and loyal cadres were accused of being connected with the old order, often on very flimsy evidence, and were purged.' (Moise, 1976:78)

The bitterness the campaign generated forced the government to admit errors in its implementation. The fact that artists and writers were involved in these campaigns also meant that in some cases they witnessed the torturing and execution of landowners: which could involve personal connections. For example, the artist Nguyên Tử Nghiêm's father was killed during the land reforms (Scott, 2012: 259). One of his earlier lacquer paintings from this period (figure 5-7) shows the redistribution of wealth during the campaign. A water buffalo calf is being given to poorer villagers (a water buffalo is valuable in Vietnamese farming), with its parent in the background seemingly feeling the parting. The inclusion of the confused and unhappy looking child in the corner (symbolising the loss that some suffered so that others could gain) indicates the artist's ambiguity about the process of reform. The group of peasant figures around the calf are bending their heads, perhaps to suggest humble gratitude, but there is not a sense of rejoicing, rather the sense they are not sure how to react. How much of the reading of this painting has been shaped by knowledge of what the artist endured during the campaigns (Ninh, 2005: 125, Scott, 2012: 259) is difficult to ascertain, but its layers of meaning

Figure 5-5 Nguyên Tử Nghiêm (1957) The Buffalo calf. [Lacquer on Board] 45.5 × 63 cm.In: Naziree, Shireen (2013) From Craft to Art: Vietnamese Lacquer Paintings. Bangkok: Thavibu Gallery. Pg 24.

are built by the material techniques alongside the significance of the charged content of its subject matter.

The painting itself is something of a showcase for technical prowess, with its mottled, matt reds representing the earth dappled with sunlight through the trees, the swirling gold highlights (silver leaf with a layer of uncoloured lacquer) and dramatic tropical greenery (lacquer, green pigment painted over silver leaf) which dominate the composition. The luxuriant treatment of the foliage contrasts with the more muted, sketchy figures below, most of whom seem to be women and children, perhaps a deliberate choice to avoid the implication of violence. The use of green in a lacquer painting would have had a novelty value, as he and Tô Ngọc Vân had been proud of discovering green pigments which were compatible with lacquer resin during their time working at the Phú Thọ commune - previously it had not been possible to create a green colour (Nguyễn Quang Phòng, 2014:183).

Nguyên Tử Nghiêm has stated he does not like the painting, although it is unclear whether his dislike is due to aesthetic reasons, or whether he is disowning the image because it depicts a less-than-utopian representation of government policies. Ninh (2005:125) describes Nghiêm having severe anxiety and attacks of nerves due to his failure to complete the land reform campaign's assigned tasks – and presumably his fear over the consequences of this. Arguably, this led to Nghiêm's artistic practice changing conspicuously during this period, from representational lacquer pieces depicting celebrations and community events, to a very distinctive simplified, 'modern' style which he attributed to returning to his roots, and being inspired by Vietnamese folk prints and village art. Despite having admired a number of French painters, such as Gauguin and Matisse, and later Picasso, in interviews about his art it is emphasised that his later paintings draw only on Vietnamese traditional art. Nguyen-Long (2017: 127) describes his influences thus:

> 'Inspired by the arts of the village rather than the arts of the court, Nghiem explored the ancient architectural heritage of the village, in its communal house, pagoda and shrine… (which had been) dismissed by colonialists'

See the figure 5-8 for an example of his simplified, playful depiction of children playing. Whether done consciously or not, by avoiding associations with the old elite (which he was born into), Nguyên Tử Nghiêm has earned the accolade of being one of the most authentically Vietnamese artists of his generation as well as simultaneously being described as 'modern' (Taylor, 1994:111, Nguyen-Long, 2007:127, Trinh Tuan, personal correspondence, 2014).

While it is highly likely that Nguyên Tử Nghiêm, as with many other artists, was inspired by significant images from his childhood and specific aspects of his own culture, the necessity of

repeatedly stating it demonstrate the pervasive angst around national identity and artistic authenticity that has haunted Vietnamese practitioners. Whatever the underlying reasons for the change in style of his work, the drawing from Vietnamese tradition seems to suggest an attempt to demonstrate national identity, to 'Vietnamize' as urged by political leaders. The leaning towards 'primitive' rather than academic aligns his work with modern art movements in Europe (even while denying referencing them), and so protected this style of work against claims of backwardness. As Huynh (2005:175) comments:

> 'It was a challenge for artists in the North of Vietnam to find an individual path not linked to Chinese and Soviet influences within the guidelines of Socialist Realism. A number of artists related their inspiration to tradition, particularly folk art, in order to get a break, if not an escape, from rigid political orthodoxy.'

Later, in 1960, Nguyên Tử Nghiêm requested permission to leave the communist party, another indication that their restrictions were not easy for artists to endure, being arguably fundamentally incompatible with artistic practice as personal expression.

Figure 5-6 Nguyen Tu Nghiem (1974) Children at Play. [Lacquer on Board] 60 x 90cm In: Ushiroshoji, Masahiro (2005) 50 years of Modern Vietnamese Paintings 1925-75. Tokyo. Sankei Shinbun. Pg 101

There was considerable pressure on intellectuals to represent the peasantry in a positive light. French-trained artists and writers, most of whom came from relatively privileged families, and who had previously earnt their living selling to those wealthy enough to buy art and books, had to radically rethink their practice. Land and cultural reforms emphasised people's origins, which resulted in poorly educated, illiterate peasants being put in charge of organizing complex transitions; the results were not monitored adequately, and at worst occasioned unfettered hooliganry. As a result, Vietnamese intellectuals began to feel under threat on account of their class origins and education.

As the first ally to recognize Hồ Chí Minh's government, Beijing sent missions of Chinese advisors 'and it was under their ideological, political, and cultural tutelage that ideological rectification (chính huấn) classes were opened' (Boudarel, 1990: 154). These classes consisted of criticism and self-criticism sessions, followed by confessions. Artists had to listen to agricultural peasants criticising their paintings. The resulting frustration at the lack of understanding of painting as a format is evident in their accounts, which include criticism for any stylistic device which did not adhere to the field worker's own experience of reality. Art criticism as it evolved in Vietnam was endorsing the most unimaginative, literal representations of life, so that 'the masses' could understand. In 1948, for example, Nguyễn Quang Phòng (1997:250) harshly describes a painting by Tô Ngọc Vân, depicting Hà Nội resisting foreign invasion, symbolised by a woman brandishing a sword exhibited, as a 'total failure' stating that:

> 'The viewers could not accept the …challenge to science (flying woman), featuring a non-representative personage (a petty bourgeois woman).'

He goes on to ask the question, 'should the artists trained under the old regime undergo an ideological reform?' (*ibid*). This verbal attack on an established artist, who had been authorised to open a national art school run along the same lines as the Communist party - in that when joining you had to pledge allegiance to your new 'family', relinquishing your blood relatives (Taylor, 2004: 49) - indicates how severe and narrow the new criteria had become in terms of acceptable portrayals of 'truth'. One is left to wonder whether, had Tô Ngọc Vân not died at Điện Biên Phủ in 1956 and attained heroic status after his sacrifice for his country, he may not have been another victim of the notorious scandals, which led to ostracization and imprisonment for a number of artists and writers in the late 1950s.

Between 1946 and 1954 a good number of artists went to military zones to support the anti-French resistance war. As they were usually on the move and had to travel light, it was impractical to work in lacquer. The majority of artists were involved in the war effort and certainly those best remembered in the official version of Vietnamese art history. However,

astonishingly, given the dominant political rhetoric pertaining to artworks, a few artists living in non-combat areas continued to produce still life and portrait paintings 'that assumed a salon character' (Phạm Hoàng Hải, 2007: 43). For example, the still life by Lê Huy Hòa (see figure 5-9) stands out in stark contrast to most other lacquer paintings of the era, for its elegant arrangement of its apparently unpolitical subject-matter. A protégé of Tô Ngọc Vân, the artist had joined the resistance, but despite being included in many of the Vietnamese art history books, there is very little written on how this image relates to artistic trends or practices in Vietnam at the time. The off-centre silhouette of the elegant chair and flowers framed by bold blocks of red and black background are contrasted with the subtle surface texture of the vase, and the wood and inlay design on the chair, depicting a lifestyle that does not seem to correlate with idealised representations of the proletariat.

Another example is Phạm Viết Song (1917 – 2005), an alumni of the EBAI, who went on to work for the Department of Culture and Information to manage a programme called art for the masses. He organized classes in central areas in Hà Nội, open to all ages, available as part-time and evening classes, which became known as the 'Hang Buom Street Art School for the Masses', familiarly known as 'old Song's classes'…'where many of Vietnam's most famous present-generation artists were nurtured' (Naziree, 2006). Song followed the traditions of academic fine arts institutions by teaching the rules of perspective, composition and colour theory.

Thus, painting traditions were sustained, from teachers to students who went on to become teachers. Landscape painting had been popular in Vietnam during the colonial era, when Inguimberty took the students out to the countryside to paint en plein air (Taylor, 2004: 25) and a as a genre, it continued to be favoured, post-independence. A widespread designation of painting, encompassing a range of forms, landscape painting is generally agreed to correlate 'with human images of the world at different times and places, which in turn reflect cultural idiosyncrasies' (Wolf, 2008: 6). Place, particularly place of origin and early experience shape one's sense of identity: how much more must this have been the case in a culture where one is linked by one's ancestors to specific areas and villages, in addition to having had to suffer foreign invasions. Huỳnh Kim Khánh, (1982: 20-7) asserts that attachment to the village, and therefore to rural landscape is entrenched in the Vietnamese psyche, due to the tradition of ancestor worship and returning to the village of one's ancestors for cult rituals that reinforce the importance of ethnic origins. Whether landscapes were painted out of love of the artist's homeland, or aesthetic choice because the light or composition was particularly scenic, as

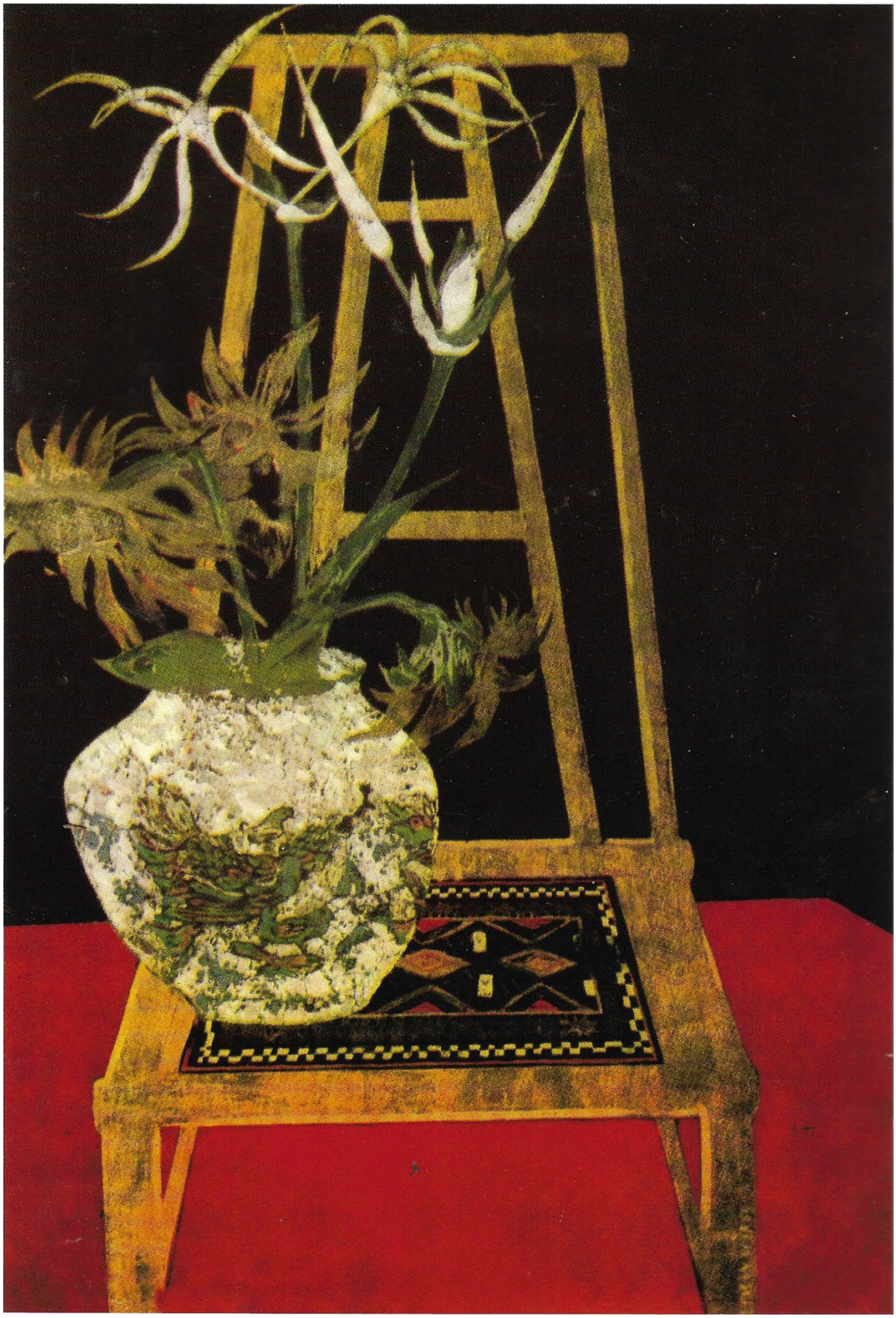

Figure 5-7 Lê Huy Hòa (1958) Still life on Bamboo chair. [Lacquer on Board] 60 x 40cm. In: Quang Việt (2014) Hội Hoa Sơn Mài Việt Nam (Lacquer Painters of Vietnam). Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Mỹ Thuật. p 86.

Taylor (2004: 46) acknowledges, there were clear similarities between French colonial paintings of Vietnam and Vietnamese works in the socialist realist style,

> 'which at times translated into romantic realism – for it needs to be acknowledged that Vietnamese literature and poetry – tinged with romanticism – has been integral to the Vietnamese cultural psyche' (Naziree, 2013:39).

The link between romanticism and patriotism is further highlighted by the poet Huy Can (cited in Schütte, 2003:9), who stated 'The period was romantic' and after the victory at Dién Bién Phu, the Vietnamese had been *ivre de Victoire* - drunk with victory and patriotic pride: 'one is a romantic because one is a patriot' (*ibid*).

Figure 5-8 Trần Văn Lưu [Photograph] The Xuân Áng Commune at Phú Thọ, artists left to right Tô Ngọc Vân, Nguyễn Sỹ Ngọc, Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm, Nguyễn Khang, Nguyễn Sáng, Trần Văn Cẩn, Nguyễn Đỗ Cung. In: de Menonville, Corinne (2003) Vietnamese Painting from Tradition to Modernity. France: Arhis

The quest for a truly Vietnamese form of expression led to Tô Ngọc Vân to open the Xuân Áng commune in Phú Thọ, an area known for the good quality lacquer produced there. There, he and Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm worked together to create a 'resistance' style of lacquer painting and promoted lacquer as a 'painting medium with special significance for Vietnam.' (Scott, 2012: 205). As a result, surprising though it may seem,

> 'All the hardships and devastation during the war did not hinder the development of lacquer painting, a difficult medium… the government commissioned artists to work in this medium and allocated the costly materials in advance. The focus on lacquer as an artistic form grew from the success it gained during the colonial days and the intention of preserving tradition for the purpose of a national form' (Huynh, 2005: 162).

Part of the reason that lacquer was promoted may well have been simply because it was an indigenous material, and therefore available, unlike costly imported paints from abroad.

Tô Ngọc Vân became one of the best-known advocates of lacquer as a painting medium. He gave a speech at a National Congress in 1948 and wrote an article based on that speech, which has been reprinted in a number of journals as well as in the memoirs of Nguyên Giá Trị by Nguyễn Xuân Việt. Tô Ngọc Vân discusses the innovation of the Vietnamese use of resin lacquer and responses over its use as an art material, rather than in decorative furniture-making. He refers to the decreasing appeal of oil paint amongst avant-garde artists such as Picasso, suggesting that lacquer paint could be the modern future of art (cited in Nguyễn Xuân Việt 2009: 426-434).

Tô Ngọc Vân's claims regarding the potential for lacquer to revive painting were refuted by both Dinh Phuc (*Văn Nghệ*, 1949: 25), who essentially argued that a material or technique could not revive an art form, and fellow graduate, Nguyễn Đỗ Cung. At the conference in 1948, Nguyễn Đỗ Cung argued that the acclaimed lacquer painter, Nguyễn Gia Trí had come to a dead end with lacquer developments. Despite having travelled to Japan to study lacquer in 1940[36] (Đông Tác, 2007-2022), he seems to have turned against lacquer as an artistic medium, associating it with creating works that appealed to bourgeois taste. His argument seems to have been based partly on the disagreement he had had with Évariste Jonchère, claiming that "he oppressed us into handicrafts" (Scott, 2012: 656-7), which demonstrates once again the conflicting perceptions – and status - of Vietnamese lacquer painting among communities of artists there.

While working at the Phú Thọ commune the artists worked on developing a broader palate by experimenting with different pigments, and were proud of discovering green, Nguyên Tử Nghiêm boasting that it was a product of the war (Nguyễn Quang Phòng, 2014:183). Certainly, it

[36] Năm 1940, đi Nhật tìm hiểu nghệ thuật sơn mài Nhật Bản.

was the result of the conditions of working, and perhaps also the necessity of representing soldiers in khaki amid forests. Nguyên Hiêm's image of troops marching at night (figure 5-9) is revolutionary in terms of appearance, in particular the colour range: looking at a photograph one would assume it is an oil painting, rather than a lacquer, which traditionally features deep reds and gold leaf etc. The practical experiments with pigments were in keeping with the mood of the times, and many works in this period exhibit muted tones, suggesting the hardship and poverty that was being endured and celebrated for being for a worthy cause: independence.

Figure 5-9 Nguyên Hiêm (1957) Marching at Night. [Lacquer on Board] 100 x 150cm In: Nguyễn Quang Việt (1995) Hội Hoa Sơn Mài Việt Nam (Lacquer Painters of Vietnam). Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Mỹ Thuật Pg 83

Merging romantic patriotism with observation of combat and rapidly changing conditions in Vietnam, it is notable that the landscapes depicting this era contain very little gore or explicit violence. Artist and soldier Pham Thanh Tam, (2005:15) opines:

> 'There is an aesthetic in war...because the events you are witnessing are too dreadful, it is up to the artist to use his art to reaffirm life itself and to communicate his belief in a better future. The French and Americans burned entire villages. War is so hard, I wanted to make the soldiers feel better by showing them something beautiful.'

In some paintings, for example the famous mountainous scene *Reminiscences of a late afternoon in Tay Bac* (1955) by Phan Kế An (1923-2018) it is the scenery that dominates the composition:

Figure 5-10 Phan Kế An (1955) Reminiscences of a late afternoon in Tay Bac [Lacquer on Board] 69.8cm x 112.3 cm. In: Nguyễn Quang Việt & Trường Hạnh (1994) Tranh Sơn Mài. (Lacquer Paintings). Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Mỹ Thuật Pg 25

the small figures of soldiers in the foreground are literally just passing through (see fig. 5-12). In Europe, during the eighteenth century and much of the nineteenth, history painting was highest in the hierarchy of genre painting, landscapes were considered a lower, less intellectual subject: scenery only served as a background to humans, who were centre stage. Figure 5-12 suggests the opposite perspective.

The painter Phan Kế An (1923 - 2018), who was the son of Phan Kế Toại, a senior mandarin and former vice prime minister of North Vietnam, was in one of the last cohorts to graduate from EBAI, who was honoured by being appointed by the Viet Minh to be the commission editor at Sự Thật (The Truth) newspaper. In November 1948, he spent three weeks in secrecy with Hồ Chí Minh and his closest advisors, producing twenty portraits of the iconic Vietnamese resistance leader. In addition to satirical cartoons published to criticize foreign imperialism, he continued to work in lacquer to create striking, romantic landscapes, using gold leaf to create the impression of sunlight and highlights. The luxurious materials are used to create surprisingly realist representations of landscapes and their inhabitants (see figure 5-13).

Despite the continuum, in the transition from the colonial era to independence there are notable differences in what was represented: the tranquil landscapes focusing on plants and the natural environment produced by the students of and teachers of the EBAI became populated with busy soldiers and field labourers, patriotically supporting the cause. The students and teachers of the resistance class had been tasked to create persuasive propaganda, and these paintings are

Figure 5-11 Phan Kế An (1955) Reaping Rice Paddy in Viet Bac [Lacquer on Board] 49.5 cm x 64.5cm. In: Ushiroshoji, Masahiro (2005) 50 years of Modern Vietnamese Paintings 1925-75. Tokyo. Sankei Shinbun.

sophisticated articulations of socialist ideology. It would seem that Phan Kế An paid a high, personal price for his loyalty to the cause, as he was one of the young patriotic urban intellectuals encouraged (some would say forced) to marry women from poor peasant backgrounds, thus demonstrating their private lives were at one with national campaigns (Schütte, 2003:13)[37].

