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Thesis

VIETNAMESE AESTHETICS
FROM 1925 ONWARDS

by

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Table of content:

Acknowledgement iv
Abstract v
List of illustrations vi-xxi
Introduction 1-7
Chapter 1: Vietnamese Pre-colonial Culture from 18th Century to 1884 8-71
Chapter 2: The Birth of Modernism in Việt-Nam 1925-1945. 72-130
Chapter 3: Vietnamese Socialist Realism: Arts of the Democratic Republic of Việt-Nam (the North) 1945-1975. 131-188
Chapter 4: Visual Arts of the Republic of Việt-Nam (the South) 1954-1975: ‘The Other’. 189-267
Chapter 5: The Construction and Deconstruction of Vietnamese Aesthetics of the Post-War Period 1975-1990. 268-310
Chapter 6: Renovation: Pluralism in the Arts of the Period 1990-2004. 311-372
Conclusion 373-386
Bibliography 387-404
Appendix 405-418
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Abstract

Twentieth century art in Viêt-Nam underwent immense changes due to the nation’s encounters with the West, through colonialism and two great wars. This thesis examines the significant impact of architecture, clothing painting and sculpture on the development of Vietnamese aesthetics. The very public nature of architecture and clothing will be used as a cultural backdrop for the changing aesthetic ideals in painting and sculpture.

The thesis examines the aesthetic merits of Socialist Realism, introduced after reunification in 1975, in particular, its relationship to the art of the Republic of Viêt-Nam (South Viêt-Nam) from 1954 to 1975. Vietnamese post-war art historians have consistently omitted the significant cultural developments of this period in their writings. A study of this distinctive era will clarify aesthetic changes in the last decades of the twentieth century.

After a long period of isolation and ideological constraint, remarkable cultural changes occurred when Viêt-Nam re-established contact with the outside world. This thesis will present the subsequent changes in aesthetics, as an attempt to balance tradition and modernity, within the context of market reforms and the internationalisation of Vietnamese art. These events had a significant impact on the contemporary art market in Viêt-Nam.

Through the changes that art history has noted, this thesis argues that the interactions with outsiders were either an impetus or a pressure for changes in Viêt-Nam’s drive for modernity.
List of illustrations:

Chapter 1: VIETNAMESE PRE-COLONIAL CULTURE FROM 18th CENTURY TO 1884 (page 8-71)

Figure 1, page 8: A Female Donor, 18th Century, Bút Tháp Temple, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 2, page 28: Đình Bảng Communal House, 18th Century, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 3, page 29: Curving Roof of Đình Bảng Communal House, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 4, page 29: Decoration on Beams of Đình Bảng Communal House, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 5 (left), page 30: Carving at a Đình, Young Men and a Woman Playing, photograph extracted from Đình Việt Nam (Community Halls), p. 291 by Hà Văn Tấn & Nguyễn Văn Kậu.

Figure 6 (right), page 30: Carving at a Đình, Playing Chess, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 7, page 31: Part of Bút Tháp Temple, the Tích Thiên Am House, photograph from The Pagoda Bút Tháp, Architecture / Sculpture, edited by Hoàng Đạo Kính, p.31.

Figure 8, page 32: Kwan Yin, Bút Tháp Temple, 1656, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 9: page 32, Kwan Yin, details, replica at the Museum of Ho Chi Minh City, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 10 (left), page 33: A Female Donor, 18th Century, photograph from The Pagoda Bút Tháp, Architecture / Sculpture, edited by Hoàng Đạo Kính, p. 45.

Figure 11 (centre), page 33: A Female Donor, 18th Century, photograph from The Pagoda Bút Tháp, Architecture / Sculpture, edited by Hoàng Đạo Kính, p. 52.

Figure 12 (right), page 33: An Elderly Monk, 19th Century, photograph from The Pagoda Bút Tháp, Architecture / Sculpture, edited by Hoàng Đạo Kính, p. 57.

Figure 13, page 34: Tây Phương Temple, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 14, 15 and 16, page 34: Lohans at Tây Phương Temple photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 17 (left), page 36: Bohdisatva, 19th Century, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 18 (centre), page 36: Serving Maid, 19th Century, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 19 (right), page 36: Vajrapāni, 18th Century, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 20, page 37: Sakyamuni at Bút Tháp Temple, photograph from The Pagoda Bút Tháp, Architecture / Sculpture, edited by Hoàng Đạo Kính, p 40.
Figure 21, page 37: Sakyamuni at Tây Phượng Temple, photograph from *Buddhist Temples in Vietnam*, p.287.

Figure 22, page 38: Sakyamuni at Mía Temple, photograph from *Buddhist Temples in Vietnam*, p. 270.

Figure 23, page 38: Sakyamuni at Nê Châu Temple, photograph from teaching kit, the Fine Arts University of Hà Nội.

Figure 24, page 40: Folk print, A Flock of Chickens.

Figure 25, page 41: Folk print, A Pig.

Figure 26, page 41: Folk print, Mouse’s Wedding.

Figure 27, page 42: Folk print, Jealousy Scene.

Figure 28, page 43: Folk print, Toad Teacher.

Figure 29, page 43: Folk print, Tiger.

Figure 30, page 44: Folk print, Dinh Bồ Lĩnh.

Figure 31, page 45: Folk print, Four Ladies.

Figure 32, page 46: Folk Print of Hàng Trồng, The Map of Agriculture.

Figure 33, page 47: Woodblocks at Sính village, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 34, page 48: A stamp of Huế’s Phoenix Kite.

Figure 35, page 48: The National Kite Festival in Huế, 2003, photograph from Viet Nam News, 03 September, 2003.

Figure 36, page 51: Dragons on the Roof of Thái Hoà Palace, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 37, page 52: The Joint of Two Roofs on a Building, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 38, page 53: Thái Hoà Palace, postcard.

Figure 39, page 54: Column in Thái Hoà Palace, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 40, page 55: Decorative Motifs of Dragons, drawing by L. Cardière from *Những Người Bạn Có Đã Huế* (Les Amis du Vieux Hue) volume VI, 1919.

Figure 41, page 56: Hiển Nhơn Gate in the Huế Citadel, photograph by David Henley from [www.cpamedia.com/travel/discover_hue/](http://www.cpamedia.com/travel/discover_hue/).


Figure 43, page 58: Statue of Ngọc Nữ (a heavenly maid) at Đâu Temple.