Lacquer artist Trần Đình Thọ exemplifies the ability to combine knowledgeable observation with harmonious compositions. For example, *Bamboo* (1957 & 1960)[38], by Trần Đình Thọ is a lyrical depiction of bamboo growing on a muddy hillock in flooded lowlands, against a ridge of higher ground and hills (see figure 5-12). The minimal colours, dominated by a powerful red,

[37] This information was published in 2003, however, I heard it – or variations of it – repeated in a number of conversations in which the respondents asked not to be named.

[38] There are two paintings by that name, with the same composition and signed by the artist: one is housed in the National Gallery in Hà Nội, dated 1957, the reproduced image shown here is dated 1960, and also signed by the artist. Due to the risk of damage to paintings while Hà Nội was being bombed regularly, artists were asked to make copies of their most iconic works.

Figure 5-12 Trần Đình Thọ (1957) Bamboo [Lacquer on Board] 40.2cm × 29.7cm. In: Nguyễn Quang Việt & Trường Hạnh (1994) Tranh Sơn Mài. (Lacquer Paintings). Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Mỹ Thuật Pg 46

creates an almost unearthly atmosphere. Arguably, works like these would have been influenced by Tardieu's recognition of the popularity of Asian art in Europe: however, despite the commonality of bamboo as a motif of Asian landscapes, and the use of gold leaf to pick out highlights and delineate the delicate foliage, the earthy ochres and greens, along with the mottled reflections on the surface of the water (sanded layers of subtly modulated pigments), are distinctively Vietnamese, both in terms of the landscape depicted and the technique of layering and grinding pigments.

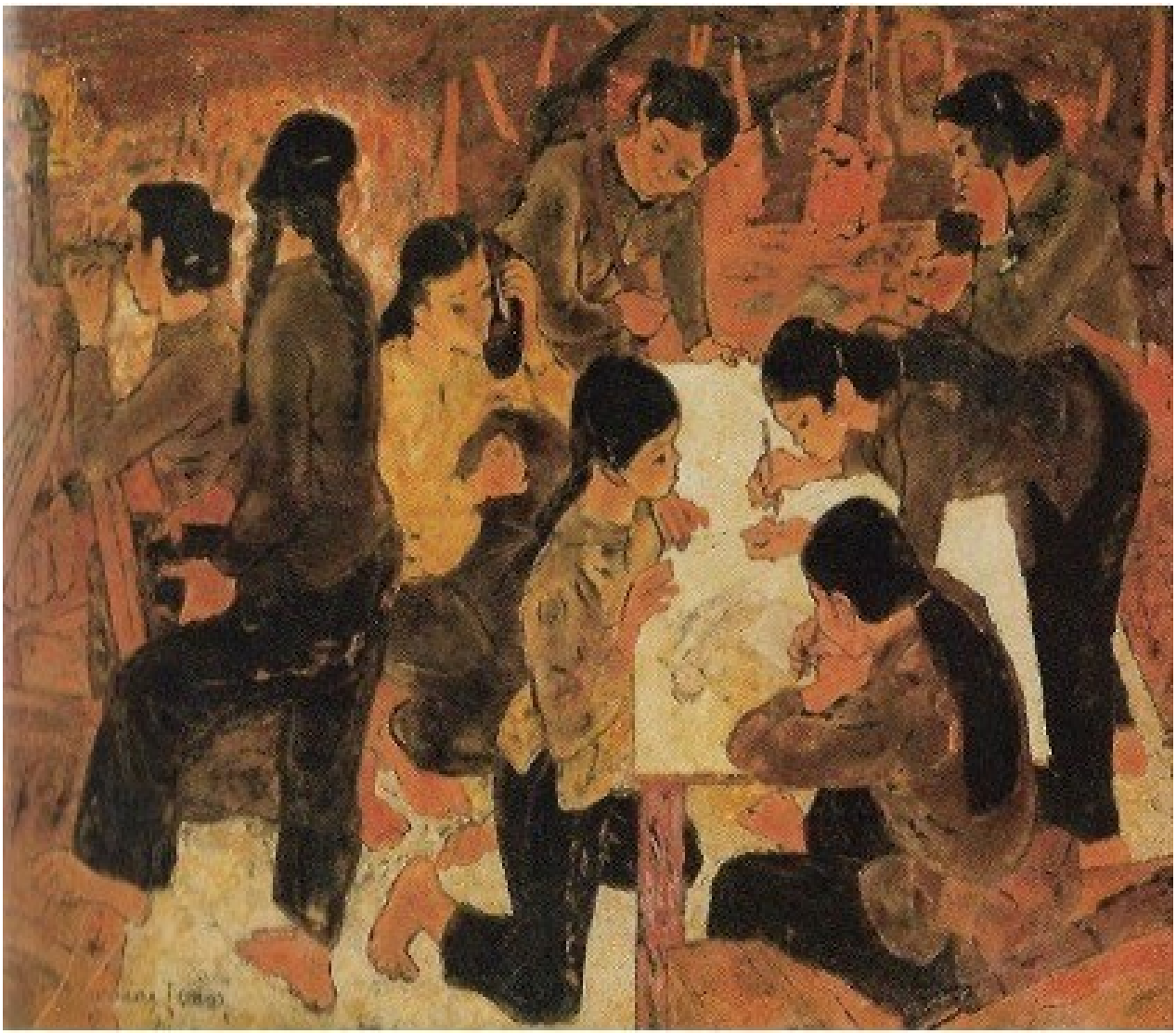

Figure 5-13 Hoàng Trầm (1974) Artillery women in Ngủ Thuỷ (Nữ pháo binh Ngủ Thuỷ) [Lacquer on Board]. 90 x 120cm In: Nguyễn Quang Việt (2014) Hội Hoa Sơn Mài Việt Nam (Lacquer Painters of Vietnam). Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Mỹ Thuật Pg 91

The attempts to demonstrate the efforts and achievements of the newly independent Vietnamese people ranged from crudely realised depictions of stereotypes to subtle, metaphoric and deeply moving depictions of both nostalgia for the past and the possibilities of this new era in Vietnamese history. The many sketches, prints and paintings produced in Vietnam during this time were a mix of reportage and observations of the everyday, which hold their value and

interest today, as it was also world-changing history in the making. Figure 5-13 by the artist Hoàng Trầm, shows a busy but informal gathering of women working together, focusing on maps and planning: the title, 'artillery women' seems slightly incongruous to describe this harmonious group, yet this serves as a reminder that not all of the war effort was about men on the battlefield. The 'birds-eye view' enables the whole frame to be filled with the activities of these women – the room and furniture in it is hardly noticeable.

Although this painting uses lacquer, the effect could not be further from the ornate inlay and goldleaf favoured during the colonial period. Following the straightforward lighter, higher contrast in the foreground, with darker more muted colours further away, the figures take up almost all the composition, with just a few props - the table and maps, the binoculars and the muted, warm tones suggest the weak light of makeshift poverty, whether a single electric bulb, or oil lamp or candle, as do their bare feet and simple clothes, the uniform black trousers and dull shirts. From the girls observing outside, and reporting to those mapping out movements and telephoning information through, the figures combine to form a triangular arrangement, which emphasises their unified effort despite their different activities. Apparently sketchy and simple, the composition, and management of understated colours is exquisite.

Born in Saigon, Hoàng Trầm studied at the Gia Đinh school of art before joining the resistance and moving to the north, where he graduated from the Fine Arts Institute in 1964. After working there for over ten years, he returned to the south, where he worked in the arts university in Saigon, and was chairman of the Arts Council from 2000-2005, winning the National Prize for Art and Literature in 2001. Along with many other Vietnamese artists of his generation, his first solo exhibition came late in life, when he was aged 82, in 2010.

A deservedly famous example of a talented artist, whose work was popular both for its political adherence to socialist realism, and its composition and painterly skill, is Nguyễn Đức Nùng, whose most well-known work, *Dawn at the Farm* (see figure 5-14), painted in 1958 in Phú Thọ province, shows a muscular farmer at work, waving to his comrades, the bright light of the dawn symbolizing the optimism at that time for the future of independent Vietnam. As Nguyễn Thanh Tùng (2016:1) in the Arts department of Huế university notes: 'The painting is like a word of support for the spirit of revolution, praise for the victory, and encouragement for the hardworking people at that time.' While the spirit was very much one with the ambitions of the Party, the observation of the light, the proportions of the figure, overall composition and perspective of the scene demonstrate his academic art training, something that came to be seen as the result of a flawed, bourgeois education system.

Figure 5-15 Nguyễn Đức Nùng (1958) Dawn at a Farm [Lacquer on Board] 50cm x 70cm. In: Ushiroshoji, Masahiro (2005) 50 years of Modern Vietnamese Paintings 1925-75. Tokyo. Sankei Shinbun. Pg 66

Figure 5-14 Nguyễn Đức Nùng (1957) Silk Weaving [Lacquer on Board] 65cm x 40cm. In: Nguyễn Quang Việt (2014) Hội Hoa Sơn Mài Việt Nam (Lacquer Painters of Vietnam). Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Mỹ Thuật Pg 67

Another of his famous works, the silk spinners (see figure 5-15), again shows the industriousness of Vietnamese workers. The use of a pale clay powder mixed with lacquer gives the pale, matt, unfinished look to the surroundings, the room in which the women work, while silver leaf overlaid with pigments creates the almost abstract impression of trees outside. This sketchy, unpolished appearance is an unusual feature in lacquer painting, which due to the layers required, is laborious. It looks modern in the sense of appearing to be a fleeting observational study, unfinished, as though the painting had been done in one sitting (which given the process of painting with lacquer, it could not have been).

Lacquer artist Hoàng Tích Chù (1912 -2003), who had opened up a studio in Hà Nội with other graduate lacquer painters from EBAI, Nguyễn Văn Tỵ and Nguyễn Tiến Chung, closed the studio in the mid-40s and, a staunch communist, joined Tô Ngọc Vân in the resistance movement, focusing on producing propaganda and helping covert army operations. He did, however, manage to continue to work in lacquer.

Figure 5-16 Hoàng Tích Chù (1958) Collaborative Efforts in the Highlands. [Lacquer on Board] 100 x 76 cm. In: Naziree, Shireen (2013) From Craft to Art: Vietnamese Lacquer Paintings. Bangkok: Thavibu Gallery. Pg 26

Perhaps Hoàng Tích Chù's most well-known work is *Collaborative Efforts in the Highlands* (1958) (see figure 5-16) which depicts an idealized landscape in the highlands, showcasing the productive harmony among peasant labourers in farmers' collectives that were being promoted in Vietnam. Hoàng Hải (2007:44) asserts that due to state subsidies:

> 'artists were provided with monthly salaries and materials. They were usually sent to factories, state-farms, cooperatives…most famous lacquer paintings then depicted working life or reminisced about the resistance.'

Hoàng Tích Chù's paintings adhere to the favoured subjects, although his chosen colours are warm and bright, which makes this artist's work distinctive. The brightness is atypical of the lacquer medium, demonstrating the recent success of experimentation with other pigments, and perhaps also, a deliberate disassociation from the lavish reds and golds used historically. It is also possible that the brighter colours suited his mode of expression, because later paintings continue to use interesting colour schemes which, despite the increase in different pigments available, are comparatively unusual in lacquer paintings. Hoàng Tích Chù, like many of his fellow graduates, went on to teach lacquer painting at the National School of Fine Arts after independence.

Figure 5-17 Hoàng Tích Chù (1961) Countryside. [Lacquer on Board] 50 x 54cm. In: Bucarelli, Angelo (2006) Il drago e la farfalla Arte contemporanea in Vietnam. Roma. Gangemi Editore.Pg 105

Artist's work developed in ways that cannot be described as adhering to socialist realism, certainly not in a poster, propaganda sense. In response to the Christmas bombings in 1973, the painter Phan Kế An (whose earlier works had celebrated the beauty of the natural landscape along with the patriotism of the Vietnamese people), depicts the jagged, chaotic, fragmented ruins of Hà Nội. The red so typical of traditional lacquer works used as an all-encompassing background, is not resplendent. Rather it seems to signify that the sky is ominous: threatening yet more bombs and destruction, brooding, dusty and jaded rather than the powerful, polished red typical of earlier decorative screens.

Figure 5-18 Phan Ke An (1985) Hanoi Christmas Bombings of 1972. [lacquer on Wood] At: Witness collection. At: https://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/art-entertainment/183625/war-inspired- artworks-by-vietnamese-artists-displayed-in-malaysia.html (Accessed on 15.10.2019)

5.3 Schisms

Even with the variety of work that continued to be produced in the DVR, implementation of Communist economic policies had profound consequences for artists who chose not to produce propaganda. The admired lacquer master, Phạm Hậu, closed his studio and settled for making smaller-scale work. Phạm Hậu's grandson stated that this was because, 'under the Communist regime, the government is the only legal organisation that can "conscript" people into national service' (Pham Tam, 2019, personal communication, 23rd June) so that anyone who hired two or

more workers was classified as a class enemy, would have all their possessions confiscated and be sent to a re-education camp. Given that Phạm Hậu came from an extremely poor family, was both a director and a respected teacher at the National School of Fine Arts, it is surprising that he should have been at risk of being accused of being bourgeois, but it is clear that at the time the Communist ideology of redistributing wealth had become embroiled in power politics. Lacquer studios, which relied on a number of artists and apprentices, had to be authorized by the party and named a commune or collective. In order to be granted that status, they had to produce propaganda. From a pragmatic point of view, most lacquer painters who did not feel they could project a positive vision of Communist Vietnam would have either decided to give up the practice, or to emigrate south, to what, between 1955 and 1975, had become the Republic of Vietnam.

One of these was Nguyễn Gia Trí, arguably the most famous lacquer painter in Vietnam. Amongst the reasons given by artists and researchers interviewed in Vietnam, I was told he moved because he and his mother were Christians, and Christianity was seen as a threat to the Party in the north but accepted in the Republic of Vietnam[39]. He did paint some Christian-themed paintings, but in his memoirs written by his apprentice there is the suggestion that he was Buddhist, rather than Christian (although any beliefs could have been perceived to represent a threat, in terms of commitment to the government's cause). An additional reason for his decision to move south may have been considerations around commissions: the government in the Republic of Vietnam were willing to provide commissions and subsidies for him, so that he could continue making beautiful lacquer paintings using expensive materials such as high quality mineral pigments and gold leaf, while in the north, artists were expected to live in basic conditions on farms or on the battlefield, making propaganda in a socialist realism style, so as to support government policies. Given the way Nguyễn Đỗ Cung had publicly criticised lacquer as an artistic medium along with Nguyễn Gia Trí's work at the conference in 1945 (Nguyễn Quang Phòng, 1996:251) because it depicted a life of 'abundance' which now needed to be forgotten, it is understandable that the artist felt that his ornate, idealized landscapes and elegant women would not be acceptable to the government in the newly-formed Democratic Republic of Vietnam, so he left his birth place, travelling first to Hong Kong, and then settling in Sài Gòn.

[39] After the division of Vietnam in 1954, Ngô Đình Diệm renamed the South the Republic of Vietnam, and Eisenhower pledged his support for the new government, offering military aid. The United States began their Operation *Passage to Freedom*, a propaganda campaign that offered assistance to those that wanted to move from the north to the south. Rumours that the Viet Minh would slaughter Catholics, or anyone suspected of not supporting communism abounded.

Throughout all the political upheavals, he continued to correspond with his old teacher, Inguimberty, and his letters discuss how his work is evolving, at times complaining about the specific difficulties of trying to work with layering different types and ages of lacquer on half-finished compositions (Pentcheff, 2012: 66). Letters demonstrate that he also maintained a correspondence with the art critic, Claude Mahoudeau who he had met at an exhibition in Hà Nội in the late 1930s. In 1943 Mahoudeau commissioned a painting called *La perfection ou femmes et jardins du Vietnam* (see fig.5-21). The name suggests that Mahoudeau was impressed by other paintings that the artist had created representing similar subjects, such as *The Fairies* (c. 1938) Nguyễn Gia Trí did not complete the commission until 1959.

Figure 5-19 Nguyên Giá Trị (1943-1959) La perfection ou femmes et jardins du Vietnam. [Lacquer on wooden panel] 50.6 x 65 cm. At: http://jeanfrancoishubert.com/2020/03/24/nguyen-gia-tri-la-perfection-ou-femmes-et-jardins-du-vietnam (Accessed on:06.06.2020)

The finished work that had been commissioned in the 1940s and completed in the late 1950s is considerably looser in style and more abstract than his earlier compositions that Mahoudeau would have seen. The garden foliage seems to merge into colour masses containing the ethereal and incomplete figures of both clothed and naked females. There are three areas of colour, red, brown and black: the greeny brown covers the greatest area, working as a neutral background on which the strong reds, blacks, with the white and gold highlights stand out. If earlier works had represented 'experience as a flux…fleeting impressions and shifting indeterminate forms' (Scott, 2012:119) this shows the artist's growing fascination with abstract painting, celebrating the materiality of the medium itself, and the relationships between surface colour, line and pattern. The smoky gradients of polished and subtly sanded goldleaf in contrast to the muted olive brown and the deep black is particularly striking.

Figure 5-20 Nguyễn Gia Trí (1938) By a Lotus Pond. [Lacquer on Board] 120 x 210cm In: Nguyễn Quang Phòng (1997) Các Họa Sĩ Trường Cao Đẳng Mỹ Thuật Đông Dương. (Painters of the Fine Arts College of Indochina). Hà Nội: Nhà xuất Bản Mỹ

During a visit to the artist Bùi Quang Ngọc's house in 2016, a friend of the renowned lacquer artist, I saw a painting by Nguyễn Gia Trí, which although damaged and darkened manifests the distinctive attention to detailed pattern and contrasting surface finishes which are so typical of Nguyễn Gia Trí's work. The composition of the painting is almost identical (if not actually identical) with a lacquer painting accredited to Nguyễn Gia Trí in what a Hà Nội Fine arts publication states was produced in 1938 (see figure 5-20).

At Bùi Quang Ngọc's house (2016), I heard a number of different stories about how the painting had become so badly damaged. Bùi Quang Ngọc (2016, personal communication, 9th August) asserted that his friend had had a strong sense of who he felt a suitable buyer would be and was aware of the importance of his work being hung where people would see it. During the colonial era he had cultivated friendships with people who were influential in the art world, and when he moved to the south of Vietnam, he sold to people like Mr. Pierre Pagès, the Governor of Cochinchina, and Madame Nhu, the glamorous wife of President Diệm's brother and advisor, Ngô Đình Nhu, and it is the latter that they claim to be the provenance of this particular painting.

Figure 5-21 Nguyễn Gia Trí (c. 1965) Women in a Garden [Lacquer on board] 182cm x88cm. In: Private collection. (2016) [Photograph] Thomson, E. Farnham. UK

His daughter, HonHoa says she heard that the painting fell from the palace walls and was therefore considered bad luck. However, Bùi Quang Ngọc asserted that the secretary at the palace had acquired it from Madame Nhu, after her husband and his brother were killed and she went into exile. After 1975, when the Viet Minh marched in to Sài Gòn, the secretary, who was wealthy either left the country (one of the boat people) - or was sent to a re-education camp, so his wife, who hated the new government, threw the painting outside so that it would be ruined, because she did not want the Viet Minh to profit from looting her house. Whatever the truth, the various versions accurately reflect real tensions as Communist power extended south. As Huynh (2005:190) asserts: 'The fall of Saigon in 1975 put visual arts of the period in an untenable position, with most of the artworks either destroyed or relocated outside Vietnam.'

Bùi Quang Ngọc a portraitist who has produced numerous paintings of Nguyễn Gia Trí and other artist friends, knew that a damaged painting by Nguyễn Gia Trí was probably the only one he

was ever likely to be able to afford and so bought it cheaply, and asked his friend, Nguyễn Gia Trí to help him repair it. It would take a team of restorers to take the pieces and reassemble them on a new board, as it is the base itself that has been damaged, but as a result the painting has two signatures, both Nguyen Gia Tri, one from the 1950s (so was this a copy, or new version of an older work, one perhaps lost due to bombing or having been sold abroad), one from the 1960s, when he tried to repair it (there is an odd, textured section, which apparently was done to cover one of the cracks: overall, however, the size and depths of cracks going into the base board have compromised the surface stability, so any repairs will not be able to entirely replicate the original).

Figure 5-22 Detail from: Nguyễn Gia Trí (c. 1965) Women in a Garden [Lacquer on board] 182cm x 88cm In: Private collection. (2016) [Photograph] Thomson, E Farnham.UK

There are, indeed, frustratingly few artworks from that period and many from previous times seem to have disappeared then, too. Huynh goes on (*ibid*) to argue that the Viet Minh's victory has meant that Vietnamese art history marginalizes Vietnamese art produced in the south, although, she asserts that it was where 'most modern art practices of this era occurred' because the region had not been dominated by rigid Communist directives. Huynh (2005:190) clearly adheres to dominant art historiographical reading of modern art practices being those followed in Europe and America, with Communist art being regressive.