Figure 44 (left), page 58: Headwear of Northern Women, (portrait of Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Hoàn, taken 1918, courtesy of Trịnh Bách).

Figure 45 (right), page 58: Headwear of Southern Women, (female guerrilla by Huỳnh Phương Đếng), 1960s.

Figure 46, page 59: Steles in Literature Temple in Hà Nội, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 47, page 59: Stele at Trụ Đức’s Mausoleum, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 48, page 60: Nine Urns at Thái Miếu Palace in the Imperial City Huế, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.
Figure 49, page 61: Chinese Urn, Zhou Dynasty, photograph from The Golden Age of Chinese Archaeology, Celebrated Discoveries from the People’s Republic of China.

Figure 50, page 61: Rain, (details of carving on the nine urns), photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 51, page 63: The Pavilion at Tự Đức’s Mausoleum and the author’s daughter, photograph by Justin Hardingham.

Figure 52, page 64: Ceiling painting in the Royal Theatre at Tự Đức’s Mausoleum, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 53, page 65: Po Klongirai Temple, Ninh Thuận, postcard.

Figure 54, page 65: Dvarapala, Đồng Dương, photograph from Art of Southeast Asia.

Figure 55, page 66: Apsara, the Heavenly Dancer, Chàm Museum in Đà Nẵng, photograph from Vietnamtourism.

Figure 56, page 67: Japanese Roofed Bridge, Hội An, 16th Century, photograph by Ray Beattie.

Figure 57, page 67: Japanese House in Hội An, (restored in 2000), photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 58, page 68: Chinese Temple in Hội An, postcard.

Figure 59, page 69: Chinese Temple in Chinatown, Saigon, photograph by Huỳnh Vinh Thanh.

Chapter 2: THE BIRTH OF MODERNISM, 1925-1945 (page 72-130)

Figure 1, page 72: Nguyễn Phan Châunh, Rinsing Vegetables at the Pond, 1931, silk, 69 x 49cm, photograph from Quang Phong & Quang Việt, 2000, Mỹ Thuật Thuộc Hội Nơi (the Fine Arts of the Capital Hanoi in the 20th Century), Arts Publishers, Hà Nội.

Figure 2, page 81: Ploughing.

Figure 3, page 81: Powdering bark to make paper.

Figure 4, page 81: Bound to a raft as a punishment for sexual sin.

Figure 5, page 82: Folk print Male and Female Westerners, image from Vietnam À Travers L’Architecture Coloniale.

Figure 6, page 84: Cây Mai’s ceramic details on the roof of the Thiên Hậu Temple in Chinatown.

Figure 7, page 84: Robert Balick, Madonna and Child, 1936, 150 x 36cm, powdered marble and resin cast, Đồng Nai College of Decorative Arts.

Figure 8 (left), page 85: Biên Hoà pot, 1941.

Figure 9 (right), page 85: Biên Hòa plate, 1940s.

Figure 10 (left), page 86: Biên Hòa ceramics, Mencius’ Mother, 1940s.

Figure 11 (right), page 86: Biên Hòa ceramics, Kwan Yin, 1940s.

Figure 12, page 87: a Khmer bust, 1940s, Biên Hòa School of Applied Arts.
Figure 13, page 87: an art class at the Gia Định School in the 1930s, the teacher wears a tunic while all students wear Western suits, courtesy of Nghiem Truong.

Figure 14, page 88: Trần Thanh Nhàn, Temple of Lê Văn Duyệt, 1950s, oil on canvas, 24 x 33cm, courtesy of Nghiem Truong.

Figure 15, page 88: Thuận Hồ, A Sleeping Girl, 1950s, charcoal on paper, 27.5 x 38.5cm, artist collection, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 16, page 98: Notre-Dame Cathedral, Saigon, 1880, photograph by Huỳnh Vinh Thanh.

Figure 17, page 99: Saigon Post Office, 1891, photograph by Huỳnh Vinh Thanh.

Figure 18, page 99: Municipal Theatre in Saigon, 1900, photograph by Boi Tran Nguyên Huynh.

Figure 19, page 100: High bas-relief on the Palace of Justice, 1885, photograph by Boi Tran Nguyên Huynh.

Figure 20, page 101: Saigon Town Hall, 1908, photograph by Boi Tran Nguyên Huynh.

Figure 21, page 102: The Big Market of Chinatown in Saigon, photograph by Huỳnh Vinh Thanh.

Figure 22, page 102: Townhouses surrounding the Big Market in Chinatown, Saigon, photograph by Huỳnh Vinh Thanh.

Figure 23, page 104: Hà Nội Cathedral, 1886, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 24, page 104: The Governor-General Palace, now Presidential Palace of the Socialist Republic of Việt-Nam, 1907, photograph by Damien Acheson from http://www.Damien.photos.online.fr/vn

Figure 25, page 105: Hà Nội Municipal Theatre, 1911, photograph by Boi Tran Nguyên Huynh.

Figure 26, page 105: Louis Finot Museum, now National History Museum, 1932, photograph from Sketches for a Portrait of Hanoi.

Figure 27, page 106: Dalat villas with different designs in the Indochinese style, photograph by Léonard de Selva from Vietnam À Travers L'Architecture Coloniale, Patrimoines et Médias, 1999.

Figure 28, page 107: Phát Diệm Cathedral, 1883-1899, photograph from Viettouch, www.viettouch.com/arch/church/.

Figure 29, page 108: Vĩnh Tràng Temple, Mỹ Tho town, renovated in 1907, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 30, page 109: Khải Định’s Mausoleum, 1933, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 31, page 109: Details of a mosaic in Khải Định’s Mausoleum, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 32, page 110: Interior of Khải Định’s Mausoleum, postcard.

Figure 33 (left), page 111: a Chăm woman wearing a traditional dress, photograph from www.nhandan.org.vn.
Figure 34 (centre), page 111: Imguiberty’s drawing of a four-flapped dress worn by a Northern female peasant.

Figure 35 (right), page 111: Photograph of Mrs Nguyễn Thị Bính in 1937, courtesy of Đình Trọng Hiếu.

Figure 36 (left), page 112: Áo dài Le Mur, worn by Ms Nguyễn Thị Hậu, photograph from Phong Hoá journal.