Huynh (2005:189) maintains that the modern art produced in Sài Gòn was a direct result of French influence, with the National Fine Arts College of Sài Gòn (NFACS) established in 1954 being a continuation of the FACI in Hà Nội. Certainly, at that time it's director, Catholic artist Lê Văn Đệ was a graduate from the Hà Nội School, who had studied in Paris and exhibited in Europe, including at the Vatican, so the continuation of French artistic tradition in South Vietnam is plausible. However, she also claims that American influence meant a greater tolerance to a range of artistic styles denied to artists in DVR. One of the examples she gives is one of the last EBAI graduates, Tạ Tỵ (1922-2004) who had a number of exhibitions, and won prizes for his work, joined the resistance, but left after a few years, saying he could no longer sympathise with their aims. He returned to Paris, and then to Sài Gòn, where he lived, painted and exhibited, but also served in the army of the Republic of Vietnam until 1975, the end of the second Indochinese war, when he was sent to a re-education camp. After that, he and his family left Vietnam by boat, sailed to Malaysia, and from there moved to California. He has been claimed as a southern artist, exemplifying many of the modernist artistic styles vilified in the north, such as cubism and abstraction (see fig. 5-23 for an example of his work).

Even without the political differences caused by the division of Vietnam, the wartime conditions present significant difficulties for art historians, in that many works were lost or damaged. Artworks were often undated or unsigned, which combined with few records of exhibitions, and the practice of making copies of important works, make it very difficult to trace the provenance and authorship of artworks.

Additionally, there appear to be some discrepancies in the records of graduates from the French established École des Beaux-Arts, despite these being the focus of most of the publications by the Nhà xuất Bản Mỹ Thuật (the Fine Art publishers based in Hà Nội) and international scholarship on Vietnamese modern art. It is becoming increasingly clear that the official records provided in *The history of the Hà Nội University of Fine Arts 1925 - 1999*[40] (1999), which has

[40] Trường Đại học Mỹ thuật Hà Nội 1925-1990 was published by the state-run university

Figure 5-23 Tạ Tỵ (1946) Women, Chinese Lantern and Doves. [Lacquer on Board] 97 x130.7cm. In: Ushiroshoji, Masahiro (2005) 50 years of Modern Vietnamese Paintings 1925-75. Tokyo. Sankeishinbunsha P 44

been used as the basis for other scholarship, such as Taylor's PhD and book (2015, personal communication, 24th August) has some notable omissions and irregularities in the lists of students and graduates, particularly with regards to lacquer practitioners from the south of Vietnam.

For example, lacquer artist Trần Hà (1911- 1974), who is not listed among the students in the early 1930s at the École des Beaux-Arts in Hà Nội. He appears, however, in photographs with other known students, for example at an exhibition by Nguyễn Phan Chánh (1892-1984), which due to the silk paintings on show can be dated as being before the 1931 colonial exhibition in Paris (see figure 5-24). As an artist, Trần Hà is perhaps best-known for a lacquer painting called *Call* (c. 1940) depicting a mythical hunter based on folklore of the central highlands, using Japanese-style techniques of polishing to produce an entirely flat, almost mirror-like, shimmering surface. It was bought by a university professor Trương Văn Chôm, and so preserved for future generations. Trần Hà went on to open a lacquer studio in Gia Đình producing decorative lacquer furniture (Nguyễn Quang Việt, 2019). He also participated at the

1959 Kỷ Hợi Spring exhibition[41] yet his work is rarely mentioned in the majority of published accounts of Vietnamese art history.

Figure 5-24 Photo of an exhibition held before 1931, showing Trần Hà (holding a hat) At: http://tapchimythuat.vn/my-thuat-hien-dai-viet-nam/chan-dung-hoa-si-tran-ha-mot-phuong-trinh-nhieu-an-so/(Accessed on 20.01.22)

Lê Quốc Lộc worked at the Department of Propaganda in North Vietnam from 1945 and gained a rapid promotion to the head of the Painting Department in the Propaganda department (Military Zone 3). Having become well-established in his early career, Lê Quốc Lộc went on to work at the Vietnam Arts and Crafts' Association and was a member of the Vietnam Fine Arts Association. Significantly he also became the deputy director of the École des Arts appliqués de Gia Định in the south of Vietnam (*Vietnam: the art of war*, *s.d.*) from 1959 to 1967. In various biographies printed in Vietnamese art collections it is claimed he studied at École des Beaux-Arts EBAI from 1936 – 1942, but it is puzzling that the attendance of such an acclaimed artist is not recorded in *The history of the Hà Nội University of Fine Arts 1925 – 1999*. Jones (2016, personal communication, 5th August)) suggests it is possible he studied the foundation course, which many student artists did before going on to complete the higher course, or that he was one of the 'unofficial' students that could not afford to attend full-time but were allowed to join classes when they could. His work in the south of Vietnam would have enabled him to connect with artists that fall outside the official historiography of Vietnamese painting, for example he is

[41] Triển lãm Mùa xuân Kỷ Hợi năm 1959 do Trường Mỹ thuật Gia Định, the Gia Định arts school exhibition

known to have worked closely with the lacquer artist, Lê Thy (1919-1961, full name Tran Minh Thi), who is listed as having attended the preparatory classes with Nam Sơn, but according to records, did not go on to study at a higher level (which, unless it is an administrative oversight, suggests that Lê Quốc Lộc also studied at that level, although what difference that made in terms of what was taught is unclear).

According to Lynda Trouve (2019) during the Indochina War, while Lê Quốc Lộc was a known Vietminh activist, Lê Thy set up a studio in Sài Gòn, exhibited his paintings in Europe and was selling Lê Quốc Lộc's lacquer paintings, without a signature, but with the brand name, *Lê Thy - Furniture-45, rue de Verdun. Saigon* on the side of the paintings, an arrangement that continued until 1955 (See Appendix 7). While it is understandable that Lê Quốc Lộc may have wanted to earn an additional income during those difficult years, his motive for not signing his work when he was an established artist causes some confusion regarding his oeuvre. It suggests that either he felt it was necessary to be clandestine, regarding the production and selling of non-socialist realist styles (through contacts in the American-affiliated Republic of Vietnam), or he, along with many other artists, preferred to keep his more commercial activities private.

In Vietnamese art writing, until very recently, the focus has been on works produced by artists from Hà Nội, many of those who graduated from or were taught by graduates from the French established École des Beaux-Arts, with the achievements of artists from the south of Vietnam marginalised and unacknowledged (Huynh, 2005:190). In particular, there has been little written about the achievements of lacquer artists who set up their own lacquer studios, hiring apprentices and selling commercially, which is how the artists Lê Thy, Trần Hà and later Nguyễn Văn Minh (1934 -2005) were able to continue producing lacquer. Whether the omission of these artists is due to geographic rivalry or dissonance, or disapproval of the mode of their working and selling remains an unanswered question. However, international galleries are beginning to gather research to attempt to locate some of the missing artworks and biographical information.

In one of his later paintings, *From Darkness* (1982), the characteristic irregularly shaped houses, and dark roofs are contrasted with the light in the house where army cadres are saluting to demonstrate their allegiance. Compared to the earlier painting which uses traditional red and gold, the latter one is starker, more sombre, less opulent (Figure 5-26). Additionally, the silver leaf used for the sky does not try to merge so that the reflected light and pigments imitate the sky; it does not try to disguise what it is, the square pieces are clearly visible, a reflexive drawing attention to the material and medium, rather than affecting to represent reality. Even with the clearly patriotic subject matter, the lyricism and stylish composition clearly demonstrate his academic study of painting.

Figure 5-25 Lê Quốc Lộc (c.1940) Scenery of a fishing village. [Lacquer on board] 140x100cm At: http://tapchimythuat.vn/suu-tap-collection/bo-suu-tap-collection-tap-chi-tet-2020/ (Accessed on 16.09.2019)

Figure 5-26 Lê Quốc Lộc (1982) From Darkness [Lacquer on Board] 122 x 120 cm In: Trần Văn Cẩn et al (1987) Contemporary Vietnamese Painters. Hanoi: Red River Pg 43.

Figure 5-27 by the same artist, *Bamboo* (1980) shows a distinctively Art Deco influence, a semi-abstract, geometric, stylised design, which exudes urbane sophistication and is reminiscent of Japanese works that would be classified as decorative, which contrasts with works produced by other artists based in the DVR before Đổi Mới.

Interestingly, it was in 1954 the Gia Đinh school became the National school of decorative arts[42], where EBAI graduate, the director, Lê Văn Đệ (cited in Way, 2019:125) stated that the development was due to American funding through USOM (United States Aid Mission) to create a pavilion to sell Vietnamese art and establish 'an institute of design where technicians can experiment with new methods of fabrication.' This description seems to suggest a shift back to the idea of technical skill training with the intention of creating high-end crafts for the US market – an idea which echoed craft school endeavours during the colonial era, and utilised the graduates from institutions developed then, as teachers and directors. Way (2019:26) outlines how the US State agenda fostered a number of programmes promoting 'craft aid', with the

[42] Trường Quốc gia Trang trí Mỹ thuật Gia Định

Special Technical and Economic Mission (STEM) providing equipment for the National Arts college in Hà Nội, as well as in south Vietnam.

Figure 5-27 Lê Quốc Lộc (1987) Bamboo (Tre) [Lacquer on Board] Unspecified Dimensions In: Nguyễn Quang Việt (2014) Hội Hoa Sơn Mài Việt Nam (Lacquer Painters ofVietnam). Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Mỹ Thuật. Pg. 64

After graduating from Gia Định National School of Decorative Arts, Nguyễn Văn Minh (1934-2005) was encouraged, by his teacher Lê Văn Đệ, to do an apprenticeship at the Trương Tiểu technology Centre. As a result, he was sponsored by USOM to study lacquer at the Japanese National art and Industrial research institute in the early 1960s. Returning to Vietnam he opened the Mê Linh lacquer centre with fellow lacquer student, Nguyễn Văn Trung, which, despite only being open for ten years, was extremely successful, and employed a number of lacquer painters. In addition to commissions from Japan, a Jesuit priest helped find buyers, which suggests Lê Văn Đệ continued to support them. In 1975 they both emigrated to the U.S.A. and the almost legendary lacquer centre was closed.

Figure 5-28 Nguyễn Văn Minh (s.d.) Mẹ và con. (Mother and child) [Lacquer on Board] 120x80cm

Presumably because of his Japanese training, many of Nguyễn Văn Minh's works are reminiscent of older, Japanese screens, use gold as a background to contrast with irises, cherry blossom and other favoured Japanese motifs. Figure 5-28 shows a more typically Vietnamese theme, an intimate scene, that of a mother breastfeeding her child.

Post-1975, it has been difficult to find out about the life and works of these southern lacquer artists, although what has been uncovered demonstrate that fewer constraints on artist studios and working in teams has led to a different kind of production and dissemination of artworks. Given the context, it is to be expected that artists who worked with Americans or other politically unaffiliated foreigners would be perceived as enemies and omitted from the official narrative of Vietnamese national art history. Glimpses of the resentment these interventions caused appear in a booklet on the topic of *Vietnamese Handicrafts* (1959) published in Hà Nội by the state-run Foreign Languages Publishing House, which states that: 'the U.S. control over South Vietnam has resulted in massive imports of American goods and in the subsequent ruin of local handicrafts…(the divide of the country has) cut off the traditional interflow of goods between the North and the South.' The attitude towards foreign trade is obvious, and so perhaps, the attitude to artists that engaged in it.

5.4 Scandals

Artists were able to exhibit and trade relatively easily in the southern republic of Vietnam compared with the claustrophobic censorship in the DVR, where the increasingly hostile attitudes that artists and intellectuals were subjected to had made life increasingly difficult for them in the newly independent nation. Along with the catastrophic implementation of the land reforms, an additional scandal caused by dissatisfaction with heavy-handed state control, known as the Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm affair took place in the 1950s. Using the titles of two short-lived journals published in Hà Nội in the early 1950s. *Nhân Văn* (Humanities) and *Giai Phẩm* (Masterpieces) were set up, edited, written and illustrated by

> 'an illustrious group of intellectuals, writers, academics and artists, virtually all of whom had loyally served the DRV party-state in the past…the journals attacked the increasingly dictatorial, repressive and corrupt character of communist rule and called for a range of liberalising reforms' (Zinoman, 2016:188).

Nhã Thuyên (2014) describes the effect of the scandal on the artist Trần Duy, who was employed as the secretary of Nhân Văn journal, stating that it 'was never a completed historical event. It is still a choking block of darkness that has not vanished… an unjust debt that cannot be

Figure 5-29 Trần Duy (s.d.) Coriander. [Lacquer on Board] 170x200cm In: Nguyễn Quang Việt &Trường Hạnh (1994) Tranh Sơn Mài. (Lacquer Paintings). Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Mỹ Thuật Pg 28

settled for generations'.[43] Fired from his job, Trần Duy (1920-2014) survived continued to paint and scratch out a living from friends and acquaintances buying his work after his involvement in the scandal. Although he did work in lacquer, he became better known for his silk paintings: whether that was because he found the medium suited his ways of working better, or whether he could not afford to continue working in lacquer is unclear. Figure 5-29 shows an unusual lacquer painting by him, of the herb coriander in flower, the lacy umbels and lobed leaves create a poetic, slightly ghostly image, reflecting the artist's predilection for painting nature (and avoidance of any form of heavy-handed political message).

Considering the wider historical context within which this now-notorious scandal emerged, significant factors were: Joseph Stalin had died in 1953, and there was a recognisable movement towards de-Stalinization, particularly after Nikita Khrushchev's secret speech denouncing Stalinist purges in 1956. In the same year, in China, a 'let a hundred flowers bloom' campaign encouraged artists and intellectuals to speak out against censorship. Vietnamese intellectuals would, perhaps, have felt encouraged that there may be a paradigm shift in Communist governance in their own country.

Boudarel (1991:170) describes intellectuals' desperation to be allowed to express themselves.

> 'Dissenters, denied freedom of speech to discuss their concerns openly, began to nói bóng nói gió (talk with shadows and winds - that is, speak in metaphors)…The stories in the journal were clearly metaphors for the discontents of their writers - for example, …a goldsmith interviewed by the author told him: I won't lecture you on literary theory, so please don't come here thinking you can teach me my craft. At this point, the publication was banned.'

Taylor (2001: 116) states that 'this conservative and repressive move in Vietnam undermined artists confidence and affected morale throughout the 1950s and 60s.' Contributors to the journals were accused of 'betraying the interests of the Communist Party, the Nation and the Vietnamese people' (Taylor, 2001: 115). Their appeals for freedom of speech had been interpreted as something close to treason.

One of the central figures of the controversy was the writer and poet Trần Dần, who had travelled to China, and it is likely he was influenced by the Chinese literary critic, Hu Feng, who was arrested for his letters challenging official control of literature. It is generally agreed that Trần Dần had incurred censure prior to the Nhân Văn, Giai Phẩm affair for a number of reasons. He had offended the Communist Party with his criticism of officially approved artistic works and

[43] Nhân Văn – Giai Phẩm chưa bao giờ là một sự kiện lịch sử đã hoàn tất. Nó còn là cái nghẹn chưa trôi, một khối bóng tối chưa tan, một khúc nôi chưa xong những giãi bày, một oan nợ khó quyết toán qua nhiều thế hệ.

as a political teaching cadre who failed to adhere to the orthodox party line. His marriage to a Catholic businesswoman caused additional disapproval (Hanoi Ink, 2011). However, it was the treatment of the patriotic subject in his most famous novel*, Người người lớp lớp* (Men upon men, waves upon waves), which was based on his experience at the victorious battle at Điện Biên Phủ, that led to his involvement in the scandal. Refusing to depict one-dimensional, working-class heroes, Trần Dần's depiction of soldiers in battle was deemed too raw, and thus constituted a threat to patriotism (presumably because it did not overtly rally readers to join the great cause). Trần Dần was jailed, and while imprisoned he attempted suicide.

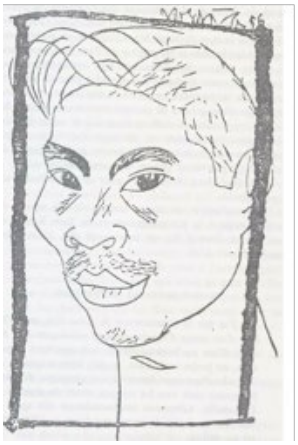

Figure 5-28 Nguyên Sáng (1956) Portrait of Trần Dần. [Pencil Sketch] At: http://www1.rfi.fr/actuvi/articles/121/article_6594.asp. (Accessed on 18.10.2019)

A sketch of Trần Dần by artist Nguyễn Sáng was published in the first Nhân Văn journal, in September 1956 (a significant detail is the scar on his neck, a tell-tale sign of his suicide attempt in prison.) The painters Nguyễn Sỹ Ngọc and Nguyễn Sáng had also participated in the resistance movement against the French and had joined the Viet Minh in the mid-1940s. They were members of the Communist Party, and both of them had been in the Xuân Áng commune of lacquer artists at Phú Thọ. Nguyễn Sáng had won the National Art award in 1954. However, their (fairly minimal) involvement in this affair resulted in Nguyễn Sỹ Ngọc being sent to a labour camp for two years while Nguyễn Sáng was barred from employment

Figure 5-29 Nguyên Sáng (1978) Bronze wall of our nation [Lacquer on Board] 125x245cm In: (2005) 50 Years of Modern Vietnamese Painting. [Exhibition Catalogue]Tokyo. Sankei Shimbun. P 93

with the Arts Association (Taylor, 2001: 115). Most of his better-known works depict patriotic subjects: for example, *The enemy burned my Village* (1954) and *Joining the communist Party at Điện Biên Phủ* (1962). However, he was blacklisted because his paintings, which depict some of the fear and brutality of the war were seen to be 'too harsh' and 'too western' (Taylor, 2001: 120).

Banned from exhibiting, Nguyễn Sáng lived as a pauper for the remainder of his life, although he continued to paint, refusing to find any other kind of work. He used chalk to plan compositions for his paintings, mapping out ideas on the tiles of his floor, relying on friends to give him commissions and buy materials for him so he could paint. His style of lacquer painting is distinctive in that he does not use inlay or gold, and very little silver leaf. The effect is austere, relying on colour and composition, rather than detailed decoration. The title of the painting (figure 5-30), *Bronze wall of our nation* describes the defence mounted against foreign invaders by the Vietnamese and is clearly shown in the 'wall' of Vietnamese facing towards the viewer, while the tall intruders approaching them are seen from behind.

The less multi-layered way of using lacquer could have been in part due to financial constraints, but it is also likely to be a reflection of his impulsive and rather hot-tempered personality. He is described as having a 'southerner's temperament' which led him to argue with Joseph Inguimberty (Nguyễn Quang Phòng, 1996: 247). In fact, Nguyễn Quang Phòng (1996: 251) gives the impression of not having a very high opinion of either Nguyễn Sáng or his work, recounting an incident when Inguimberty gave him low grades, and describing his painting as 'nothing outstanding' because it had been 'strongly influenced' by his previous training at the southern École de Dessin Gia Đinh, where Nguyễn Sáng had studied before attending EBAI. Whether the art historian's disparagement is due to politics, regional differences, personal dislike based on jealousy of his talent can only be surmised. However, it reinforces the idea that the status of artists and craftsmen, and how they are linked to ideas around production and trade was every bit as controversial in Vietnam as in other parts of the world during this period.

The outcomes of the Nhân Văn – Giai Phẩm affair remain a politically sensitive subject in Vietnam today, and as Zinoman (2016:192) notes, it led to the

> 'institutional infrastructure, still in operation today, for policing Vietnamese artists and intellectuals – an interlocking network of so-called "professional organisations" known as the writers Association, the Music Association, the Theatre Association and the Fine Arts Association.'

However, as this chapter has demonstrated, some of the lacquer paintings created during the first decades of independence are extraordinary. The many limitations on Vietnamese artists

dictated by ongoing warfare and the accompanying ideological shifts, did not hinder the continuum of lacquer painting as an artistic practice. Paintings that depict ostensibly socialist realist subjects still exhibit many aspects of painterly technique and aesthetics as had been taught by the French. However, stylistically, it is clear that many painters were influenced by modernist trends in Europe and elsewhere, reflexively drawing attention to the process of delineating the flatness of the two-dimensional surface, often creating the effect of gestural brushstrokes, and unfinished sketchiness even when the process of lacquer is comparatively unspontaneous. The word 'art' or 'artful' are defined in dictionaries as being skilled, intentional. It is evident that even within the seemingly rigid constraints on subject matter there was, nonetheless, a range of responses to the political agenda imposed on artistic practice. The final chapter will explore the ways in which individual artists negotiated the challenge of transition, from state control to an open market

6. ĐỔI MỚI AND AFTER: LACQUER ART AND CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE

This chapter surveys the thriving world of contemporary lacquer painters in Vietnam, and the ways in which they responded to the challenge of dealing with of international sales and exhibitions of lacquer art, so as to position the art form within contemporary modernist discourse. As Huyssen (2007:190) asserts:

> 'alternative geographies of modernism have emerged on our horizon since the rise of postcolonial studies and a new attentiveness to the genealogy of cultural globalization.'

The language around art has changed over the past century to reflect shifts in political power and ideological frameworks which influence taste and readings of art, and both the production and reception of Vietnamese lacquer painting can be seen through a different lens. The metaphor palimpsest epitomises the re-envisaging of a technique of layering and rubbing away, building upon existing images, so that different perceptions are revealed, and what has been obscured becomes visible. Asian lacquer is inextricably bound up with tropes of decorative arts and traditional crafts, despite its inception in the 1920s being clearly linked to European modern painting: dominant art historiography continues to affect responses to Vietnamese lacquer painting in the international art market.

In general terms, it was in the 1990s that a number of countries from the communist bloc began to trade internationally again, and globalisation became the dominant market force. As Burawoy (2001:149) observes: 'the present era of globalization springs not only from the erosion of colonial orders but also from the decentring of the nation state.'

In Vietnam, Đổi Mới (open door, or renovation policy) was officially announced in 1986: however it was when the subsidized economic system collapsed and changed market trading in the 1990s that there was a significant impact on art production and sales. Since then, according to the World Bank (2019), in Vietnam: 'between 2002 and 2018…poverty rates declined sharply from over 70% to below 6% …, and GDP per capita increased by 2.5 times' which demonstrates that it has been an economic success story (Le Hong Hiep, 2012: 146). Over the past few decades Vietnam's economy has thrived, signalling a new engagement with capitalism.

However, as with many of the communist countries that opened to trade and tourism, Vietnam kept a tiered price system in hotels, for travel and for many other commodities, and most visitors (particularly those who looked non-Vietnamese) were likely to be charged more for goods and

services. This was based on the assumption that those from capitalist countries would be wealthier, but it was also due to an understandable sense of having been exploited in the past (during the colonial era, and by American military interventions to prevent Vietnam's independence). There was a level of distrust and resentment, along with the recognition that the imbalance of power in colonial relationships have in some ways been echoed in what has been described as cultural imperialism, in terms of artistic production, audiences and potential buyers, and again, this creates tensions for Vietnamese artists and art collectors, galleries and dealers. Romare (1998:87) describes how increased access to a commercial art market was detrimental because 'In the very hard years after the victory… many of the collectors' families saw themselves forced to sell out to the West'.

There has been a huge increase in the prices paid for works by established artists, such as Lê Phổ, Nguyễn Phan Chánh and Bùi Xuân Phái: in 2017 one of Lê Phổ's works was bought at auction for more than a million US dollars mark in the international art market (Toan *et al.* 2018:1). However, there has also been a lot of media coverage on forgeries and copies. Making multiple copies of a painting or other artwork is only an issue when done to defraud buyers as to its status or value (copies may be done for a number of reasons, such as to learn and practice techniques, as a parody or as a form of homage). However, even in national institutions in Vietnam, this is a grey area. In the late 1960s; under threat of bombing from the US, museum officials working at the Hà Nội National Gallery, decided that in order to protect the artworks they would have them removed to the countryside for safekeeping, and commission copies to be made to display in the museum. Some of the copies were done by the original artists, some by their apprentices, and some by skilled copyists in the museum's restoration department. The works were of excellent quality. The monitoring of the process was less impressive. The Chairman of the Artist Association at the time admitted: "When the artists took them home, they could make more than one copy. They could keep the original. We had no way of knowing" (Mydans, 2009). This has led to a number of famous paintings being in two places at once, engendering considerable confusion regarding provenance, how to identify or value the pieces.

The lack of established dealers and legal regulations contributes to the difficult in establishing the provenance of artworks. In the international art market, Vietnamese and other Soviet art was invisible for decades in terms of exhibitions and sales, because of the cold war. Top auction houses such as Christies, Sotheby's, Bonham's and Philips feature Vietnamese lacquer painting from the colonial era, and some works from the late eighties onwards, though even these are more visible in Hong Kong Auctions than European ones. Thus, the chance to encounter Vietnamese art or artists was limited, and audiences would struggle to contextualise their significance.

So much was lost during the war years and the lack of records of when artworks created in Vietnam were first produced, exhibited and sold has an impact on their value. Investigating the achievements of Vietnamese artists when so many of their works and the associated documentation is missing has had an impact on how Vietnam's artistic heritage is understood. For example, as Taylor (1999: 245) points out, Bùi Xuân Phái (like Van Gogh) was an easy target for forgeries due to the lack of recognition and documentation during his life. Having been one of the victims of the *Nhân văn Giai phẩm* affair, and therefore not a member of the Arts Association, the works of Bùi Xuân Phái were barely exhibited to the Vietnamese public. This meant that the majority of his work had been either sold to international aid workers and tourists, exchanged or given to friends and acquaintances. As a result, when his work became popular[44] there were many incidents of forgeries and fakes, resulting in a lot of negative press coverage (Taylor, 1999: 232). Somewhat surprisingly it is one of Bùi Xuân Phái's sons, Bùi Thanh Phương (2009: 15), who is responsible for some of the most high-profile exposure of forgeries of his father's work, because he challenged Sotheby's auction house in 2008, claiming that the paintings accredited to his father, Bùi Xuân Phái, were copies.

Bùi Thanh Phương (2013:113) also wrote an account of how he told an unnamed American art collector that the painting he bought, with Bùi Xuân Phái's signature on it, was a fake. The buyer returned to Vietnam, to the dealer colloquially referred to as Café Lam, and demanded his money back. Allegedly the art collector argued that because in the past he and Bùi Xuân Phái 'had to experience a lot of hardship, invasion and exploitation brought about by capitalists, empires and colonists… it is to be expected that we exploit them (in return).' This anecdote encapsulates the problem. Historic encounters with western peoples have led, for some, to an attitude that now Vietnamese are entitled to cheat and extort money from Westerners, which does not make for a healthy relationship in the art trade and the publicizing of such cases has resulted in art collectors being more wary of buying art from Vietnam.

Within Vietnam, the Arts Association, as the branch of the state apparatus most involved in monitoring and evaluating artistic work, controls artistic exhibition and therefore sales. There are a number of government-supported art exhibitions, prizes and competitions held annually. However, it is clear that they have a specific agenda that underlies their criteria for the kind of art and artists that they will endorse and encourage, which, although considerably relaxed when compared to the 1950s, still controls (or tries to control) public exhibition.

[44] Bùi Xuân Phái's paintings have sold for between $600 USD to $58,710 USD (Mutual art, 2022).

> 'In Vietnam, all art exhibitions must apply for an official exhibition permit from the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. The purpose of this board is to regulate the exposure of art to the general public according to the state's wishes and needs.' (Libby, 2011:209)

A number of exhibitions are closed every year, with a variety of reasons given, but generally anything that appears to reflect a negative impression of Vietnamese society or governance is targeted, with a particular sensitivity around anything depicting Vietnamese women showing hedonistic tendencies. Some accuse the government of censoring 'anything they cannot understand' implying they have limited knowledge of different art forms. This has led to an increase in performance art and experimental art forms that allow 'dodging' censorship.

However, in the case of the more traditional format of painting, the combination of censorship and international buyers has, arguably, led to a preference for 'safe' subject matter, earning Vietnamese painting a reputation for being conservative. Simonetti (2016:10) argues that Tardieu had encouraged a tradition of 'harmonious' painting, in keeping with French academic orientalist painters, who depicted landscapes and societies devoid of any signs of the colonial context they were created in. In the early days of independence, the ideology that promoted the production of socialist realist propaganda demanded an idealised but 'realistic' depiction of Vietnam. After Đổi Mới, with the increase in tourism, for many Vietnamese painting has become known as being a relatively high-quality souvenir (Edwards, 2009:201), providing skilled copies of famous artworks or easily digestible Vietnamese landscapes peopled by happy peasants or girls in national dress.

For those who have visited Vietnam for less than a month, and followed the expected tourist trail, the perception of Vietnamese painting is likely be that it is churned out and deliberately saleable. Libby (2011:211) describes how it is not unusual to hear serious Vietnamese artists explaining how their work is intrinsically better than the works exhibited in tourists' shops. Unfortunately, it is a difficult argument to win conclusively because the art market is notoriously fickle and art buyers have their own criteria, in terms of what they think is worth buying. However, while it is indisputable that there are a number of similar themes and compositions in paintings available in small galleries in urban centres throughout Vietnam, it would be inaccurate to dismiss all landscapes or representational work produced there as kitsch.

Contemporary lacquer artist Bùi Hữu Hùng (b. 1957) has gained considerable commercial success with his paintings of girls in various forms of national dress, along with altars and bowls of incense, and so his work has been criticised for appearing to cater for the market. Variations on this theme are recognisable throughout much of his oeuvre. These comprised the core of his

exhibition *A Novel Tradition*, held at the upmarket, private Apricot Gallery[45] in 1999, which was pivotal in establishing his reputation as an artist. Along with establishing Nhà Sàn Studio, a traditional wooden house on stilts at west lake in Hà Nội, Bùi Hữu Hùng has worked with a number of respected lacquer artists, including Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm[46] and exhibited at a range of independent galleries in Vietnam and abroad since the 1990s. He uses lacquer to create polished, flat surfaces, with subtle shifts in colours, so that different areas of the of his paintings appear to fade away in places so that other elements stand out. Taylor, (1999b:86) describes his figures as

Figure 6-1 Bùi Hữu Hùng (1995) North West Afternoon. [Lacquer on Board] 122 x 122cm. In: Bui Huu Hung: Vietnam Nostalgia. Viet Gallery. Virginia, USA. Vietgallery Pg 123.

[45] The Apricot Gallery is located in the popular tourist area of the old town in Hà Nội, close to Hoàn Kiếm lake. It also has branches in other cities, such as in Mayfair, London.

[46] *The Sacred Seasons* (1997) Notices Gallery, Singapore

'suspended in mid-air' which evokes the dreamlike, weightless shimmer of surface qualities that make these images something other than an indulgence in nostalgia. His lacquer paintings explore the suggestion of depth and distance, evoking an atmosphere suggestive of timeless infinity (see figure 6.1)

For Vietnamese painters, the availability of an open and international market offers the opportunity to sell artworks for profit: however, given that for the past three decades Vietnam had been fighting to defend itself against foreign invasion, has been a difficult transition because along with an understandable resentment towards foreigners, it presents the difficulty of a largely unknown audience, and one that is liable to make judgements in relation to a canon established in very different circumstances. Despite the difference in the relationship between the painter Bùi Hữu Hùng and his subject matter, the motif of this quintessentially Vietnamese way of life has been criticised for its resemblance to orientalist paintings of an imaginary 'other' and for pandering to tourist expectations, in terms of representing an idealised vision of a historic Vietnam untroubled by colonial interventions.

In the late 1980s, Stephen McGuinness, a visitor to Vietnam, met by chance some Vietnamese artists (as I did a decade later), and recognized that Vietnamese art would:

> 'speak to a wide spectrum of art lovers. The work contained elements of Chinese and other Asian cultural conceptions which would appeal to the connoisseurs of Chinese art…(but) also seemed readily accessible to westerners…'
> (McGuinness, 1991:VI)

McGuiness, Jeffrey Hantover and Nguyễn Quân worked together to put together an exhibition of contemporary Vietnamese painting in the *Plum Blossoms* gallery in Hong Kong and record the problems they had persuading Vietnamese artists to work with them. Whether this was in part an unwillingness to cooperate with foreigners, given recent history, or anxiety about the Party monitoring communications and artistic output, is difficult to ascertain. Given the internal tensions resulting from the scandals in the fifties, and the concerns that the artists who had been implicated had been subjected to continued surveillance, many artists felt their dealings with foreign buyers was better kept secret. Hantover (1991:33, 1995:16) describes how Đổi Mới had enabled greater freedom in the visual arts, so that artists are able to express themselves and choose their own preferred subjects. He does, however, refer to the continued control over artistic production, including censorship and legal persecution of those deemed to criticize the government, such as the novelist, Duong Thu Huong, who was under house arrest at that time.

Edwards (2008: 201) asserts that because Vietnam artists have demonstrated their skill at producing 'decorative painting and crafts (it) has contributed to this relative disinterest from the

rest of the serious art world.' This view, which distinguishes between intellectual weight (seriousness) and commercially orientated (and therefore trivial) decorative craft, reinforces the widely held belief that the categories are mutually exclusive. However, out of those who seized opportunities to exhibit and sell artworks for profit, some have continued to produce what they themselves would consider tourist art for profit, while also producing their own work: others have gone on to have solo exhibitions and establish themselves as artist who exhibit in non-commercial galleries.

One such artist, Lý Trực Sơn (b. 1949), whose works shows considerable development over the span of his painting career in that many of his early paintings were of the popular and predictable subject of stylised Vietnamese women in national dress, but over time his work has become more

Figure-6-2 Lý Trực Sơn (2017) Blue Distance [Lacquer on Board] 70 x 70cm.[Photograph courtesy of the artist

abstract, focusing more on painterly qualities. Considered an accomplished and innovative artist, mostly known for his skilful and experimental work in lacquer and dó[47] paper (his painting *Trembling Space* was bought at 100 million VND in 2020).

In 1989 he held a joint exhibition with artist, historian and critic, Nguyễn Quân which 'contributed to establishing dó paper as a unique independent material' (Tia Sáng, 2009). Reviews of his paintings often refer to his ability to work with indigenous materials and sensitively convey a 'true' national spirit (still a key concern in Vietnamese art criticism). Obviously interested in and influenced by European painting, he spent around ten years travelling and painting in Europe, visiting Paris and Berlin to study art and paint, a variation on the grand tour. When he returned to Hà Nội, he had his first solo exhibition at the age of 60. There were around twenty lacquer paintings which were admired for their finesse.

In Vietnamese art history terms, he is described as being:

> 'Located in the bridge generation of the art of transition from "Sang, Nghiem, Lien, Phai" to Doi Moi…he belongs to the same age as artists such as Dao Minh Tri... born during the resistance against the French in the late 40s and early 50s and grew up in the anti-American resistance war, known as "art cadets" trained by the resistance school...graduates of To Ngoc Van's teaching' (Vũ Lâm, 2011)

In addition to highlighting the importance of association and relationships with other established artists, the description of being a 'bridge' generation is evocative: in a sense all generations bridge from the previous to the new, but in this particular context the wars had shaped the greater part of his particular generation's lives. Inevitably, the struggle to be an artist amid the disruption and constraints of war meant a very different training and experience than the older generation, with less freedom than the younger generation of artists who could really make a name for themselves in the open market. There is a sense that this generation of artists felt overshadowed and frustrated over the limited opportunities (*ibid*). Yet it is artists like these, who have traversed a wide terrain in terms of the changing role of art and artists, that are producing some of the most interesting contemporary lacquer paintings.

Opening up to international trade inevitably led to lifestyle changes in Vietnam, and the rise of a new middle class. Researchers in this field express uneasiness with 'importing' the concept of 'middle-class' or 'bourgeoisie' into transitional economies of ex-communist countries in the throes of rapid social changes (Geciene, 2005: 82). While Vietnam is not a post socialist society in political terms, it shares with Eastern European socialist societies the experience of a communist class

[47] Paper made from bamboo fibre

structure prior to the dismantlement of their centralized economies. Therefore, while Geciene's cautionary note is relevant, the fact that this sociological phenomena is the subject of analysis in *The Reinvention of Distinction: Modernity and the Middle Class in Urban Vietnam* by Nguyen-Marshall *et al*. (2011) suggests it is a factor in Vietnamese contemporary culture.

Amongst other things, the emerging middle class, or nouveau riche comprises a new generation of, audiences, viewers, consumers, collectors and buyers. Taylor (2011: 116) observes that the open market had enabled

> 'hundreds of Vietnamese artists …to live quite comfortably on the profits they have made in annual sales of dozens if not hundreds of works to tourists and international art buyers.'

This has made being an artist a popular career choice. However, as is always the case with increases in quantity, it does not guarantee an increase in quality. Taylor (*ibid*) notes that artists themselves are part of the middle class who are starting to buy and collect art, amongst other things. In terms of artistic practice, there remain a variety of approaches, those who feel art should challenge the status quo, and those who want beautiful things to decorate their homes.

6.1 Abstraction: an emerging trend.

The tensions between government restrictions and the newly available market have inevitably impacted on artistic production. The political context has reinforced the link between representational art and socialist realism, so that for many artists abstraction signifies both a greater freedom of expression, and an avoidance of the explicit messages that dominated forms of propaganda. As Levasseur (2009:141) argues that the art schools established in Huế and Sài Gòn followed the model of the French established art school in Hà Nội, and that 'Two main trends inspired the artists from the South: Abstract Expressionism coming from the USA and Lyrical Abstraction, or Art Informel, stemming from the school of Paris.' She also (Levasseur, 2009:148-151) refers to the influence of Chinese landscape and ink paintings, in some Vietnamese lacquer artist's abstract work. From the influence of Inguimberty's réalité poétique to more recent influences, the result is many semi-abstract paintings that are loosely based on observation, but revel in the material qualities of the medium.

From Vietnamese pioneers such as Nguyễn Gia Trí and Tạ Tỵ, the next generation has continued to explore abstract painting. Considering that abstract art had been such an anathema to the party, who saw it as inaccessible to the worker and part of a decadent Western tradition, this shift towards acceptance of more experimental art forms is likely to have been influenced by the

reunification of the North and South of Vietnam in 1975. As Corey (2015:136) notes, the slower transition in the south allowed for greater continuity, including the creative legacy from the 1960s and 1970s, abstract painting.

Contemporary lacquer artist Nguyễn Xuân Việt worked as an assistant to Nguyễn Gia Trí, and now sells most of his work directly from his studio, in Hồ Chí Minh City. Born in Thailand, he has lived in Vietnam most of his adult life and specialises in lacquer painting. Author of *Nguyễn Gia Trí's words on creation* (2009), a collection of the late artist's advice, reflections and recollections, most of Nguyễn Xuân Việt's large-scale abstract lacquer panels get sold for interiors of prestige buildings in Singapore and Hong Kong. Figure 6-3 shows one panel from a five-piece painting, an untitled commission. The range of textures, along with the overall sense of movement in the composition are particularly impressive when seen full-sized and together.

Figure 6-3 Nguyen Xuân Việt (2014) Untitled. [Lacquer on Wood] 210 x 120cm. [Photograph] (2014) Thomson, E.Farnham. UK

Nguyễn Gia Trí always asserted that he would not waste his time teaching (Bùi Quang Ngọc, 2016, personal communication, 9th August), so Nguyễn Xuân Việt was not officially his student; rather, he would have learned through observation and practice, assisting the master lacquerer in his studio. The prestige of the connection has clearly been instrumental in Nguyễn Xuân Việt's career, which reinforces the way that belonging to schools, groups or communities of artists makes individual artists part of a network. As Irvine (2013) argues:

> 'What makes something an artwork is not an observable property in an artwork itself. The work is a node in a network of forces without which it would be unrecognizable - literally invisible.'

Throughout Vietnam there are a number of local artist associations, aside from the government department, and these provide support for artists[48] in different geographic locations. Huỳnh Hữu Ủy (2008: 115) describes the *Hội họa sĩ trẻ Sài Gòn* (Young artists of Sài Gòn) as 'the avant-garde art group of Sài Gòn before April 3, 1975' (the group had a reunion exhibition in Texas in 2012). Of the original members two of the best-known surviving, practicing abstract painters are Nguyễn Lâm (b.1941) and Hồ Hữu Thủ (b.1940).

Figure 6-4 Nguyễn Lâm (1990) The Structure [lacquer on Board] 27.9 x 40.6cm In: Nguyễn Lâm (s.d.) Lacquer Paintings Nguyễn Lâm. [Catalogue]

[48] "Nhóm nghệ thuật tiền phong của Sài Gòn trước 3/4/1975"

Nguyễn Lâm, who has won numerous prizes both internationally and in Vietnam, established himself as an artist in the early 1960s. He is described as [49] 'an excellent representative of the abstract lacquer that he has pursued for decades, his paintings are all about tight colour compositions' (Doanh Nhân, 2012) Actually his abstract compositions cover a vast range, from semi-geometric, high contrast 'industrial' images to organic, eroded away surfaces which tease out and explore the possibilities of natural lacquer. Today Nguyễn Lâm is known as a bậc thầy – a master - 'one of the few senior painters who has pursued traditional lacquer art for more than half a century' (Đỗ Dương, 2013).

Figure 6-5 Nguyễn Lâm (2008) Abstract 5. [lacquer on Board] 80 x 80 cm In: Nguyễn Lâm (s.d.) Lacquer Paintings Nguyễn Lâm. [Catalogue].

[49] Nguyễn Lâm là một đại diện xuất sắc của sơn mài trừu tượng mà ông đã theo đuổi từ nhiều thập niên qua, tranh ông đều là những bố cục màu sắc chặt chẽ.