Figure 37 (right), page 112: Ms Vũ Thị Hoà Văn wearing the new áo dài by Nguyễn Cát Tường Le Mur, photo was taken in 1939, courtesy of Mr Trịnh Bách.

Figure 38, page 114: Lê Văn Miến, Reciting Literature, 1898, oil on canvas, 68 x 98cm, photograph from Vietnam Fine Arts Museum.

Figure 39 page 115: Ưng Mông, Perfume River, c.1900, oil on canvas, 50 x 80cm, courtesy of Đình Trọng Hiếu.

Figure 40, page 115: Trần Thien, Old Man, 1912, oil on canvas, 55 x 46cm, courtesy of Robert Bezuijen.

Figure 41 (left), page 117: Victor Tardieu (1870-1937), the founder and first Director of the FACI, photograph from Painters of the Fine Arts College of Indochina.

Figure 42 (right), page 117: Nam Sôn Nguyễn Văn Thọ (1890-1973), co-founder of the FACI, photograph from The 20th Century Vietnamese Fine Arts Selected Works, Culture-Information Publishing House.

Figure 43, page 119: George Khánh, The Porter, 1930s, marble, photograph from Vietnamese Contemporary Sculpture, Fine Arts publishing House.

Figure 44, page 119: Vũ Cao Đàm, A Vietnamese, 1931, bronze, height 57cm, photograph from Vietnam Fine Arts Museum, Việt-Nam Fine Arts Museum.

Figure 45, page 121: Victor Tardieu, At the Mausoleum in Huế, 1930s, oil on panel, 21.5 x 26.5cm, Sotheby’s source, auctioned in Singapore on 04 April 2004.

Figure 46, page 121: Joseph Inguiemerty, Landscape and People of Tonkin, 1933, oil on canvas, 228 x290cm.

Figure 47, page 123: Lê Phổ, A Mandarin’s Wife, 1931, oil on board, 80 x 113cm, photograph from Mỹ Thuật Thủ Đô Hà Nội (the Fine Arts of the Capital Hanoi in the 20th Century), written in Vietnamese, English and French, by Quang Phong & Quang Việt, 2000, Fine Arts Publishers, Hà Nội.

Figure 48, page 123: Mai Trung Thứ, Young Lady, 1934, oil on canvas, 82 x 57cm, photograph by Đỗ Huy from Vietnam Fine Arts Museum, Việt-Nam Fine Arts Museum (published).
Figure 49 (left), page 124: Lưu Trung Nhi, *Young Woman by Lotus*, 1940, oil on canvas, photograph from Lưu Trung Nhi, *A Collection of Paintings & Graphics*.

Figure 50 (right), page 124: Tô Ngọc Vân, *Young Woman by Lilies*, 1943, 61 x 46cm, photograph by Đỗ Huy from *Các Họa Sĩ Trường Cao Đẳng Mỹ Thuật Đồng Dương* (Painters of the Fine Arts College of Indochina).

Figure 51, page 125: Nguyễn Gia Tri, *Young Girls by Hibiscus*, 1944, lacquer on panel, 44 x 130cm, courtesy of Bùi Quốc Chí.

Figure 52, page 126: Nguyễn Phan Châu, *Girls Playing with Pebbles*, 1931, silk, 62 x 85cm, *Các Họa Sĩ Trường Cao Đẳng Mỹ Thuật Đồng Dương* (Painters of the Fine Arts College of Indochina), Fine Arts Publishing House.

Figure 53, page 127: Lê Văn Đệ, *St. Madeleine*, 1930s, photograph from Việt Nam Giáo Sư (History of Vietnamese Christianity).

Figure 54, page 127: Lê Văn Đệ, *Girl Combing Hair*, 1943, silk painting, 71 x 43cm, photograph from *Vietnam Fine Arts Museum*.

Figure 55 (left), page 128: Đỗ Đức Thuận, *Boat on the Red River*, 1931, woodcut, 47 x 40cm, photograph from *Vietnam Fine Arts Museum*.

Figure 56 (right), page 128: Trần Văn Cần, *Hair Washing*, 1943, woodblock, photograph from *My Thuật Thủ đô Hà Nội* (the Fine Arts of the Capital Hanoi in the 20th Century).

**Chapter 3: VIETNAMESE SOCIALIST REALISM: ARTS OF THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF VIỆT NAM (THE NORTH) 1945-1975** (pages 131-188)

Figure 1, page 131: Communual house at Dương Xá village, Gia Lâm district in Hà Nội’s outskirt, photograph by Bôi Trần Huynh.

Figure 2, page 133: Nguyễn Sáng, the first stamp (1946) with portrait of Hồ Chí Minh for the newly independent Viêt-Nam.

Figure 3, page 136: Hồ Chí Minh and his cabinet on the Independence Day 2nd September 1945, photograph from *Ho Chí Minh* by William Duker.

Figure 4, page 137: Hà Nội’s residents with plain clothing, photograph by Marc Riboud printed in *Face of North Vietnam*

Figure 5, page 137: Posters became ubiquitous in Hà Nội’s life. The text reads, “All must fight the American Enemy”, printed in *Face of North Vietnam*.

Figure 6, page 140: Tô Ngọc Vân, *Hà Nội’s Standing Up*.

Figure 7, page 142: Tô Ngọc Vân: *Going to Night Class*, 1954, water colour, 50 x 35cm, photograph by Đỗ Huy, printed in *My Thuật Thủ đô Hà Nội* (the Fine Arts of the Capital Hanoi in the 20th Century).

Figure 8 (left), page 142: Tô Ngọc Vân: *Hồ Chí Minh*, 1946, crayon, photograph by Đỗ Huy, printed in *My Thuật Thủ đô Hà Nội* (the Fine Arts of the Capital Hanoi in the 20th Century).
Figure 9 (right), page 143: Tạ Tỵ: *Longing for Hà Nội*, 1947, gouache, 20x25cm, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 10, page 149: Nam Sơn, *Portrait of a Confucian Scholar*, 1923, oil on canvas, 49.5x40cm, photograph from *Vietnam Cultural Window*, n 59 February 2003.

Figure 11, page 150: *To mine more coal for the Fatherland*, collection of Samuel Stern.

Figure 12 (right), page 150: *Angry waves*, poster after Chinese, collection of John Bineham.