Figure 6-6 Nguyễn Lâm and his daughter, Huyền Lam working on the restoration of a panel of a painting by Nguyễn Gia Trí [Photograph].

In addition to commanding respect for being one of the most skilled and prolific lacquer painters of his generation, Nguyễn Lâm has been involved in a number of restoration projects. He is referred to in particularly high-profile repairs of works by Nguyễn Gia Trí and due to his outstanding skill and knowledge, has been involved in the restoration of paintings in public buildings in Saigon, including the library and the French Embassy. He has nine children, six of whom are also artists, reaffirming how important lose familial associations are with artistic production in Vietnam. Figure 6-6 shows him working on cleaning and restoring a panel of a lacquer painting by Nguyễn Gia Trí, with his daughter, Huyễn Lâm who is also a lacquer artist.

Figure 6-7 Hồ Hữu Thủ (2004) The scent of a flower [Lacquer on board] 60 x 60 cm. In: Le, Lan & Le, Brigitte (2005) Hon Viet – Transcending Traditions. Virginia, USA: Gallerie Brigitte, Inc.

His work is often compared to his friend and fellow graduate Hồ Hữu Thủ, who paints dreamlike abstracts and semi-abstract both in lacquer and oils. Having been very successful internationally, Hồ Hữu Thủ continues to work independently in Ho Chi Minh city, producing numerous canvases and lacquer paintings. The crossover in materials and methods is evident in both his oil painting and his lacquer works, in that both explore surface texture and the properties of matt, opaque pigmented areas in relation to glossy, reflective mixed media, whether gold leaf or experimental textures which create harmony and the suggestion of depth in the abstract compositions: see figure 6-7.

One of the most famous abstract lacquer painters in Vietnam, Trương Bé (1941-2022) was originally from Quảng Trị, in central Vietnam. He started his artistic career as a soldier, or art cadet, and having earned Party approval in the 1960s for arranging exhibitions to boost morale in what was then the demilitarised zone in central Vietnam (the site of some of the fiercest battles during the war years, while Vietnam was divided), he went on to study at the National College of Fine Arts in Huế, graduating in 1974. That arts institution had been founded in 1957: the first director, artist Tôn Thất Đào (1910-1979), was another EBAI graduate who returned to his home town, and set up a new arts institution there, based on his studies in Hà Nội. Although mostly known for his oil and silk paintings, Tôn Thất Đào did work in lacquer, and was a well-respected teacher. Trương Bé became director there, 1997-2001.

Figure 6-8 Trương Bé (2000) Oriental Rythym (Nhịp điệu phương đông) [Lacquer on Board] 110 x 200 cm. In: Nguyễn Quang Việt (2014) Hội Hoa Sơn Mài Việt Nam (Lacquer Painters of Vietnam). Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Mỹ Thuật Pg129

Trương Bé was given funding to do a Masters' at the Hungarian University of Fine Arts in Budapest (Trương Bé, 2016). From then on, his work developed a clear trajectory in abstract art, which lacquer is particularly well-suited to, given the range of surface textures available that add richness and depth to abstract compositions. His preference for abstract art, which he describes as 'the ultimate art, because it is purely aesthetic expression' (Trương Bé, 2016, personal communication,14th August) is noteworthy given his artistic career having started as an art cadet producing propaganda. Insiders like Trương Bé would have influenced state departments that oversaw exhibition and censorship, contributing to the increasing freedom for visual artists, in terms of the style and genre of art forms.

He has produced a number of series of distinctive abstract paintings in lacquer, huge panels of richly-textured shapes and lines, evoking a sense of energy, dynamism akin to (and yet distinct from) Jackson Pollock's action painting (see figure 6-8). However, despite the energy and playfulness, Trương Bé's work is more consciously composed, and uses a wider variety of techniques to produce a more varied surface areas, and the suggestion of depth as well as the linear movement. In addition to showing his work in Vietnam, Trương Bé has had exhibitions in France, Thailand and Singapore, and has gone on to have a number of exhibitions both in Vietnam and internationally, selling works through Christies.

Using a slow-drying, layering process may not seem the obvious medium for paintings composed of gestural brushstrokes, drips, dribblings, flow and pouring of liquid paint onto the surface. These

Figure 6-9 Trương Bé (2019) Cluster of Galaxies [Lacquer on Board] 120 x 90cm. At: https://doanhnhansaigon.vn/my-thuat-am-nhac/hoa-si-truong-be-tu-thien-dia-nhan-den-nhip-dieu-vu-tru-1094441.html (Accessed on: 23.03.2020)

are what most viewers will recognise and understand of the artists' process of painting: the processes of sanding, inlay and polishing are only apparent to those who understand lacquer painting techniques, but are unlikely to be registered by most viewers, other than the appreciation of the sensuality of the rich and varied surface that is characteristic of natural resin. The layers, and how they are read (or left unread) relate to viewers ability to recognise qualities that have been either erased or eradicated from day-to-day experience. Arguably they are similar to the qualities of polished, veneered and varnished wood, or inlaid gemstones, although the colours and compositions do not correlate, stylistically with techniques and artefacts that would generally be judged to be antique.

Chairman of the *Sơn Ta* group[50], Nguyễn Trường Linh (b.1971) has both a BA and MA from the Fine Arts University in Hà Nội, majoring in lacquer painting. Currently a lecturer in Fine Arts and member of the Arts Association, he is a key figure in the conservation and promotion of natural lacquer painting in Vietnam. His work demonstrates his ongoing experiments with the material qualities of natural lacquer, and he explores a rich variety of subject matter in his varied

Figure 6-5 Nguyen Truong Linh (2013) Levels [Lacquer on board] 120 x 160cm In:Nguyễn Trường Linh (2013) Concealed Content: Vietnamese Lacquer Art. Taiwan. Kuo Min Fei.

[50] a group of Vietnamese lacquer artists who have elected to work only with natural lacquer so as to preserve their cultural heritage.

compositions, drawing upon observation of nature, and his immediate environment, in addition to his rich, intense, abstract works.

Participating regularly in the Vietnam Association of Fine Arts since 1998, and in the Ministry of Culture's National Fine Arts exhibitions, Nguyễn Trường Linh has won a number of gold and first prizes over the past decades. He has had group and solo exhibitions in a variety of galleries in Hà Nội, including shows sponsored by ASEAN Fine Arts; he has also exhibited in China (Guangzhou, 2008, and Beijing, 2011, 2012), Korea (2006), Taiwan (2013) and Italy (Bienalle Vernizer, 2013).

A prolific artist, Nguyễn Trường Linh has produced an impressive oeuvre of work. His recent work, (see figure 6-10 & 11) shows a growing confidence and energy in semi-abstract landscapes which celebrate the surface and colour properties of natural lacquer. The trend towards less explicitly representational imagery, along with the use of bright colours evident in a number of Đổi Mới artists' work, suggests a new confidence, a sense of freedom and exuberance in engaging with the international art world.

Figure 6-6 Nguyễn Trường Linh (2019) Plateau echo [Lacquer on Board] 80 × 100cm

At: https://indochineart.vn/gallery/141/tac-pham (Accessed on: 17.03.2020)

6.2 Vietnamese Primitivism and the power of nostalgia.

In Europe, the Primitivism signified a turning away from enlightenment beliefs in rationality and progress (as discussed in chapter four) and a combination of longing for an 'exotic other' and nostalgia for lost innocence, after the devastating experience of the First World War. From a postcolonial stance, the term 'primitivism' is controversial: as Torgovnick (1990:120) asserts 'primitivist discourse …(is)... fundamental to the Western sense of self and Other'. However, anxiety about being 'guilty' of othering has led to the assumption that any representation of an 'Other' is understood in relation to white people and dictated by the desire to assert superiority.

Indian artist K. G. Subramamyan (1961, cited in Khullar, 2015: 130) proclaimed himself and other post-colonial practitioners to be 'primitives of a new age' creating a new language that drew on indigenous crafts. However, what I am describing as a distinctively Vietnamese primitivism has stylistic similarities to well-known 'primitive' artists, such as Picasso, but is motivated by different impulses and visions. Given that Vietnam was directly impacted both by international conflicts and the anti-historicist policies that tried to supersede (and therefore eradicate) religion and other belief systems, it is understandable that there would be a similar phenomenon in terms of yearning for a lost way of life, which evidenced itself in artworks. Casualties of the destruction wreaked by warfare or through the necessity of relocating, the work of many artists of this generation is redolent of nostalgia, which often manifests itself by referencing Vietnamese folk art and village life. Perhaps Nguyên Tử Nghiêm best exemplifies the ability to draw upon the cultural heritage of Vietnamese villages, using simplified, semi-abstract motifs which are often described as 'modern' (in that they are reminiscent of 'primitivism' in European modernist paintings). The book, *Mỹ thuật ở làng* (1991) by art historians Nguyễn Quân and Phan Cẩm Thượng traces the history of Vietnamese art to village customs rather than imperial dynasties, which is where the French scholar Louis Bézacier (1955) had attributed the origins of Vietnamese art. The early 1990s also saw a resurgence of village traditional crafts (self-consciously distinct from fine art practices) and village festivals as controls over religious rituals relaxed (Taylor & Corey, 2019: 8).

The significance of the village is linked to the cult of ancestor worship, which despite government attempts to abolish 'superstitious' customs, remains prevalent in Vietnamese social life, in terms of yearly gatherings and festivals. Many of the paintings produced by lacquer artist Trần Tuấn Long's (b.1967) are on the theme of this, oldest of Vietnamese beliefs, and the importance of maintaining the connection, this generation still communicating with and drawing from previous ones. Arguably, these beliefs are the basis of Vietnamese culture, but his paintings were rejected from being exhibited in the 2005 National art exhibition, because the judges felt he was depicting

out-dated superstition[51] (Nguyễn Văn Học, 2017). Following a Vietnamese strand of the 'artist as shaman' he has produced a body of work exploring encounters with the spirit world. His paintings evoke a mystical, other worldly atmosphere that link today's rituals with ancient lives and practices.

Figure 6-7 Trần Tuấn Long (2014) Spirit Medium. [Lacquer on Board] 100 x 100cm At: https://baodansinh.vn/gia-thanh--trien-lam-hoi-hoa-dau-tien-ve-tin-nguong-dao- mau-53755.htm (Accessed 12.10.2020)

The endeavour to reclaim folkloric traditions, and an increasing interest in collecting antiques (Taylor, 2011b:113) came about in part due to the improved economy and the number of people able to live more affluent lifestyles, and therefore with leisure. However, there were clearly elements of nostalgia, for what had been lost in a country that had suffered decades of bombing and political upheaval.

[51] *Được biết, năm 2005, anh đã mang một số tranh Hầu đồng tham dự Triển lãm Mỹ thuật toàn quốc, nhưng đã bị loại ngay từ "vòng gửi xe" vì lý do "vẽ đề tài mê tín dị đoan"* (*Nguyễn Văn Học, 2017).*

Graduating from the Hà Nội college of Fine Arts, Đào Minh Tri (b.1950) is one of many of the French trained artists who was recruited to disseminate the practice of fine art painting, so relocated to Sài Gòn. One of the many northern artists who relocated to the south, Đào Minh Tri (2016, personal communication, 6th August) told me that he felt he had followed in the footsteps of Nguyễn Gia Trí, in terms of experimental practice and expertise, as well as in their geographical relocation. However, aside from the use of patterns and motifs, and attention to surface textures, his subjects are very different from the earlier artist. Đào Minh Tri's lacquer paintings borrow from village art, using traditional symbols, in particular fish, which, as discussed in chapter four represent wealth and happiness (see figure 6-15). His references to folk art, the art of the northern villages he knew growing up, are distinctively nostalgic, echoing themes of loss. The heavily outlined shapes are reminiscent of aboriginal symbols (who gained international acclaim during the 1990s), and contrast with the subtle use of lacquer layering and polishing that creates undulating, fluid fluctuations of colour and surface texture.

Figure-6-8 Dao Minh Tri (2011) Untitled [Lacquer on Board] 60 x 80cm Thomson, E(2014). [Photograph]: Farnham.UK

In addition to exhibiting in a range of galleries in Vietnam and abroad: including the National Fine Arts Museum in Hà Nội (1980), the USSR (1983) and Hồ Chí Minh City Fine Arts Museum (1984), Đào Minh Tri has been involved in organising some important ASEAN collaborative exhibitions.

His first solo exhibition was at the Maison du Viet Nam, in Paris (1992), and he has exhibited in Japan, Korea and in a number of collaborative Asian Friendship exhibitions.

Figure 6-12 Nguyễn Thanh Mai (1998) Hanoi Church. [Lacquer on Board] 60 x 80cm Thomson, E (2014) [Photograph] Farnham UK

Although her parents were from the south, Nguyễn Thanh Mai (b.1959) was born in Hà Nội and that was where she first encountered and began to study lacquer painting. Moving to Sài Gòn, she studied at Hồ Chí Minh City University of Fine Arts, going on to teach there. Her style of lacquer painting is decisively different from the polished, ornate gold used to decorate temples. There is something almost primeval in the use of hollow black shadows juxtaposed with layered, uneven, roughly-textured, eggshell with lacquer mixed with pigments. While her paintings cover a wide range of subjects, I have selected some of the semi-abstract cityscapes, which I find particularly emotionally charged. The walls of buildings loom, threatening or threatened, it is difficult to decide which because the composition is up-close. The viewer is given a child's perspective, unable to step back and see the whole building as a complete piece of architecture, facing the intensely solid, tactile, eroded walls, with no identifiable geographic location. In Figure 6-13 the cross against the indeterminate sky (suggesting smoke, or perhaps mist) implies, without being explicit, the threat of bombs.

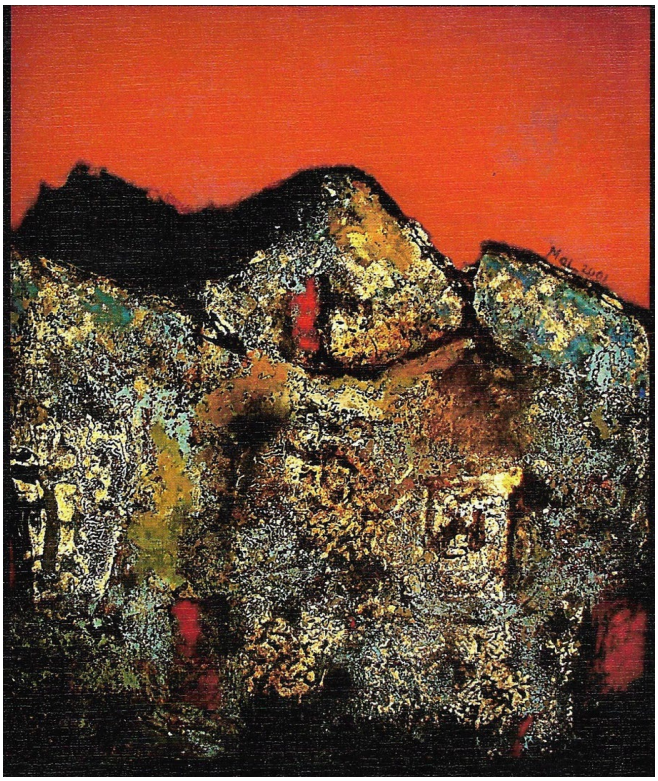

Figure 6-13 Nguyễn Thanh Mai (2006) Phố Hội. (Hoi An City) [Lacquer on Board] 60 x50 cm. In: Lacquer and oil Paintings by Nguyễn Thanh Mai. Exhibition catalogue.

Trinh Tuan (b.1968) has a studio in central Hà Nội, and some of his cityscapes include references to particular buildings and landmarks, although they are reduced to simplified, geometric shapes

Figure 6-9 Trinh Tuan (2013) Summer over the Old Town. [Lacquer on 2 x Boards] 140 x240cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

)

that create a seemingly haphazard rhythm across the plane of the painting's surface. Apparantly naive, drawn by a child, what is most striking is the use of colour and texture, which transform a pared-down cityscape into an other-world phenomena. Trinh Tuan's work was some of the first contemporary lacquer painting I encountered in Vietnam, after seeing older works in the Vietnam Fine Arts Museum in Hà Nội, and then, as now, am impressed with how even while outwardly representing recognisable built structures, landscapes and people, the colour saturation and stylised composition combine with surface texture to transport the viewer somewhere that is reminiscent of Hà Nội, as though viewed through a filter (see, for example, figure 6-14).

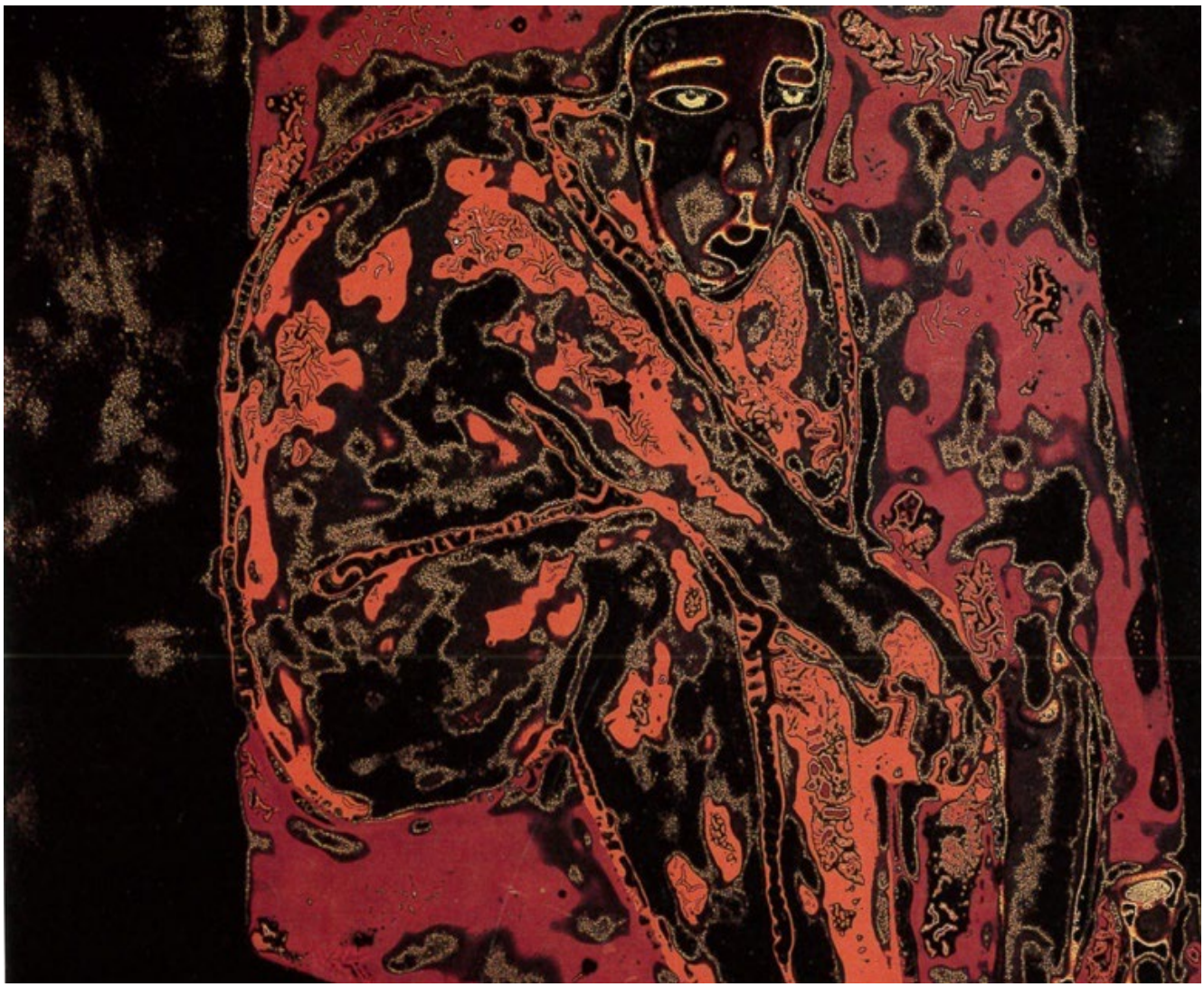

Figure 6-10 Trinh Tuan (2001) In my Dark Corner. [Lacquer on Board] 20 x20 cm. In:Middelborg, J. (Ed.) (2003) Trinh Tuan: Lacquer Painting. Thailand: Thavibu Gallery.p 30

Trinh admits having been influenced by Austrian artists such as Klimt and Hundertwasser, their sense of pattern and design, and while the overall effect is in many ways very different, the bold contrasts and stylised lines are strangely familiar.

Many of Trinh Tuan's images include simplified figures, which evoke the idea of individual loneliness, while refusing to identify a recognisable individual. In figure, the form of the male figure is shown through what look like heat or prominent zones: a topographic map of contact or sensitivities. Lines play a part, but are lesser to the masses, which dominate the composition. The human form becomes amorphic, anonymous (see figure 6-15).

Having grown up in the chaos of war and bombing, many artists of this generation feel that their education was limited, as compared to art students in the colonial times, and assert that those in control of artistic publication and dissemination had little understanding of art other than as a tool to promote their own interests. These opinions, even if only given anonymously, demonstrate continued resentment at government control over artistic exhibition and recognition. One of the anonymous artists cited by Libby (2011:214) argues that the government's lack of interest in the visual arts in Vietnam today is the result of the revolution, when most of the educated middle-class fled the country, meaning that the majority of those left in power were descended from peasants, most of whom had no interest in what they saw as an elitist form of expression.

Reduced, primitive figures and faces appear in a number of paintings in that decade: Trinh Tuan's friend, Vũ Thăng (b. 1970) creates masks that suggest a watchful, somewhat menacing presence. One of a series created in the 1990s, figure depicts chimeric faces, reminiscent of archaeological relics: Vũ Thăng (1997:21) states that he draws inspiration from funeral houses in the central highlands of Vietnam) because of their stressed, eroded surface created by mixing lacquer with clay powder and other media, scraped, gouged into or built up, standing in relief to the polished lacquer background.

Distorted, half-recognisable faces and figures are also a prevalent theme in the work of Lê Quảng Hà (b.1963) whose work most pointedly does not conform to the nostalgic idealization of the national past: rather he scrutinizes contemporary issues in Vietnam - in particular, power and corruption. Using the grotesque to unpick a different kind of reality, his figures are nightmarishly malformed, an exploration of the baser human instinct that motivates depraved behaviour. Influenced by Frances Bacon (1909-1992), his work also bears some resemblance to the German artist, Otto Dix, in that his work consistently focuses on portraits (even if not of named individuals), on faces and facial expressions similar to the German *New Objectivity* movement, which was developed to expose the social and political realities of the Weimar Republic, a dramatic contrast to traditional approaches to portraiture, intended to flatter the sitter.

Figure 6-11 Vũ Thăng (1996) Faces.[Lacquer and Mixed Media] 153 x 137 cm. In: Vũ Thăng (1997) Exhibition catalogue. Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Mỹ Thuật.

Lê Quảng Hà has produced, throughout his artistic career, a coherent body of work which clearly challenges the jurisdiction of the Vietnamese government, and his critical stance seems to appeal in the international art market. He has exhibited in Japan, Switzerland, Malaysia and America, and his work is held in a number of permanent collections. Nazaree (2008:6) describes his 'desire to shock and possibly to destabilize' is based on his understanding of art needing to challenge 'established ways of seeing…whether formally, spiritually or socio-politically, and… acknowledging that everybody has his or her own interpretation of truth.'

Working in a variety of media, Lê Quảng Hà's use of Vietnamese lacquer, in both his paintings and sculptures, demonstrates how versatile it is as a medium, defying the preconception that it is 'old-fashioned' and 'traditional' and therefore irrelevant to contemporary society. His installation at the 2018 Singapore biennale, *Gilded Age* 'poses questions about power and control, leadership and authority' (Singapore Art Museum, 2019).

Figure 6-12 Lê Quảng Hà Gilded Age, 2018 (installation view) Dimensions Variable. Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum

6.3 Beyond National identity: the impact of globalisation and travel.

A number of Vietnamese artists, art collectors and historians (De Fontbrune, 2014, personal communication, 12th September, Trinh Tuan, 2014, personal communication, 14th August) have voiced the opinion that within Vietnam, the artwork that is most valued, is valued because of international interest, implying that the Vietnamese government have failed to provide sufficient recognition of their own artists and that this has resulted in the loss of national cultural treasures.

However, in the last forty years a younger generation of artists have been able to travel themselves and exhibit their work abroad. Some have emigrated. Additionally, families that had fled as boat people during the land reforms, have resulted in Việt Kiều artists returning to Vietnam, even if only temporarily and mainly in urban centres. Furthermore, international artists have visited Vietnam, and stayed to study lacquer painting. Globalisation, and the history of

colonialization and twentieth-century politics have shaped points of interaction, but so have individual choices.

Nhat Tran, an America immigrant from Vietnam, studied lacquer first in Vietnam (Fine Arts University, Hồ Chí Minh City), continued to study independently before winning a scholarship to study in Japan (Tokyo University of the Arts). Using the Japanese term, 'urushi' to define her material and practice, amongst a range of projects and works exploring the aesthetic properties of lacquer perhaps she is best known for her mural *On the Tip of Our Wings* (2006-2008), at Indianapolis airport.

Made of three-dimensional fibreglass covered with layered lacquer employing a rich variety of colour and texture combinations, *On the Tip of Our Wings* (2006-2008), is a relief mural, an installation that displays an assurance that the objects, their form and surface are sufficient in their own right (see figure 6-20). As Nhat Tran (2008) states: 'The artwork's abstraction does not seek to impose any particular interpretation since it only exists for the sake of its own forms.' Following other Vietnamese and Việt Kiều artists in the conscious decision to produce artworks

Figure 6-13 Nhat Tran (2009) On the Tips of Our Wings. [Photograph of Lacquer Mural]. At: https://www.urushi-artist.com/airport-commission (Accessed on: 19.03.2020)

that do not have a message or stance other than enjoyment of form and texture, and the interplay of light and the observers, Nhat Tran focuses on the material properties of the lacquer medium. Given that airports are places of transition, liminal places, and her work is likely to be viewed by a wide variety of people, including those with no particular knowledge or interest in art, this, perhaps, is a perfect example of art for the masses. Yet it is also art for the connoisseur, with its exquisite surface layering on a scale which will tolerate some scrutiny, and which offers shifting values of light, depending on where the viewer is in relation to different sections of the mural.

Perhaps the most internationally acclaimed contemporary Vietnamese lacquer artist, and therefore most significant is Oanh Phi Phi, exhibiting both in Vietnam and internationally, in the Fost gallery and the Institute of Contemporary Arts, Singapore, Oanh Phi Phi has also been active in art fairs and biennials. In that sense she has been one of the most successful Vietnamese lacquer artists in terms of gaining recognition for the medium in an international context, exemplifying the importance of networking and having connections with a variety of institutions.

Figure 6-14 Oanh Phi Phi (2007) Black Box. [Photograph] At: http://www.phiphioanh.com/blackbox (Accessed on: 12.03.2020)

Oanh Phi Phi was born in Houston, in the USA, but as an artist, has chosen to relocate to Vietnam, where her parents came from. Her education has been particularly varied: a BFA from Parsons school of design, Paris and New York, 2002, and Masters from the University of Madrid, 2012, after having studied an Atelier Fresco painting course there in 2004. As a result, her experiments build on tranh sơn mài (lacquer painting) in ways few other lacquer painters have managed. Stressing that most importantly, her research into lacquer painting is practice- based, Oanh Phi Phi takes her experiments beyond a single board to be hung on a wall, using dry lacquer techniques and multiple platforms and formats to create installations and immersive experiences. Figure 6-19 is a photograph of *Black Box* (2005-2007) an installation of boxes which suggest coffins, or perhaps treasure chests, in part in commemoration of her grandmother, and in part a capturing of

> 'memories of scenes so commonplace and recurring they are overlooked in our everyday lives. Yet over time, the sum of these instants forms the structure for the collective impression of an experience: a place, a culture, a period in one's life. The painted images of Black Box are like "decisive moments" of the city of Hanoi, freeze-frame images telling of the aftermath of daily life, portrayed in lacquered hyper-saturation and elevated to the drama of baroque tableaus.' (Oanh Phi Phi, 2007)

Drawing on themes of diaspora and something akin to homesickness demonstrated in the intense longing for familiar day-to-day experiences, Oanh Phi Phi is particularly ingenious in terms of how she exploits the material properties of the medium so the black and gold of lacquer is indeed suggestive of baroque décor, and an integral part of the aesthetic experience of her work.

> I see lacquer as a cultural medium rather than solely an artistic one, and it is one through which we can retrace through its changes in its form all the major dialectical changes in Vietnamese culture. Precisely because of this deep relationship and the fact that it has been so little theorized do I believe a relationship, a conversation, as an individual artist is still possible. Also, because I was not born in Vietnam, lacquer as painting originally presented a way through which to understand this culture, and eventually has become an agency through which I can participate in its social changes. (Oanh Phi Phi, 2022, personal communication, 12 May)

In *Specula* (2009) viewers walked through a tunnel of lacquer panels, sanded, rubbed away colour, suggesting erosion, but also endurance, reflecting light in varying ways as viewers move through and around the work. The exploration of the process of sơn mài is continued in the work *Palimpsest* (2014), which Oanh Phi Phi describes as a "lacquerscope" using old slide projectors with glass slides hand-painted with lacquer of varying degrees of translucence. As stated previously, the term "palimpsest" refers to something that has been reformed, but its earlier form is still evident, which relates to the process of Vietnamese lacquer painting, the painting of many layers, the sanding away of parts of them, so that only parts of the early layers show through in the

final surface. In her review of the exhibition, Stock (2014:142) asserts that the Vietnamese-American artist has

> 'rekindled our predecessors' fascination with the Laterna Magica, an archaic precursor to the slide projector… however, (she) does not project fables or morality tales, as these early "magic lanterns" once did, but rather puts forth idiosyncratic layers of lacquer and light…insinuating the traditions of lacquerwork into the anatomy of photography, the lacquer not only reflects light, it is rendered luminescent.' (Stock, 2014:142)

Increasing experimentation is being carried out by contemporary artists, using lacquer on a range of alternative grounds such as clear Perspex so as to flaunt the translucence and luminescence (see figure 6-22) of the resin. Saeko Ando (b. 1968) studied Japanese art and philosophy at Waseda University, but was working as an air steward when she first visited Vietnam and discovered lacquer painting. Leaving her job, she moved to Vietnam in 1995 to learn how to paint with lacquer. She defines herself as a Vietnamese lacquer painter, because while she was born in Japan, her study of lacquer has been entirely in Vietnam, learning in the studios of artists and artisans such as Trinh Tuan, Doãn Chí Trung, Nguyễn Huy Hoàng, and Làm Hữu Chính.

Ando is fascinated by the medium and its possibilities, and spends a lot of time experimenting with it, along with other Vietnamese lacquer artists in the *Sơn Ta* group. Given that *Sơn Ta* is considerably more time-consuming and difficult to work with than the increasing types of synthetic lacquers available, this choice demonstrates their dedication to the very specific qualities of the material and the highly-skilled techniques involved in using it. During trips and conferences organised by the Asian Lacquer Craft Exchange Research Project, participating lacquer artists have had the opportunity to visit plantations for farming lacquer throughout Asia, enabling them to sample different types of lacquer and experience the different properties , in terms of workability.

As a result of her extensive experimentation, Ando questions the oft accepted idea that Japanese raw lacquer is superior to raw lacquer from other Asian countries, arguing that the advantages depend on use. While certain techniques used by Vietnamese and Japanese craftsmen are similar, the Japanese need to add protein into natural lacquer (for example tofu or egg white) to make the lacquer's consistency workable enough to maintain an uneven surface without it running flat before drying. In contrast, Vietnamese lacquer naturally has a thicker consistency because of the high gum content: this enables artists to use these techniques without having to rush. So, what manufacturing countries judge to be an inferiority in glossiness and hardness, coupled with a slower drying process are beneficial for sơn mài processes. It is easier to sand smoothly, and the

Figure 6-15 Ando, Saeko (2018) Gleam of Enlightenment. [Lacquer on Acrylic Board] 120 x 60cm In: Simon Pilling, East Asian Art & Interiors. At: https://japanlivingarts.com/ando-saeko-japanese-lacquer-artist/ (Accessed: 21.09.2021)

slow speed of drying gives the artists enough time to work on large surfaces and to carry out complex techniques before the lacquer dries (Ando, 2015).

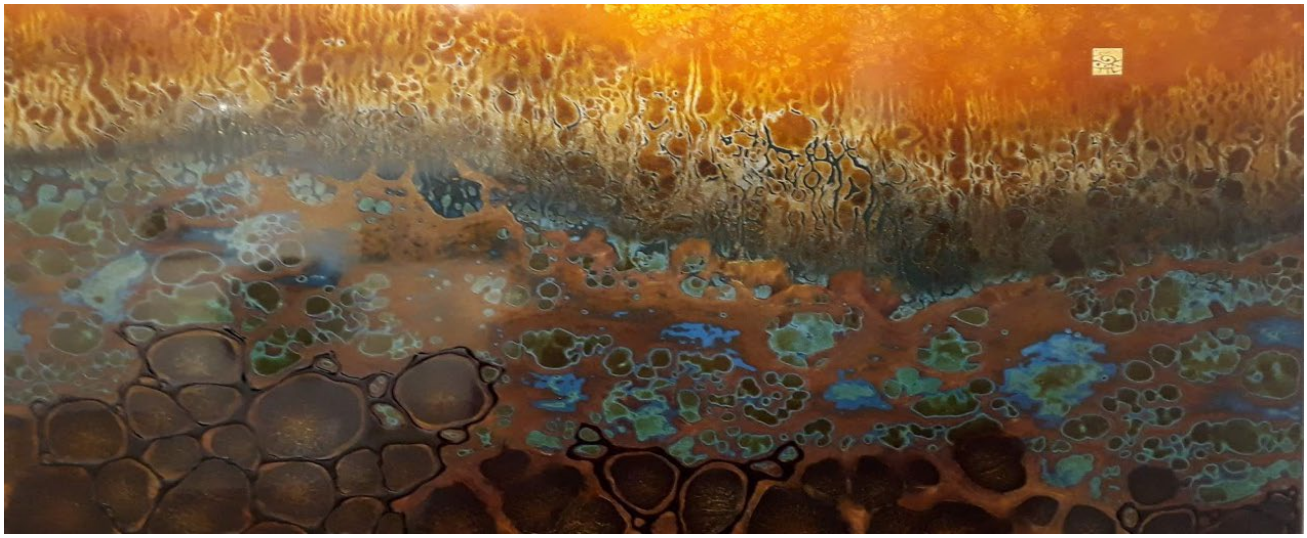

Figure 6-16 Ando, Saeko (2017) Detail of Metamorphosis [Lacquer on Board] 50 x 50 cm

Studio visits to other lacquer artists, particularly in the south of Vietnam, often result in discussions revolving around where the best natural lacquer is sourced from and their distinct qualities. Some continue to favour resin from the northern area famed for the quality of its lacquer, Phú Thọ (Nguyễn Gia Trí is reputed to have been one of those artists, who preferred lacquer from Phú Thọ) although in the south of Vietnam, many lacquer painters use lacquer from Cambodia. Cambodian lacquer is harvested from the *Melanorrhoea usitate* or *Melanorrhoea laccifera*, and contains thitsiol, which hardens even more slowly than Vietnamese *laccol* lacquer, although it creates, some artists argue, a glossier and more beautiful surface. (Ando, 2015, personal communication, 12th August).

Ando's work is distinctive, in part because she tends to work on a smaller scale than many of her Vietnamese contemporaries, but more significantly in the attention and detail she gives the intricately textured, polished surface, using matte finishes to absorbs light, and contrast with polished, shiny black or burnished gold and bronze… The patterns formed of butterfly wings, birds' feathers, underwater coral or sea life, or images from science books showing cells under a microscope or planet surfaces all serve as inspiration for her semi-abstract abstract explorations of the possibilities of lacquer. The surfaces she produces range between being reminiscent of geological rocks, to suggesting fine lace or embroidery.

One of her principal concerns is contributing to the continuation of natural lacquer arts, and to this end, Ando established a company called SAEKO ANDO & Co. – and then changed its name to

Figure 6-17 Ando, Saeko (2016) Between Light & Shadow [Lacquer on Board] 45 x 45 cm

Lacquer Seeds, with the aim of specializing in high-end sơn mài products. 'Through this enterprise, I will try to create steady work and income for highly skilled crafts people like Anh Doãn Chí Trung'[52] (*ibid*). If the endeavour succeeds, it will also mean that there will be a regular demand for good quality raw lacquer in the domestic market. Up until now, it is a comparatively small number of lacquer artists that are willing to pay for good quality natural resin, which means much of it is exported to China at a low price. More demand locally will provide an incentive for *Rhus vernicifera* plantation farmers to continue growing and harvesting from the trees in Vietnam.

[52] An article showing photographs of his intricate work was published in *Elle Decoration*, January 2022

As she perceives it, truly talented and skilled Vietnamese craftsmen are comparatively rare, and she hopes to offer rewarding work, producing small amounts of high-quality interior decoration items. This collaborative approach is in sharp contrast to the Marxist model of factory owners and alienated labour, despite the intention to produce commodities. However, in order to produce crafts that use expensive materials, there needs to be a means of supporting practitioners: that in itself is a form of sustainability.

It is hoped that when the company achieves a regular income stream, they will be able to hire new apprentices, and will start producing more affordable, smaller products. Ando does not see the collective working and the organisation of positive cashflow as anything that would undermine her artistic integrity, or the quality of her work. In fact, what she is planning to do is very similar to what the Swiss-born artist, Jean Dunand, successfully did in the 1920s and 30s. Perhaps more importantly, it is very much in keeping with lacquer workshops in Vietnam, such as those that that closed down in the 1940s in the north, and in the south in 1975, most notably Thành Lễ, Trần Hà and Mê Linh. The precedent is there, although it is a very different market, now.

Figure 6-18 Đinh Công Đạt (2017) Ants [Lacquer and metal foil on Fiberglass] 23x35x50cm [Photograph courtesy of the artist]

In this thesis I include him as a lacquer artist, however it is the subject of debate whether Đinh Công Đạt (b.1966) should be described as an artist, sculptor, painter, or high-end designer (Elle Decoration, 2022). Đinh Công Đạt describes himself as a Nghệ sĩ, rather than a họa sĩ, which given most of his work is three-dimensional is understandable, but he has also been called a 'pop artist.'

Known for his insect sculptures, see figure 6-23 for his 'ants' installation, Đinh Công Đạt has recently teamed up to exhibit with a minimalist painter (Lê Thiết Cương) who describes Đinh Công Đạt as a 'maximalist'

juxtaposing all sorts of influences, ideas and colours into extraordinary artefacts and installations.

His work has covered a range of projects, some of which model making, other upcycling old furniture, including a community project with a craft village: he asserts that 'one of the reasons

Figure 6-19 Đinh Công Đạt (2004) Masks – Negative Faces. [Lacquer on Fibreglass x 16] 31 x 24 cm. At: https://greenpalmgallery.com/en/product/negative-faces-233.html (Accessed on: 12.03.2022)

that traditional craft villages are in such a state is that there are no new designs[53].' Arguing that Vietnamese artists do not have to worry about following tradition because it is in their DNA, his engagement with lacquer is as philosophical as is many artists who choose to work with it, stating that you need to take care to make the base solid, not just worry about the surface.

Drawing on traditional forms, techniques and materials, Đinh Công Đạt is adamant that contemporary artists should not follow convention. His shell-inlay and lacquer on a Vespa seems to epitomise the playful spirit of his boundary-crossing art.

Figure 6-20 Đinh Công Đạt (2012) Lacquer & Shell inlaid Vespa {Lacquer & multimedia] Variable Dimensions. At: https://dantri.com.vn/giai-tri/an-tuong-tac-pham-dieu-khac-cua-nghe-si-dinh-cong-dat-1347817561.htm (Accessed on:

This chapter is in no way exhaustive, in terms of accounting for contemporary lacquer practice in Vietnam, but it demonstrates at least some of the range of innovative and experimental art forms utilising this indigenous and traditional material. At a time when machine production is the norm, and labour is usually measured in relation to efficiency, to invest the time and effort into developing prowess in lacquer painting could be construed as a refusal to be dominated by market forces, or the 'logic' of capitalism. That is not to say that art and craft production in Vietnam is unaffected by the art market: in a largely unregulated environment where copyists working for profit undermine the work of serious artists – and in some cases, artists who have gained recognition devalue their own work by producing copies (Minh Thi, 2017) – international buyers interested in art as an investment are justifiably sceptical. However, while taking photographs of lacquer is difficult due to its reflective surface (when polished) there no way to replicate artworks dependent on the material itself to create the surface qualities. Ando (2015, personal communication, 12th August). confidently asserts that no copyist could imitate her skill, even if they copied her design, and even then, it would be time consuming and demand considerable expertise. So it could be argued that natural resin provides a guarantee of a certain kind of authenticity: certainly, it retains its appeal for a number of practitioners – and a niche audience

[53] Một trong những lý do khiến làng nghề truyền thống lâm vào tình trạng đó là không có những thiết kế mới.

7 Conclusion

This study of the emergence and development of Vietnamese lacquer painting re-evaluates the modern history of this medium, examining the reception of lacquer art and its status in relation to both local and international discourses of modernism.

Many of the key dynamics of the tumultuous twentieth century impacted this artistic field: expansionist nationalism, colonialism, increased travel and intercultural communication, as well as an explosion in the variety of forms of art production, exhibition and consumption. Perhaps most importantly, the political divide between capitalism and socialism led to division and conflict, and was refracted in debates around elitism and populism, art and craft, kitsch and propaganda. This study of the emergence and development of Vietnamese lacquer painting re-evaluates a selection of artworks, examining their reception and artistic status in relation to both local and international discourses of modernism.