Figure 13, page 150: Nguyễn Bích, poster, text in the top corner “We’ve destroyed 5,000 enemy troops, shot down 50 aircrafts, 7 military warehouses, 5 tanks”, text at the bottom “[We’re] determined to constantly fight all hardships and destroy the entire enemy in Điện Biên Phủ”, photography by the artist, printed along with the article by Vũ Huyễn, ‘Một Chặng Đường Đi’ (A Part of the Journey) in Mỹ Thuật, n. 102 (64) (4-2004), p. 14-15.

Figure 14, page 152: Poster “Dear Uncle, We Have a Good Crop This Year”, Courtesy of Mona Brand, Sydney.

Figure 15 (left), page 152: political poster, “To unite, hundred thousands of people march on. Success, songs will be heard all over the nation”, photograph from *Vietnam: Plastic and Visual Arts from 1925 to Our Time*, (Dutch and English) 1998, La Lettre Volée, Bruxelles, Belgium.

Figure 16 (right), page 152: Diệp Minh Châu, *Portrait of Hồ Chí Minh and Southern Children*, blood on silk, July, 1947, photograph from Nhan Dan online.

Figure 17, page 154: Cover of the Giai Phẩm (Art Works) magazine with list of writers.

Figure 18, page 157: Bùi Xuân Phái’s cartoon, published in Nhận Văn “- Why can’t you produce some creative works when everyone celebrate ‘Hundreds of flowers blossom, hundreds of houses raise their voice? – Just look at what I have on my head!”’, page 149.

Figure 19, page 158: Nguyễn Sỹ Ngọc, *A Bowl*, 1951, lacquer, 80 x 60cm, photograph by Đỗ Huy, printed in *Vietnam Fine Arts Museum*.

Figure 20, page 161: Nguyễn Đức Nưng, *Dawn in a State Farm*, 1958, lacquer, 63x91cm, photograph by Đỗ Huy, printed in *Vietnam Fine Arts Museum*.

Figure 21, page 162: Ngô Minh Cầu, *Going to the Countryside for Agricultural Production*, 1957, silk painting, 45 x 61cm, photograph by Đỗ Huy, printed in *Vietnam Fine Arts Museum*.

Figure 22, page 163: Lương Xuân Nhi, *Reading the Victory News*, 1968, silk painting, 69 x 100cm, photograph from Fifty *Years of Painting and Sculpture*
on Armed Forces and Revolutionary Wars, (bilingual text), Fine Arts Publishing House & The Army Museum, Hanoi.

Figure 23, page 164: Nguyễn Phan Chánh, *After the Military Duty*, 1964, silk painting, 73 x 51cm, *Fifty Years of Painting and Sculpture on Armed Forces and Revolutionary Wars*, (bilingual text), Fine Arts Publishing House & The Army Museum, Hanoi.

Figure 24, page 168: A. A Tyurenkov, *Lenin*, 1970s, photograph by Boi Tran Nguyễn Huỳnh.

Figure 25, page 169: Nguyễn Phước Sanh, *Southern Scythe*, 1964, plaster, 150cm in height, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 26, page 170: *Victory of Nam Ngan*, 1967, cement, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 27, page 171: Hồ Chí Minh Mausoleum, photograph by Boi Trần Nguyễn Huỳnh.

Figure 28, page 172: Huỳnh Văn Gâm, *The Heart and the Barrel*, 1963, lacquer, 85x160cm, photograph by Đỗ Huy, printed in *Vietnam Fine Arts Museum*.

Figure 29, page 174: South Việt-Nam, *Land, People*.

Figure 30, page 174: Huỳnh Phương Đông, *a female guerrilla*.

Figure 31, page 176: Fine Arts Museum of Hanoi, photograph from www.ibliblio.org.


Figure 34, page 179: Nguyễn Tử Nghiêm, *Ancient Dance*, 1970s, gouache, photograph from *The Fine Arts of The Capitol Hanoi*.

Figure 35, page 180: Dương Bích Liên, *Portrait of a Woman*, 1968, oil on board, 50x69.5cm, photograph from *Paris, Hanoi, Saigon*.

Figure 36, page 180: Dương Bích Liên, *Man and Woman on the Beach*, 1957, gouache on paper, 58x82cm, photograph from *Paris, Hanoi, Saigon*.

Figure 37, page 181: Nguyễn Sáng, *Admission into the Party in Điện Biên Phủ*, 1963, lacquer, 112x180cm, photograph from *Vietnam Fine Arts Museum*.

Figure 38, page 182: Nguyễn Sáng, *Admission into the Party in Điện Biên Phủ* (detail).

Figure 39, page 183: Bùi Xuân Phái, *Tin Street*, 1967, oil on canvas, 38 x 55cm, photograph from *Vietnam: Plastic and Visual Arts from 1925 to Our Time*.

Figure 40, page 183: Bùi Xuân Phái, *Self portrait*, 1960s, gouache on newspaper, photograph from *Bùi Xuân Phái* by Trần Hậu Tuần.
Figure 41, page 183: Bùi Xuân Phái, Chèo, 1960s, oil on board, photograph from Bùi Xuân Phái by Trần Hậu Tuân.

Figure 42, page 184: Nguyễn Sáng, Portrait of Mr. Bùi Đình Thành (Dức Minh), courtesy of Bùi Quốc Chí.

Figure 43, page 186: Văn Cao, Portrait of Mr. Lâm, 1971, oil painting, 82 x 60cm (Plastic and Visual Arts from 1925 to our times source), photograph from Vietnam: Plastic and Visual Arts from 1925 to Our Time.


Figure 1, page 189: Mai Châu, The War, 1968, mixed recycled military ammunition, 168x445cm.

Figure 2, page 196: Trần Kim Hùng, Fellowmen Building a New Hamlet, 1963, oil, 100x200cm.

Figure 3, page 202: Ngô Đình Diệm and Archbishop Danniel Mannix, photograph from Tài Magazine online: www.tain.net.au

Figure 4, page 202: Henry Cabot Lodge said good-bye to Vietnamese at the airport Tân Sơn Nhứt, 1964, photograph from Vietnam A History by Stanley Karnow.

Figure 5, page 203: Madame Nhu in the new áo dài, photograph in the cover of Thế Giới Tự Do (Free World) n. 9 (39).

Figure 6, page 205: Singer Khánh Ly in áo dài, which was in the process of “shrinking to the knees”.