These theoretical debates in dominant art historiography effectively dismissed artwork from socialist nations, so that, aside from in other socialist countries, Vietnamese art has rarely been encountered or exhibited. The politics of the period dominated perceptions of Vietnam, in terms of media coverage, and to a large extent, scholarship. Certainly there is little that could be described as a scholarly review of Vietnamese lacquer painting, thus the reliance on personal and commercial sources for both data and images.

Colonial exhibitions tended to exaggerate their own (the colonial power's) role in the production of work, by labelling it as by the 'students of…' French artists or ateliers rather than acknowledging Vietnamese artists themselves. This is a practice that continues in contemporary auctions, suggesting that the use of the connection to France, the centre of the legitimised art world, continues to be understood as validation of quality and authenticity. Thus the lack of representation of Vietnamese art, generally, and lacquer painting, specifically, means that it remains obscure, or for the most part, invisible.

Artistic achievements are evaluated according to current epistemes; the dualistic categories of early modernism are being questioned and dismantled to demonstrate the biases in systems that enable exhibiting and publishing of artworks and dictate the mode and categorisation of these activities. This thesis has reflected these intellectual developments, focusing a post-colonialist lens on the cultural phenomenon of Vietnamese lacquer painting. At the same time, I have sought to celebrate this rich area of artistic innovation and hybrid aesthetics which has thrived amid

political turmoil and controversy. A next step for this research would be to curate a retrospective exhibition, exposing a broad audience to this artistic trajectory and demonstrating its development and range.

The narrative of the origins and development of Vietnamese lacquer painting encapsulates many of the contradictions that dominated modern dualism, and which have shaped understanding and reception of this art form. In dominant art historiographies, 'fine art' is privileged (art for art's sake, or art being valued for its autonomy) over 'craft' (art for the people, or art being valued for its serviceability). Yet although these concepts and hierarchies exist in Vietnamese culture and art practice, the terminology has different nuances and relationships. Craft traditions overlap with what, in Vietnamese, is described as fine art, in that there is much more interest in (and knowledge of) materials and skills among art enthusiasts. The term 'mỹ thuật' refers to 'the art of beauty' characterised by aesthetic qualities, and although there are associations with the Chinese literati and links between philosophy, painting and writing, there is not the Anglophone association with conceptualism or the intellect.

The significance of an artistic practice being the exercise of free will, autonomous and independent, rather than being designed and dictated by others was central to the development of Vietnamese lacquer painting in a colonial context and is still of importance to contemporary artists. Since mechanised production has become wide-spread, the fear of humans being out-performed in terms of efficiency, by robots and machines (a reoccurring theme in art, literature and film) has led to the privileging of creativity and originality. Contradictory approaches and discussions around arts and crafts tend to associate artistic autonomy with elitism and wealth, when perhaps it should be related to human instinct, to emotional and mental well-being. Rather than seeing the skill of craftsmanship as 'poorly paid' (because similar items can be produced faster by a machine) unintellectual and monotonous, perhaps it is possible to recognise that there are types of haptic knowledge that cannot be reduced to a recipe or formula. That skill develops out of practice, empowering the maker as well as offering a wealth of variety that machines cannot produce. One contemporary lacquer artist, Ando (2019 personal communication, 3rd March) asserts that 'without the knowledge of the materials and techniques you don't have freedom.' Natural lacquer, although demanding, offers an exciting and unpredictable medium for artistic exploration and discovery, a kind of antidote, perhaps, to the homogeneity of mechanical reproduction, and a sense of freedom in an increasingly regulated world.

In a world obsessed with efficiency, for many the idea of working with such a time-consuming and unpredictable material may not appeal, but as Oanh Phi Phi (2022, Personal Communication, 12 May) surmises:

> 'as we (hopefully, maybe) move onto post-humanist thought I think lacquer as an image medium is interesting because it is more about a relationship to a specific place, space and time rather than the traditional idea of art, and especially painting, as the will of the artist impressed upon an inert medium. If you look at it this way (and not simply as a means to an end) it is no longer tedious, time consuming, nor demanding. It is in its practice a relationship with one's environment.'

In this thesis, I have consistently positioned artistic individualism and independence in opposition to colonialism, Communist state control and the impact of globalised market forces. Yet, throughout, I have sought to particularize my account, showing how individual artists have responded to the conditions for production and sale of lacquer painting. Additionally, although it is beyond the scope of this research to offer an exhaustive survey of either contemporary or historic practice, it is hoped that the curatorial selection of lacquer artists included demonstrate the range and diversity of the field of contemporary practice. This study has focused on artists who have persisted for long enough in working with natural lacquer to produce work which reflects the unique qualities of the material, in addition to gaining enough recognition to exhibit, either internationally or domestically. This is in line with the claim that while Vietnamese lacquer painting is a fine art, it also requires a high level of craftsmanship that can only be attained through consistent practice with natural resin.

Having asserted in the introduction that language, and documentation impact on the understanding of art, here in the conclusion, I hope to bring together themes that have run throughout the chapters that demonstrate the ways that Anglophile art historiography (and so the interrelated categorisations of educational subject disciplines) has leaked into judgments about paintings made in a very different context. My hope is that this thesis will make a small contribution to revealing Vietnamese achievements in this area.

Due to Vietnam having been the site of prolonged political and military conflict, there is relatively little documentation or archive material to inform research on the lives and practices of many of these different artists, but along with other recent research, this project brings to light some of what has previously been obscure or omitted from official accounts. Gathering further artworks, and related information could build a more coherent narrative than has available up until now, for example, given that they aroused such enthusiastic praise, it would be interesting to track down what happened to Trần Quang Trân's lacquer paintings, or even any photographs of them. Are

they sitting in someone's house, or private collection? Were they damaged, or as early experiments in sơn mài, did they deteriorate? Which EBAI course did Lê Quốc Lộc study, and what arrangement did he have with the lacquer artist Lê Thy? Did Trần Hà's work fall off the radar because it has judged to be 'applied arts' rather than 'fine arts'? Or was it down to politics, and economic restrictions? These are just some of the - as yet unanswered - questions that could help uncover more of the fragmented narrative.

The practice – indeed the very existence - of Vietnamese lacquer painting disrupts many of the paradigms or epistemes in art historiography: it is both an art and a craft, traditional and yet modern, indigenous but influenced by French intervention. It incorporates the continuity as well as the ruptures of the past century in Vietnam, and the layers of resin, carved into, inlaid, dyed with pigments, coated with metal foils, ground and sanded down are expressive of the history of its development, which comprises stories of resistance and resilience, amid conflict and upheaval. Palimpsest is a fitting metaphor to represent the process and format of Vietnamese lacquer painting, and its narrative.

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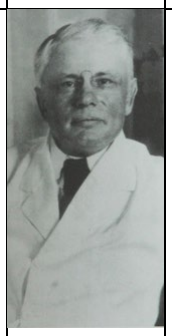
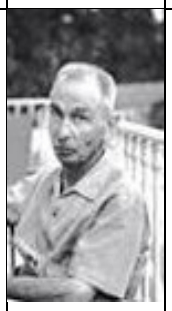
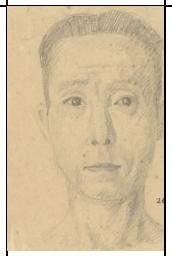
APPENDIX 1

List of Vietnamese & French art institutions (with translations & abbreviations).

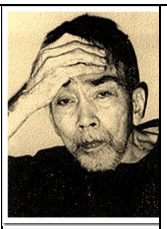
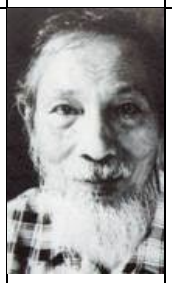
Agindo	Agence Économique de l'Indochine (Indochina Economic Agency)	1892
	Corporate Association of Gia Định & Thủ Dầu Một: a marketing organisation to sell students' work from these schools	1933
CAI	**Cooperative des Artists Indochinois**: Inguimberty and Jonchère founded this cooperative to support the production of artworks, by advancing funds for materials, and securing buyers for them.	1938
EBAI	**École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine**, the school established in Hà Nội by Victor Tardieu & Nguyễn Nam Sơn. In Vietnamese, Trường Mỹ thuật Đông Dương, and as the Fine Arts College of Indochina, and abbreviated to FACI (which) refers to the same institution. Reopened as the Resistance Class (Khoa Kháng Chiến) by Tô Ngọc Vân in north-eastern hills of Việt Bắc, an area being used as the base for the revolutionary army. Re-opened in Hà Nội on Yết Kiêu street, with Trần Văn Cẩn as director, 8 years after the **National School of Fine Arts, Hà Nội** (which had a more crafts-based curriculum)	1925-1945 1950 1957
Biên Hoà	**École Professionelle de Biên Hoà** (Applied Arts School of Bien Hoa): taught metalwork in a foundry.	1903
Thủ Dầu Một	**École des Arts Appliqués de Thu Dau Môt** (originally called École d'art indigène de Thủ Dầu Một) and the École des Arts Appliqués de Thu Dau Môt Drawing on local expertise, in 1913 it opened a lacquer department (the first French school to do so).	1901
Gia Định	**École des Dessin** (established in Gia Định, close to Biên Hoà, Thu Dau Môt, and the city of Sài Gòn) **National School of Gia Dinh Fine Arts** (Trường Quốc gia Cao đẳng Mỹ thuật Gia Định) Renamed: **Gia Định Practical Fine Arts School** (Trường Mỹ nghệ thực hành Gia Định) École des Arts appliqués de Gia Định **Gia Định National School of Decorative Arts** (Trường Quốc gia Trang trí Mỹ thuật Gia Định) Renamed: **National School of Decorative Arts**	1911 1940 1946 1951 1954 1971
EFEO	**Ecole Francaise d'Extreme-Orient** conducted research into philology, art and archaeology throughout Indochina, along with colonial propaganda.	1898
	École Professionnelle de Hà Nội: also known as **École Nationale de l'Artisanat de Hà Nội**: taught pottery, carpentry, pottery & lacquer	1902- 1945
FACI	**Fine Arts College of Indochina**, is the translation of Trường Mỹ thuật Đông Dương, also known as École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine (abbreviated to EBAI) the school established in Hà Nội by Victor Tardieu & Nguyễn Nam Sơn.	1925-1945
FARTA	**Foyer des Artistes Annamites** Association. Vietnamese artists exhibition group	1940
	National School of Saigon College of Fine Arts (Trường Quốc gia Cao đẳng Mỹ thuật Sài Gòn) established by the government of the Republic of Vietnam, with Lê Văn Đệ (1954-1966) appointed as director. **Hồ Chí Minh City University of Fine Arts** (Trường Đại học Mỹ thuật Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh) was a merging of the 2 schools above.	1954 -1971 1975
	National School of Fine Arts, Hà Nội (Trường Quốc Gia Mỹ Nghệ) which is – confusingly, - also referred to as **The National school of Applied Arts**: first directors Phạm Hậu & Trần Quang Trân Vietnam Fine Arts School Fine Arts Middle School **School of Industrial Fine Arts** (Mỹ Thuật Công Nghiệp), **Industrial Fine Arts College** **University of Industrial Fine Arts**. (Trường Cao đẳng Mỹ thuật Công nghiệp Hà Nội)	1949 1955 1958 1962 1965 1984
	National College of Fine Arts, Huế first director an EBAI graduate: Tôn Thất Đào	1957
SADEAI	**Société d'encouragement pour Arts and Industrie.** a group formed by Tardieu to to provide opportunities for the exhibition and selling of his students' work	1934
	SƠN TA VIETNAM Group: natural lacquer painters group, based in Hà Nội, intended to support painters who want to work in natural lacquer.	2013

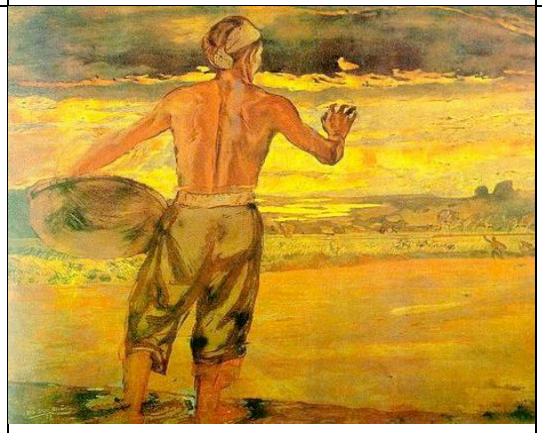
	Trường Trung cấp nghề Tổng hợp Hà Nội. Vocational School for Lacquer: This is a contemporary school with a thriving lacquer department where students can work part time to complete their studies.	1960
VFAA	**Vietnam Fine Arts Association**: set up by the government to support (and to some extent, control) artistic production and exhibition. Early members include Huỳnh Văn Thuận and Phan Kế An.	1957
VNFAM	**Fine Arts Museum in Hà Nội (**Bảo tàng Mỹ thuật Việt Nam) first director, EBAI graduate: Nguyễn Đỗ Cung	1966
VYAA (Sài Gòn)	**Vietnamese Young Artists Association**. The 1950s migration of artists and intellectuals from the north meant there was a vibrant artistic scene in Sài Gòn, which began to wane with the increasing intensity of the war. This group was an attempt to revitalise the art scene and its members, including Hồ Hữu Thủ & Nguyễn Lâm, were very highly regarded.	1966- 1975

APPENDIX 2

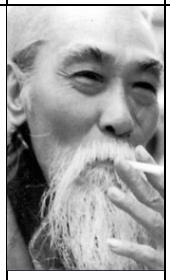
Name	Portrait	D.o.B	Example of Famous Painting	Summary Biography
Victor Tardieu		1870-1937		1887-1889 École des Beaux-Arts de Lyon 1890, École des Beaux-Arts, Paris. Studied in the studios of artists Léon Bonnat and Albert Maignan. Won National prizes and commissions before serving an ambulance corps in WW1 (paintings from this time now in Florence Nightingale Museum, London) 1920 won the Prix du Indochine travelled to Vietnam, met Nam Son, and together they established EBAI.
Joseph Inguimberty		1896-1971		1910 École des Beaux-Arts in Marseille, 1913 École Nationale Supérieure des Arts-Décoratifs in Paris in under Eugène Morand but was drafted in WW1, and was wounded. Won travel grants enabling travel in Europe/ Won the National Prize in 1926, and was employed as painting master at EBAI, 1926-1945, staying the longest of any of the French tutors in Vietnam.
Alix Aymé		1894-1989		The only French teacher who learnt and practiced lacquer. Alix Aymé studied drawing with Maurice Denis, in Toulouse, lacquer techniques with a Japanese tutor in Paris before travelling to Indochina. She taught lacquer at the L'Ecole des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine (1934-1939) 10th cohort. She helped organise the colonial exposition in 1931, and produced a number of works in lacquer as well as other media.
Trần Quang Trân		1900-1969	No photographs of his lacquer works, only commentary, such as art historians Nguyễn Quang Phòng, and his son, Nguyễn Quang Viet, who assert his screen depicting a lily pond was the first lacquer painting to indicate the medium's potential.	EBAI 1927-1932 Trần Quang Trân was highly respected by his fellow students, and mentioned by a number of better known lacquer artists as being an inspiration. Visited Japan to study lacquer. After independence he worked in film and animation, and there is no record of his lacquer paintings, in collections or photographs.

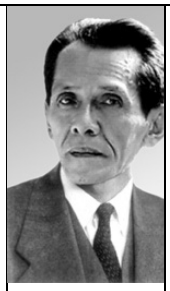
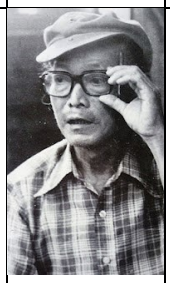
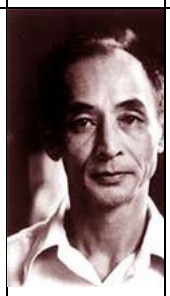
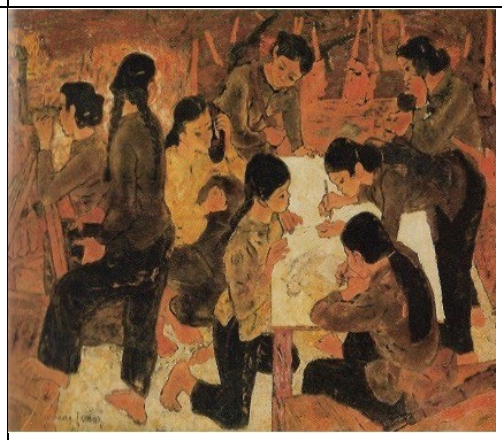
Phạm Hầu		1903 – 1995		EBAI 1930 – 1944 From a large, but poor family, orphaned at the age of 11, Hậu spent his teenage years staying with various relatives. Specialised in lacquer. Winning a number of awards and commissions early in his career, after independence the Ministry of Education authorised him and Trần Quang Trân to establish the National School of Fine Arts.
Tô Ngọc Vân		1906 – 1954		EBAI 1926-1931 Tô Ngọc Vân came from a comparatively poor family and was both a student (1926-1931) and teacher at the École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine. Influenced by his French teachers, he also had a keen sense of the injustice of colonialism. He died a war hero, at the battle of Điện Biên Phủ.
Lê Phổ		1907-2001		1925-1930, first cohort at EBAI. Although Lê Phổ wentn to move to Paris and specialise in silk paintings, in early exhibitions, he is listed as having exhibited lacquer screens. One of the most respected Vietnamese artists in France.
Công Văn Trung		1907-2003		1925-1930. first cohort at EBAI, In his 3rd year, he was asked to do archaeological surveying for EFEO, because he was such a meticulous draftsman. Công Văn Trung specialised in sơn khắc, with a preference for muted, minimal colours, and landscapes including ancient architecture, resembling Chinese screens. Member of the Vietnam Fine Arts Association since its founding (1957), the same year he began teaching at the Industrial school of fine arts, where he stayed until he retired. Won the Gold Medal at the national exhibition in 1990.

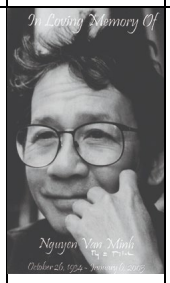
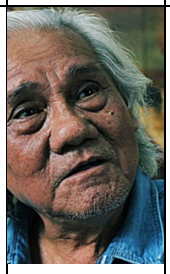
Nguyễn Gia Trí		1908 - 1993		EBAI 1928 – 1936 took a year out in 1931 due to his wish to not get involved with French colonials, but was persuaded to continue by Tardieu. Nguyễn Gia Trí is probably the best known lacquer painter in Vietnam. He sold at good prices to the French bourgeoisie, so when independence came, was anxious about the communist government, and fled to Hong Kong 1946, then moved to South Vietnam.
Trần Văn Cẩn		1910 – 1994		EBAI 1931-1936. Trần Văn Cẩn is remembered for his break throughs in Vietnamese lacquer painting,and followed on from Tô Ngọc Vân in directing the independent continuation of EBAI after independence. In addition to winning a number of prestigious national prizes, he was also chairman of the Vietnam Fine Arts Association, and so must have been influential in terms of which artists were supported by the state and which were not.
Trần Hà (Trần Văn Hà)		1911-1974		Photographic evidence shows Trần Hà with other students in exhibitions which occurred between 1930-1935 at EBAI, however he is not listed as a degree student in the historic records. Attended the 1959 exhibition of the Gia Định school of arts, featuring only artists from the south. He went on to open a studio producing lacquer in the tradition of the many Thủ Dầu Một workshops.
Nguyên Khang		1912-1988		1930-1935 EBAI. Prior to graduation, Nguyên Khang was selected to go to France, and his paintings won several awards at the International Lacquer Exhibition in Paris in 1937. Became the director of the National school of industrial Fine arts. He worked closely with Hồ Chí Minh, going on a secret mission to rally support abroad, and was involved in the design of the leader's funeral ceremony.
Hoàng Tích Chù		1912 - 2003		EBAI 1936-1941. After graduation, opened a lacquer studio on the corner of Hàng Khoai (1942-1943), working with fellow lacquer painter Nguyễn Tiến Chung, with whom he composed a number of joint works, the goldfish painting included here, being one. Taught lacquer at the National College of Finel Arts (1956-1969), and the director of the FACI (1969-1970). While not engaged with open combat, was involved with covert operations supporting the French Resistance.

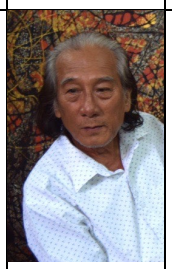
Nguyễn Tiến Chung		1914 - 1976		EBAI 1936-1941. Nguyễn Tiến Chung's work is praised by many of the review writers of the time, as his techniques were greatly admired. Joined the resistance Taught at FACI from 1955 to 1964 Member of the council of the Fine Arts Association
Nguyễn Đức Nùng		1914 - 1983		EBAI 1933-1938 Nguyễn Đức Nùng's work is exhibited in the Vietnamese National gallery, in the National Museum of Art, Singapore, and Russia, greatly admired for his representation of the proletariat. Head of painting at Thừa Thiên in Huế (1945- 1946) and worked as a journalist for the army, after joining the resistance. Director of the Vietnam Institute of Fine Arts (1973-1981). Posthumously awarded National prize for art and literature in 2000.
Nguyễn Hiêm		1917 - 1976		Studied at Gia Định, alongside Nguyễn Sáng, then EBAI 1940-1945 Came from a poor farming background, and worked for most of his artistic career, in the army, involved with various publications, etc. Most of his work is reportage of the war that continued most of his life, and generally he worked in watercolour and oils, this lacquer is unusual, but included in a number of publications focusing on lacquer paintin
Nguyễn Văn Tý		1917 – 1992		EBAI 1936-1941 Exhibited with SADEAI, FARTA and CAI in Vietnam, Paris, Brussels and San Francisco Travelled in Cambodia and Japan (1943) Worked as a stage and scenery director at the Hà Nội Opera House. Worked as an art teacher at FACI and a writer and editor for government-run art and culture journals. Won: Silver Medal Leipzig, Germany 1965, Bronze Medal at the National Fine Arts 1993 and the Hồ Chí Prize in 2000

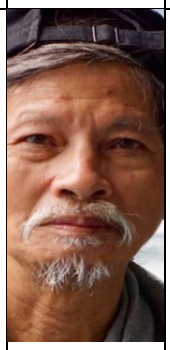
Lê Quốc Lộc		1918-1987		EBAI 1937-1942. Joined the Việt Minh in 1945, successful career working in the Department of Propaganda in North Vietnam. Then, he was put in charge of the Painting Department at the Department of Propaganda of Military Zone 3 from 1947 to 1954. He also worked at the Vietnam Arts and Crafts Association, becoming a member of the Vietnam Fine Arts Association in 1957. He produced a number of works in collaboration with the artist Lê Thy.
Lê Thy (full name: Tran Minh Thi)		1919-1961		Lê Thy studied the foundation course at EBAI and after the August 1945 Revolution, he moved to South Vietnam and continued to study at both Gia Định Applied Arts School and Thủ Dầu Một. Lê Thy participated in exhibitions in Europe, and established a successful lacquer workshop. Despite their different political paths, there are paintings which suggest that Lê Thy continued to work with Lê Quốc Lộc on lacquer compositions. However, his political writings, particularly those directed against Ngô đình Diệm's regime, are suspected to have been related to his mysterious death.
Trần Đình Thọ		1919 - 2011		In addition to his beautiful lacquer landscapes, Trần Đình Thọ was an expert printer, whose skill was invaluable for revolutionary publications. A member of the Ministry of Culture He became Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of Art Culture Research, developing the field of art research theory and criticism.
Thành Lễ, (Full name: Nguyễn Thành Lễ)		1919 - 2003		1938 graduated from École des Arts Appliqués de Thu Dau Môt. Established a successful lacquer workshop open from 1945-1975, which employed around 40 skilled artists and craftspeople, but his work falls into the 'decorative arts' category, so rarely mentioned in art histories. Participated in lacquer exhibitions in France (1952), Thailand (1954), Philippines (1956) and the United States (1959).

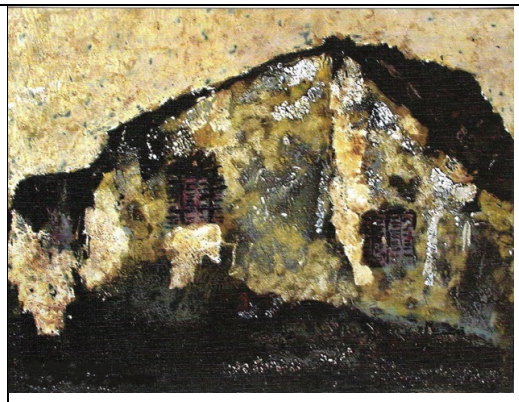
Mạnh Quỳnh (Full name: Ngô Mạnh Quỳnh)		1919-1991		EBAI 1937 -1942 (There is no record of this cohort, which also included Lê Quốc Lộc) More famous for his illustrations of the La Fontaine fables and newspaper illustration (including the popular cartoon, Lý Toét) writing articles than for his lacquer painting, Ngô Mạnh Quỳnh produced this lovely painting, 'Spring festival: Going to the Temple' and others that are housed in VNFAM.
Trần Duy		1920 - 2014		Dates of attending EBAI are not listed in official records, but according to his biography, he attended the clast cohort before closure, 1940 -1945 Trần Duy is best known for his silk paintings, (and his unfortunate involvement with the Nhân Văn, Giai Phẩm affair) but the few lacquer paintings he executed demonstrate his mastery of the medium.
Huỳnh Văn Thuận		1921-2017		Studied at Gia Định 1937-1939, then EBAI 1939-1944 1943, sold work at the SALON UNIQUE to Governor General of Indochina Graphic Department of Vietnam Fine Arts Association 1957 Member of Communist party Hanoi Information Office (1945 - 1946), worked on several propaganda campaigns, including the Central Youth Union in Viet Bac (1947 - 1951); land reform (1954 - 1957). Designed stamps, badges and posters, as well as working in sơn khắc
Thái Hà (Full name: Nguyễn Thái Hà)		1922 - 2005		EBAI 1940-1945, Nguyễn Thái Hà joined the revolutionary army and worked as a war artist, so is remembered for his sketches of guerrilla soldiers and his sơn khắc paintings, which he continued to work on in his retirement. A member and exhibitor at the Arts and Culture Association, in addition to painting, he was a filmmaker, who had gone to the USSR in 1957 to learn about film production.

Huỳnh Văn Gấm		1922-1987		EBAI 1941-1945. On graduating, he joined the Communist Party and was appointed Head of the Propaganda Department of Tan An Province and a member of the 1st National Assembly. He went on to organise printing facilities in the South, and joined the Executive Committee of the Vietnam Arts and Culture Association, and edited art journals, in addition to winning a number of national prizes.
Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm		1922-2016		EBAI 1941-1945 Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm came from wealthy family and his family suffered during the land reforms. Although he was a member of the communist party, he left in 1960, which suggests a rejection of their influence. Considered to epitomese Vietnamese modernist painting, with his 'primitive' imagery which draw from village art forms such as communal house carvings and water puppetry.
Nguyễn Sáng		1923 - 1988		1936-8 studied at Gia Định school of applied arts, then EBAI 1940 – 1945. Involved in the Nhân Văn, Giai Phẩm affair during the 1950s for his sketch of the poet and writer Trần Dần while he was in prison. As a result he was exiled from the artists association and lived as a pauper most of his life.
Phan Kế An		1923-2018		EBAI 1944-1945, Son of an important official, **(**envoy to the last Emperor of Vietnam, Bảo Đại**)** Phan Kế An graduated and had a successful career in illustration for revolutionary publications. In 1948 he spent 3 weeks with Hồ Chí Minh and his advisers in the Việt Bắc, producing a number of sketches of the guerrilla army and their leader.
Hoàng Trầm		1928		Studied in Gia Định before joining the resistance and moving to the north, where he graduated from the FACI in 1964. After working there for over ten years, he returned to the south, where he worked in the arts university in Saigon. He is best known for his paintings of the resistance, which epitomize some of the best of socialist realist paintings. Chairman of the Arts Council from 2000-2005, and won the National Prize for Art and Literature in 2001. First solo exhibition in 2010 (aged 82)

Phùng Phẩm		1932		Phùng Phẩm joined the revolution, and due to his many achievements was sent to study abroad in China. Returning to Vietnam he enrolled in the Fine Arts School on Yết Kiêu street in Hà Nội. After graduating, he worked in an Animation Studio, but his own work is mainly lacquer and woodcarving, and is distinctive with its use of clearly defined lines and blocks of colours. Awards include prizes for Graphic Design in 1985 in Vietnam; and others in Germany and Korea.
Trần Hữu Chất.		1933-2018		From a poor, rural area, Trần Hữu Chất got a job for the Information and Propaganda Office in Hà Tĩnh Province. Joining the army in 1952, he worked as a journalist. He studied at the reopened EBAI from 1956-1957. Selected for a scholarship in China, he studied at Giang Tây-Jiangxi Pottery Institute, where he specialized in painting ceramic because the government hoped to develop the industry. In 1970 he studied woodcarving and lacquer and then in 1985 studied oil painting and conservation in Paris.
Nguyễn Văn Minh		1934		Nguyễn Văn Minh won a scholarship from The Technology centre (Tâm Khuyếch Trương Tiểu Công Nghệ), and was funded by the Japanese National art and Industrial research institute to study lacquer in Japan. Returning to Vietnam he opened the Mê Linh lacquer centre (Trung Tâm Mê Linh) with fellow lacquer student, Nguyễn Văn Trung, which employed a number of lacquer apprentices.
Nguyễn Văn Trung		1937-		Graduated from Saigon College of Fine Arts, 1959. Studied Lacquer at Sendai Institute of Fine Arts and Technology in Japan in 1960. Lacquer Professor of Saigon Fine Arts College, and the Polytechnic School at Phú Thọ, and Deputy Director of the Mê Linh lacquer centre up until 1975 when he moved to the USA.
Hồ Hữu Thủ		1940		Graduating from Bình Dương Art School in 1960, he went on to become a professor there, after further study at the Sài Gòn school of Fine Arts. Winner of a range of national and international prizes, including the Esso fine arts award in 1960, he has exhibited in France (in Dunkirk, in the city hall with Tardieu's mural), in Japan, the Fujita Verve gallery, and in Singapore. Member of VYAA since 1966.

Nguyễn Lâm		1941		Graduated from National School of Gia Định Fine Arts in 1965. One of the first members of the Young artists of Sài Gòn since the 1960s. Taught at Gia Định National School of Decorative Arts 1972=1975 Earned awards for his painting throughout his career, and has exhibited in the Biennale de Paris in France in 1961 & 1963, as well as having solo exhibitions in Vietnam and Malaysia.
Trương Bé		1942-2022		1974 Bachelors of Arts, FACI 1983-6 PG diploma Bucharest, Hungary 1997-2001 Rector of Fine Arts University, Huế Has exhibited throughout Vietnam, Thailand, France, China, Japan and Singapore, and his work is held in collections in the Vietnamese National galleries in Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City, and in Singapore art museum
Nguyễn Xuân Việt		1942 1949?		Worked as an apprentice to Nguyễn Gia Trí for 17 years (from 1976 until the artist's death). Author of the book: *Nguyễn Gia Trí's words on creation* Sells work directly to buyers from Singapore and Hong Kong, has had a number of exhibitions in Vietnam and Thailand.
Đặng Tin Tưởng		1945		1967- 1 year course at FACI, studying graphic art so as to learn to create persuasive propaganda posters. In addition to his woodblock printing and other graphic artwork, Đặng Tin Tưởng is a specialist in sơn khắc. Teacher at FACI for over 20 years, and was influenced by his teachers, Trần Văn Cẩn, Nguyễn Đức Nung, Hoàng Tích Chù. His work is in the Vietnam Fine Arts Museum, Vietnam Military Museum, & the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology.

Đoàn Văn Nguyên		1947		Studied for 7 years, from 1961-1968 at FACI, taught by Hoàng Tích Chù, and then went on to teach there himself for around 30 years, retiring in 2007. His early works were exhibited alongside artists like Nguyễn Sáng and Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm. Exhibits and sells lacquer in Vietnam, mainly for high prices.
Lý Trực Sơn		1949		1979 Graduated from Vietnam Fine Arts University and became lecturer there. 1989-1998 travelling and painting in Paris and Berlin Exhibitions include: Solo Exhibition in Vietnamese Culture Palace in Paris (1991) Paintings Exhibition in Hanover (Germany, 1996) “Here” Solo Lacquer Painting Exhibition at Viet-Art Center, Hà Nội (2006) 5th Beijing International Art Biennale (2012) Sontavietnam.com - http://**lytrucson**.com
Công Quốc Hà		1955		Công Quốc Hà graduated from the College of Industrial Fine Arts in 1979. Influenced by Nguyễn Sáng’s portraits of young women, Công Quốc Hà has exhibited in Germany, Switzerland, Buenos Aires, New York, Paris, Singapore, Tokyo and Melbourne, and won a number of awards.Established NHÀ NGHỆ THUẬT HÀ NỘI (Arts Home) in Kisa, Sweden, where he has lived and worked since 2005. Author’s articles on Vietnamese artists (such as Đặng Tin Tưởng. www.daibieunhandan.vn
Bùi Hữu Hùng		1957		Early lacquer works were dream-like landscapes, followed by series of Vietnamese women in traditional dress, which were popular abroad. Bùi Hữu Hùng has exhibited Salon Natasha, Hà Nội, Plum Blossoms, Hong Kong, and New World Art Center, New York. Website: https://bui-huuhung.com/

Nguyễn Thanh Mai		1959		Graduated from HCMC FACI 1984 Member of the Fine Arts Association Has won numerous national prizes in addition to exhibiting in California and running her own art school for children.
Trinh Tuan		1961		1985 graduated from the College of Industrial Fine Art, 2000 MA at FACI Exhibited abroad throught the 1990s and 2000's several times, in such as Japan , China , Singapore, Australia, USA, Thailand), France, the Netherlands, Germany, Israel , Taiwan Hong Kong, Malaysia (2005, 2009), UK (2006), Korea (2007, 2008) and India (2009).
Công Kim Hoa		1962		1985 graduated in ceramics from the Industrial College of Fine Art, but went on to specialise in lacquer painting, allong with her husband, Trinh Tuan. Their studio (and home) in central Hà Nội is used for painting, workshops and exhibitions, in addtion to participating in international exhibitions.
Nhat Tran		1962		Born in Hồ Chí Minh City, but emigrated to America in the 1990s, having graduated with distinction in BA from the University of Fine Arts, Hồ Chí Minh City in 1992. In 2006 she was commissioned to create a mural for the Indianapolis Airport Authority Awarded grants to study urushi in Tokyo (2010) and Kyoto (2015) Website: https://www.urushi-artist.com/home

Lê Quảng Hà		1963		Studied a BA and at postgraduate levels at the Industrial Fine Arts University in Hà Nội. Winning awards since the early 1990s, at Vietnam Fine Arts Association and National Fine Arts Exhibition as well as Asean Exhibitions, Lê Quảng Hà has exhibited in Berlin , Germany: Beijing , China: Zurich, Switzerland, Bangkok, Thailand and in 2019 in Singapore at the Biennale.
Đinh Công Đạt		1966		1994, graduated from the Fine Arts University in Hà Nội, specialising in sculpture. Often described as a 'pop artist' but is involved in performance, set design and shop window dressing. His use of lacquer is innovative, incorporating lacquer techniques into interior decoration. Đinh Công Đạt has had a number of solo exhibitions: 2009 Tokyo American Club, Japan, 2003 Iskandar Gallery, Paris, 2004 Masks Mai's Gallery, Hồ Chí Minh City, Hà Nội
Trần Tuấn Long		1967		2005: Graduated from Fine Arts University in Hà Nội. A member of the SON TA VIETNAM GROUP Exhibits regularly in Vietnam (Fine Arts Association), Taiwan (Annual exhibition), China (Beijing, Lacquer painting) and (Internaational Lacquer Painting) Korea. https://indochineart.vn/trantuanlong
Saeko Ando		1968		Studied Vietnamese lacquer in the studios of Trinh Tuan, Doãn Chí Trung, Nguyễn Huy Hoàng, and craftsman, Làm Hữu Chính Solo exhibitions, include "SsssshhhhH!" (1999), as well as "Texture of Life" (2004) "Japan in Me" (2013) Japan "The World of Vietnamese Lacquer paintings" held in Tokyo, Kyoto and Sapporo (2006), "Resonant Uruwashi" (2012), Britain (Simon Pilling Gallery and in Collect), Germany (Museum für Lackkunst in Münster) and America (Boston, 2011). https://www.saekoando.com/

Đỗ Đức Khải		1969		2000: Graduated from Fine Arts University in Hà Nội. Member of Vietnam Fine Arts Association A member of the board of the SON TA VIETNAM GROUP Exhibits regularly in annual SON TA VIETNAM exhibitions, and has pictures in the Vietnam Fine Arts Association, Vietnam Military History Museum, Đà Nẵng City Museum of Fine Arts https://indochineart.vn/24
Vũ Thăng		1970		Born in Hải Phòng, Vũ Thăng moved to Sapa in the north. He has had solo exhibitions in Hà Nội in 2004 (Sofitel Metropole), 1999 (New Factory Gallery) & 1997 (Trang An Gallery), & participated in a range of Arts Association and National painting exhibitions in Vietnam, the Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT3) in Australia, Korea (Art Gwangju), and Germany (including the Museum für Lackkunst in Münster) https://mythuathaiphong.blogspot.com/2012/02/vu-thang.html
Nguyễn Trường Linh		1971		Graduated from FACI Hà Nội in 1997, majoring in Lacquer. Graduated from the Master of Fine Arts in 2006, majoring in Painting. Member of Vietnam Fine Arts Association CHAIRMAN OF ARTS, College of Art. Chairman of SON TA VIETNAM GROUP Exhibits in Vietnam, Korea, Taiwan, http://sontavietnam.blogspot.com/2014/08/gioi-thieu-ve-hoa-si-nguyen-truong-linh.html
Nguyễn Tuấn Cường		1978		Graduated from the University of Industrial Fine Arts in 2001, majoring in Lacquer. A member of the SƠN TA VIETNAM Group Exhibitions from 2004 – 2020 include various lacquer exhibitions held in Hà Nội & Hồ Chí Minh City, Vietnam: Geneva, Switzerland: Beijing, China and Seoul, Korea.

Oanh Phi Phi		1979		2002 BFA at Parsons School of Design 2004 Fulbright Grant to study lacquer painting in Hanoi 2012 Masters in Art and Research at the University of Madrid Complutense Radiant Material, Pro Se, National Gallery Singapore, Singapore 2017 Palimpsest, FOST Gallery, Gillman Barracks, Singapore 2014 Specula, Hanoi City Exhibition Hall, 2009 Black Box, Art League Houston, 2008 http://www.phiphioanh.com/
Vũ Đức Trung		1981		Univeristy of Industrial Arts 2000-2003, Univeristy of Fine Arts 2007, 3months study at EBAI Paris. Exhibitions include a range of galleries in Hà Nội: 2016 Dong Phong Gallery; 'AIA Vietnam Eye' (group exhibition), & Mai Gallery.

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Phạm Hầu (1940) *Summer Storm* [Lacquer on Board] 150 x 68cm. In: Phạm Gia Yên (2019) *Sơn Mài Phạm Hầu* (The Lacquer art of Pham Hau). Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Mỹ Thuật. P52

Tô Ngọc Vân (1953) *Soldiers and citizens resting on the hill* [Lacquer on Board] Dimensions unknown. At: http://pgdvangiang.hungyen.edu.vn/mien-que-van-giang/dat-va-nguoi-van-giang/tac-pham-cua-danh-hoa-to-ngoc-van.html (Accessed on 12.05 2022)

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Trần Văn Cẩn (1960) *Autumn.* [Lacquer on Board] 75 x 100cm
At: http://www.postcolonialweb.org/singapore/arts/painters/vietnam/tranvancan/2.htm l (Accessed 26/01.2020)

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Nguyên Khang (1962) *March across a Stream.* {Lacquer on Board] Dimensions unknown. At: http://vanhocnghethuathatinh.org.vn/cac-tac-pham-son-mai-cua-hoa-si-nguyen-khang-1585660857.html (Accessed on 12.05.2022)

Hoàng Tích Chù and Nguyễn Tiến Chung (1943) Detail from a 6 panelled screen. [Lacquer on board] 100.2 x 33 cm each panel, overall: 100.2 x 198 cm. Christies Auction, 2021.

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120.5 by 61 cm: Overall: 120.5 by 122 cm. Sotheby's Auction, Hong Kong 2020.

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Nguyễn Văn Minh (s.d.) *Mother and child* (*Mẹ và con*.) [Lacquer on Board] 120x80cm

Nguyễn Văn Trung (1951) *Moon Festival.* [Lacquer on Board] 125 x 90 cm.

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Đoàn Văn Nguyên (1990) *Uncle Ho composing a poem* (*Bác làm thơ)* [Lacquer on Board] 90 x120cm. In: Quang Việt (2014) *Hội Hoa Sơn Mài Việt Nam* (Lacquer Painters of Vietnam). Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Mỹ Thuật pg. 111

Lý Trực Sơn (2017) *Blue Distance* [Lacquer on Board] 70 x 70cm

Công Quốc Hà (1992) *Full Moon*. [Lacquer on Board] 80 x 110cm. In: Nguyễn Quang Việt & Trường Hạnh (ed.) (2001) Công Quốc Hà : lacquer – Mysterious Kingdom. Hà Nội: Nhà xuất Bản Mỹ Thuật.

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