Figure 7, page 205: A typical áo dài of the 1970s, courtesy of Nguyễn Thị Huệ.

Figure 8, page 207: Independence Palace, Ngô Viết Thu’s design, 1966, photograph from Ngô Viết Thu library on line: www.angelfire.com/ns/namsonngo/nvt/index5.htm.

Figure 9, page 207: The calligraphic meaning of the main elevation, ibid.

Figure 10, page 208: Vĩnh Nghiêm Temple, Nguyễn Bá Lăng’s design, 1971, photograph by Huỳnh Vinh Thanh.

Figure 11, page 209: State Library in Saigon, Nguyễn Hữu Thiện’s design, 1967, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 12, page 210: Chợ Rẫy Hospital, photograph by Huỳnh Vinh Thanh.

Figure 13, page 210: Vì Dan Hospital (renamed Thông Nhất after 1975), photograph by Huỳnh Vinh Thanh.

Figure 14, page 211: A Saigon street in 1968-69, photograph by Graham Renfrey, printed in My Vietnam, edited by Stephen Lewis.

Figure 15, page 212: A Saigon building in the 1960s, guarded by military.

Figure 16, page 213: The statue of the hero Trần Hưng Đạo, late 1960s, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.
Figure 17, page 213: The statue of Phù Đổng Thiện Vương, late 1960s, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 18, page 214: The statue of Trần Nguyên Hân, late 1960s, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 19, page 215: The statue of King An Dương Vương, late 1960s, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 20, page 216: The statue of the Two Trưng Sisters, 1963, Thế Giới Tự Do (The Free World), v. XI, n. 3.

Figure 21, page 217: Mai Chủng, Rice, 1972, on the left, the monument was being built with the artist on the scaffolding, on the right, photograph of the finished work printed in a catalogue, page 207.

Figure 22, page 218: Nguyễn Thanh Thu, Lamentation, 1966, courtesy of Dr. Nguyễn Mạnh Tiến.

Figure 23, page 220: Nguyễn Thanh Thu, Resolved to Win, photograph by Mos Hancock printed in My Vietnam: Photographs by Australian Veterans of the Vietnam Conflict, My Vietnam Trust, Adelaide.

Figure 24, page 221: Lê Thành Nhơn, Bust of Phan Bội Châu, (1974), photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 25, page 222: Lê Thành Nhơn, Kwan Yin (1974), photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 26, page 222: Dương Văn Hùng, Jesus on the Cross (1967), photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 27, page 223: Trường Đình Quế, Prisoner, 1970s, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 28, page 225: Director Lê Văn Đệ is explaining the College curricula to art critic Pierre Faucon. Photograph was taken in 1957 on the Graduation Day. The woman in the photograph is Ms Trường Thị Thịnh, the first female student of the College, College archive.

Figure 29, page 226: Lê Văn Đệ, Summer Light, 1954, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 30, page 227: Trường Đình Quế, Combing Hair, 1972, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 31, page 230: Trần Düzü Hồng, Kiều and Kim Trọng, 1959, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 32, page 231: Đào Thị Chu, Thù Đức, 1959, a print of an original oil painting in 1959 Calendar sponsored by The American Department of Information, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 33, page 231: Đào Thị Chu, Young Girl Feeding Chicken, 1974, oil, 45 x 38 cm, (Sotheby’s Catalogue April 2002). Robert Bezuijen owned the painting and released it for auction.

Figure 34, page 232: Văn Den, The Barn, 1960s, oil on canvas, 80 x 80cm (Sotheby’s Catalogue April 2002).
Figure 35, page 233: Tú Duyên, *The Hero Trần Bình Trọng*, 1955, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 36, page 234: Bé Ký, *The Load*, 1960s, pencil sketch, photograph from *Bách Khoa*, n.133.


Figure 38, page 236: Nguyễn Gia Tri, *Garden*, 1964.

Figure 39, page 236: Nguyễn Gia Tri, *Untitled*, 1968, photograph by Boi Tran Nguyen Huynh.

Figure 40, page 238: Phạm Huy Trường, *Autumn*, 1970s, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 41, page 239: Nguyễn Trí Minh, Chicago, 1963, oil on canvas, 60.5 x 95cm, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 42, page 240: 1959 Calendar sponsored by the United States Information Service, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 43, page 241: The cover of the *Oil-Lamp Light* magazine, *Alley*, oil painting by Lê Cao Phan, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 44, page 241: The cover of *Free World* magazine, *Fruit Seller*, lacquer painting by Trần Ha, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 45, page 243: Duy Thanh, *Chương Dương Port*, 1957, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 46 (left), page 243: Ngọc Dựng, *Young Lady*, 1962, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 47 (right), page 243: Thái Tuấn paintings in Kohlman’s collection, printed in *Thế Giới Tư Do*, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.


Figure 49, page 246: Tà Ty, *Music Calypso*, 1962, oil on canvas, 80 x 80cm, *Sáng Đời Miền Nam*, n. 11.- 1960.

Figure 50, page 246: Tà Ty, *Untitled Yellow*, 1974, oil on canvas, 70 x 70cm, courtesy of Nghiêm Trường.

Figure 51, page 247: Ngô Viết Thụ, *City*, 1960s, oil, photograph from *Sáng Đời Miền Nam*, n. 10 (28).- 10.1961.

Figure 52, page 248: Văn Đen, *Glass Blowing*, 1963.


Figure 54, page 251: Ảnh Đèn Đấu magazine, coloured reproduction of American prints in the International Exhibition 1962.


Figure 56, page 251: Emil Schumacher, *Wagudu*, 1958, ibid.
Figure 57, page 254: Ñinh Côôøng, Untitled, 1974, oil on canvas, 80 x 60cm, courtesy of the Bennetts, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 58, page 255: Trònh Cung, Autumn of Childhood, 1962, oil on canvas, 80 x 100cm, ibid.

Figure 59, page 255: Nguyễn Trung, Girl at the Table, 1964, oil on canvas, 120 x 83cm, ibid.

Figure 60, page 255: Nguyễn Trung, The Spirit of the Lotus, 1972, oil on canvas, 80 x 65cm, ibid.

Figure 61, page 256: Nguyễn Khai, Mother and Child, 1975, oil on canvas, 60 x 85cm, ibid.

Figure 62, page 257: Nguyễn Khai, Untitled, 1973, oil on paper, 18 x 17.5cm, ibid.

Figure 63, page 257: Hồ Thành Đức, Eastern Dance, early 1970s, a print from an original oil painting, ibid.

Figure 64, page 259: Nguyễn Lâm, Black Still Life, 1972, oil on canvas, 35 x 45cm, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 65, page 259: Joss paper during the war, courtesy of the Bennetts.

Figure 66, page 260: John and Marinka Bennett are in an exhibition, next to Mai Chùng’s the Seed, courtesy of the Bennetts.

Figure 67, page 261: Tôn Nữ Kim Phương, Construction in Grey, 1964, oil on canvas, 65 x 81cm, courtesy of the Bennetts, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 68, page 262: Cao Bá Minh, Abstract 1, 1974, oil on canvas, 80 x 90cm, ibid.

Figure 69, page 262: Hồ Nguyễn, Untitled, 1974, oil on canvas, 47 x 33cm, ibid.

Figure 70, page 263: La Hon, Peaceful Mid Autumn, 1970s, oil on canvas, 70 x 80cm, ibid.

Figure 71, page 263: La Hon, Birds and Man, 1971, oil on canvas, 59 x 49cm, ibid.

Figure 72, page 264: Bùu Chí, The Lock, 1974, ink on paper, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 73, page 264: Bùu Chí, From the Inside, 1974, ink on paper, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 74, page 265: Phạm Huy Tường, Happy New Year, 1975, oil on canvas, 90 x 90cm, courtesy of Robert Bezuijen.


Figure 1, page 268: Nguyễn Phước Sanh, Tâm Vu Victory, 1990, cement, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 2, page 272: Áo bà ba, mostly worn by female working class, photograph from Vietnamtourism.

Figure 3, page 273: High school students in the late 1970s at Nguyễn thị Minh Khai High School, HCMC, photograph from Việt Nam, edited by Ep-Ghya-Ni Gla-Du-Nop.
Figure 4, page 277: Đỗ Quang Em, A Railway Worker, 1970s, courtesy Nguyễn Văn Trung (USA).
Figure 5, page 285: Ca Lê Thằng, Evening, 1992, photograph from Mỹ Thuật TPHCM n 6, 12-1992, p.43.
Figure 6, page 285: Đào Minh Tri, Traditional Dance, 1995, water colour, 80 x 105cm, photograph from Mỹ Thuật TPHCM Special Issue on Reality and Abstraction, p18.
Figure 7, page 286: Cô Tán Long Châu, a Việt-Công in action, 1961.
Figure 8, page 288: Nguyễn Trung, Mother, Child and the Ocean, 1980.
Figure 9, page 288: Nguyễn Khai, Two Female Painters, 1980.
Figure 10, page 289: Nguyễn Phước, Pottery Production, 1980, oil, 80 x 95 cm.
Figure 11, page 290: Đặng Thị Khhue, American Pirates, 1980, photograph from Vietnam Fine Arts Museum.
Figure 12, page 292: Hồ Chí Minh Museum, 1990, photograph by Boi Tran Nguyên Huynh.
Figure 13, page 292: Soviet-Vietnamese Cultural Friendship Palace, 1985, photograph from Việt Nam, edited by Ep-Ghé-Ni Gla-Du-No.
Figure 14, page 293: A Hà Nội pointed house, reminiscence of guest workers from the Soviet Union, photograph from www.vinko.com.
Figure 15, page 294: Nguyễn Kim Giao, To Die Bravely for the Fatherland's Survival, 1980s. The building in the background is Bà Kieu temple, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.
Figure 16, page 295: Đ Apocalypse Memorial, the rice fields are scared with a placard of a burning helicopter marking the former battle site, photograph by Huynh Vinh Thanh.
Figure 17, page 296: Nguyễn Hài, Đ Apocalypse Monument, 1993, photograph by Huynh Vinh Thanh.
Figure 18, page 296: the three tombs of the three martyrs in Đ Apocalypse battle, photograph by Huynh Vinh Thanh.
Figure 19, page 297: Long Hồ Cemetery in Mỹ Tho, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.
Figure 20, page 299: A fair of Soviet books in Hồ Chí Minh City, 1984, photograph from Việt Nam edited by Ep-Ghé-Ni Gla-Du-No.
Figure 21, page 300: Trần Lưu Hậu, Sewing Clothes, 1982.
Figure 22, page 300: Trần Lưu Hậu, Flower Market, 1996.
Figure 23, page 305: Soviet Nghệ Tinh, 1958, collaborative work by Nguyễn Đức Nưng, Trần Đình Thọ, Phạm Văn Đôn, Nguyễn Văn Ty, Huynh Văn Thuần and Nguyễn Sỹ Ngọc.
Figure 24, page 305: Soviet Nghệ Tinh, copy, Museum of Soviet Nghệ Tinh Movement in Vinh City, photograph by Huynh Vinh Thanh.
Figure 25, page 306: unknown artist, Soviet Nghệ Tinh, oil copy of the lacquer painting Soviet Nghệ Tinh from the Fine Arts Museum in Hà Nội. This copy
(311-372)
Figure 1, page 311: Billboard celebrating the Party’s Anniversary, photograph by
Boi Tran Huynh.
Figure 2, page 313: Vincom City Towers, 2004, photograph by Boi Tran
Nguyen Huynh.
Figure 3, page 314: Hilton Hotel, Hà Nội, 1999.
Figure 4, page 315: Hà Nội’s Mini Hotels, photograph by Nguyễn Hải Thảo.
Figure 5, page 316: Saigon’s Metropolitan Towers, 1997, photograph by Boi Tran
Nguyen Huynh.
Figure 6, page 316: Saigon’s Diamond Plaza with blue glass facade, 2000, photograph
by Boi Tran Nguyen Huynh.
Figure 7, page 317: The Statue of General Trần Hưng Đạo, between the Renaissance
Riverside Hotel, (2000) - Left and Me Linh Point Plaza, (1999) -
Right, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.
Figure 8, page 318: The Temple of Bến Đờc, 1995, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.
Figure 9, page 318: The House of Revolutionary Martyrs in Hàng Gai Street, Hà Nội,
2000, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.
Figure 10, page 320: Ghostly City at An Bàng Village, Huế. (Eternal rest for the dead,
sign of wealth for the living), photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.
Figure 11, page 320: Ghostly City at An Bàng Village, Huế, photograph by
Boi Tran Huynh.
Figure 12 (left), page 321: Áo dài with hand-painted patterns and coloured pants.
Figure 13 (right), page 321: Áo dài fashion by Liên Hướng.
Figure 14, page 325: Rừng’s exhibition at Tự Do Gallery in 1989, courtesy of Tự Do
Gallery.
Figure 15, page 326: Apricot Gallery in Hà Nội, photographed in 2001, courtesy of the
gallery.
Figure 16, page 328: Salon Natasha, photograph by Boi Tran Nguyen Huynh.
Figure 17, page 329: Catalogue of the touring Australia exhibition Crosscurrents,
collaborative works exchanged by mail.
Figure 18, page 331: Đức’s house on stilts, with art critic Trang Thanh Hiền and artist
Nguyễn Mạnh Đức, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.
Figure 19, page 332: New Building of Goethe Institute in Hà Nội, 2004, photograph by
Boi Tran Huynh.
Figure 20, page 333: Art Việt-Nam Gallery, photograph from the gallery website: http://www.vietnamesefineart.com

Figure 21, page 334: Blue Space Contemporary Art Centre. Opening of the exhibition, Hà Nội-Huế-Saigon Artists in 1997, courtesy of Blue Space.

Figure 22, page 335: Nguyễn Trung, Nocturne II, 1993, from the Six Saigonese Artists Exhibition, 1994.

Figure 23, page 337: Saigonese artists reunion at Vĩnh Lợi Gallery. From L to R: Nguyễn Lâm, Đỗ Quang Em, Dương Nghiem Mâu (writer), Đinh Cường, Dương Văn Hùng, Khưu Đức, Hồ Hữu Thụ and Nguyễn Văn Trung, courtesy of Nguyễn Trung.

Figure 24, page 337: Mai Chủng, Girl, 2001, bronze, 38 x 40 x 33 cm, courtesy of the artist family.

Figure 25, page 338: Nguyễn Khai, Light, 2001, mixed media, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 26, page 339: Đỗ Hoàng Tưởng, Way to Darkness, 2000.

Figure 27, page 339: Trần Văn Thảo, Square II, 2000, oil on canvas, 90 x 90cm.

Figure 28, page 341: Fine Arts magazine. 1995 issue featuring abstraction.

Figure 29, page 343: A staff member from Massachusetts College of Arts (Boston) photographs Bùi Xuân Phú’s self-portrait at Đức Minh Museum, 2003.

Figure 30, page 343: Thành Chượng, Self-Portrait, 1995, photograph from Thế Thao & Văn Hóa, n. 20 on 10 March 2000, p. 29.

Figure 31, page 344: Đặng Xuân Hoà, Self-Portrait, 1998, oil on canvas, 45 x65cm.

Figure 32, page 345: Lê Quang Hà, Self-Portrait, 2002, oil on canvas, 30 x 25cm.

Figure 33, page 346: Trường Tấn, Stop, 1990s, ink on rice paper, 70 x 50cm.

Figure 34, page 346: Dinh Ý Nhi, Inside the Fear, 1999, gouache on paper, 90 x 115cm.

Figure 35, page 348: Nguyễn Thái Tuấn, Great, 2002, oil on canvas, 195 x155 cm, courtesy of the artist. The painting is in Mỹ Trưởng’s collection from June 2005.

Figure 36, page 348: Nguyễn Thái Tuấn, Identity Card, 2004, oil on canvas, 135 x 155 cm, courtesy of the artist. The painting is in Mỹ Trưởng’s collection from June 2005.

Figure 37, page 349: Lê Hồng Thái, She Works Hard, 2003, photograph by Bôi Trần Huỳnh.

Figure 38, page 351: Lê Quang Hà is finishing off The American Dream. The middle canvas removed from exhibition, courtesy of Nguyễn Thị Thu Thủy.

Figure 39, page 353: Trần Trung Tín, Mother and Child, 2000.

Figure 40, page 354: Vū Dân Tấn, Masks, 2002, page 340, photograph by Bôi Trần Huỳnh.
Figure 41, page 355: Nguyễn Minh Thành, *Be the Image with the Shadow*, 2003, photograph from ‘Truyện Thống là Đối Thấy’ (Tradition means Changes), Mỹ Thuật, n. 100 (63) (3-2004) by Phan Cảm Thọ. Image.


Figure 44, page 357: Đạo Anh Kháng, *Arrival of Spring*, photograph from Mỹ Thuật.

Figure 45, page 358: Lý Hoàng Lý, Trays, Busan Biennale, Korea, 2002, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 46, page 359: Jun-Nguyen-Hatshushiba, *Towards the Complex - For the Courageous, the Curious and the Cowards.* (Video still) 2001, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 47, page 360: David Thomas, *Hồ Chí Minh – A Portrait*, 2003.

Figure 48, page 362: Nguyễn Tân Cương, *Scenario*, 2001, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 49, page 364: The 4th National Sculpture Exhibition, 2003, photograph by Bôi Trần Huỳnh.

Figure 50, page 364: Vương Văn Thảo, *Land and Water*, installation, 2003, photograph by Bôi Trần Huỳnh.

Figure 51, page 367: Lê Thừa Tiến, Việt-Nam – *The Fossilised War*, 1998, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 52, page 369: Đức Minh Museum, courtesy of Bùi Quốc Chí.

Figure 53, page 371: Thái Bá Văn and his portrait bust by Phạm Văn Hạng, photograph from Tuổi Trẻ Chữ Nhật in the article ‘Một Ý Thứ Phê Bính’ by Nguyễn Quân, Tuổi Trẻ Chữ Nhật, n. 15-99 on 18, April, 1999, p.26.
INTRODUCTION

The word ‘Việt-Nam’ has been synonymous with ‘war’ for a very long time, particularly through copious publications about the ‘Việt-Nam War’ printed in the West and predominantly in English. However, Việt-Nam has more qualities to promote other than those that are the consequences of war. This thesis developed from a desire to offer greater insights into Vietnamese culture through its visual arts. It covers the period from 1925 to 2004 accompanied by a pre-colonial background.

This is a reflection on Vietnamese art from the inside by a Vietnamese and aims at reconstructing the nation’s art history as it happened and as a whole. Due to the great span of historic time covered in the thesis, discussion of artists and artworks are limited. However, the choices made represent the recognisable shift in aesthetics through the eras. Particular focus is placed on recovering that part of art history lost due to the fall of Saigon and to raise those voices that have not yet been heard. In doing so, some questions will be asked that have not appeared in publications so far, but are forever present in the minds of many Vietnamese artists and cultural workers. The reason for the silence can be interpreted in this statement:

Nobody is going to say the truth in any conference in Việt-Nam. Don’t waste your time attending conferences if you want to hear the truth.1

This revelation by an official from the Việt-Nam Fine Arts Association indicates the ongoing fear of being punished for speaking publicly against government policies. Consequently, skirting around the issues is commonplace in conference papers or articles and obtaining information inside Việt-Nam is complicated.

The research began officially in 2001 with little available literature on Vietnamese art history inside or outside Việt-Nam. The magazine, Mỹ Thuật (Fine Arts), is now published monthly in Việt-Nam but the articles, on the whole, tend to be more

1 Source of quote wishes not to be disclosed.
descriptive than critical and lack accompanying images. Diaries and memoirs have been an invaluable source of facts about Vietnamese art history but finding the few ‘gems’ has been time consuming.

The process of accumulating and distilling data is never an easy task and in the case of publications from Việt-Nam, a veil of ideological doctrine and criticism favouring Socialism always covers them. Researching, therefore, requires cross-referencing texts with other documents and citations to get to the core issues. Although the Restricted Room at the Library of General Sciences of Hồ Chí Minh City permits researchers access to pre-1975 publications, not every request is granted and is accompanied by a slow, bureaucratic process. During field trips in Việt-Nam and the USA, numerous personal interviews with Vietnamese artists, art officials and researchers were conducted to uncover information not available in Vietnamese publications. Even though the interviews were supplemented by telephone and email, some questions remain unanswered. Refusal was on the grounds that the interviewee felt that their response could endanger them or the interviewer.

The thesis acknowledges aesthetic concepts are a construct in constant change throughout history. In Việt-Nam’s case, this has been primarily through contact with other nations during periods of great conflict. Việt-Nam’s key struggles in the 20th century were with France, America, China and the Soviet Union. These influences significantly changed Vietnamese aesthetics and the development of a national art, either as a general cultural ambience or as an official imposition of national policies.

While Vietnamese Socialists were motivated by nationalism, evident in works displayed in the State Fine Arts Museums, it will be argued that the formation of Vietnamese aesthetics over the 20th century was driven by an impetus toward modernity. A case will be made that while some aesthetic values were imposed by institutionalised guidelines they were often adapted by Vietnamese artists and reworked in unique ways. I will also argue that colonial influences were neither
uniform nor inevitable but shaped by the specific contexts in which they emerged. As such, concepts of beauty and creativity are marked by changes in aesthetics, from one era to another.

Vietnamese aesthetics will be examined through clothing, architecture, sculpture and painting. In most societies, clothing and architecture are noticeable cultural features which tend to reveal the economic status and mood of a community. A close examination will be made of the evolution of the national costume for females (áo dài), to demonstrate how Việt-Nam preserved tradition and, at the same time, integrated it with modernity. Sculpture and painting, on the other hand, have more complex requirements to contemplate in order to appreciate their aesthetic qualities. Furthermore, these media are influenced by ideological considerations and, in totalitarian societies, artists have to negotiate between State demands and their personal vision. Also some comparisons between visual arts and literature will be made where appropriate to reveal the social and intellectual context in which visual arts are practiced.

Aesthetic changes in Việt-Nam will be looked at chronologically, for the most part through encounters with western colonialism.

Chapter 1 (18th century-1845) considers the diversity of pre-colonial art practices and Vietnamese aesthetics, particularly in relation to religions and beliefs, through a detailed account of works from communal houses (đình), Buddhist temples, folk prints and court art in Huế. The popularity of sculpture in pre-colonial times is examined through Buddhist art and court art in Huế, with the view that a new tradition was constructed in order to break with the past. Artworks that reflect the flexibility of Vietnamese artists and artisans who sought to integrate new influences and local traditions will be studied. Overall, the pre-colonial era saw Vietnamese aesthetics develop from various influences, which were reinterpreted by the artisans.
Based on this complex history, Chapter 2 (1884-1945) examines modern Vietnamese art as it developed under western influences, particularly through the establishment, in 1925, of L’École supérieure des Beaux-Arts d’Indochine (trường Cao Đàm Mỹ Thuật Đông Dương / the Fine Arts College of Indochina), which was modelled on L’Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Relations between the colonisers and the colonised were inevitable and are expressed clearly in architecture and clothing. As time passed, a clash between East and West; old and new, tradition and modernity, craft and fine arts, became increasingly visible. Colonial influences were manifested most clearly in literature through the adoption of French syntax, journalism, translation of French classics and the growth of Romanticism in new poetry and novels. Visual artists were stimulated to rework their ideas and adapt these influences as they were explored in literature. In their move to modernity, Vietnamese artists chose the most appropriate western influences and, despite the impact of French art, local and traditional values were aesthetically integrated. This was demonstrated with the introduction of oil painting into Việt-Nam and modern developments in traditional lacquer craft, which increased the status of painting when the two media were combined.

Chapter 3 (1945-1975) examines the imposition of Socialist Realism on the Democratic Republic of Việt-Nam (North Việt-Nam), where art became propaganda for the revolution by suppressing French-influenced individualism and non-figurative art. In doing so, Socialist Realism fabricated a collective identity and patriotism in art, with the intention of making a new culture for the masses. The State systematically introduced Soviet and Chinese communist ideas as examples of ideological merit. However, due to the prevailing opinions of some dissident artists, who refused to align themselves with State cultural policies, the scheme was unfulfilled. Some 30 years

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later, many of these artists were recognised as ‘masters’ and the Party’s ‘official artists’ were looked upon with indifference.

Chapter 4 (1954-1975) concentrates on the art of the Republic of Việt-Nam (South Việt-Nam) and is subtitled ‘The Other’ because of its opposition to the Socialist art of North Việt-Nam during the war. The Other represents ‘art for art’s sake’, an aesthetic that was ignored, underestimated or distorted by post-war Vietnamese art historians. This is partly due to the artworks that went missing in the aftermath of the fall of Saigon and the Cultural Revolution in the South. Vietnamese aesthetics during this era attempted to balance tradition and modernity, as shown in a number of national architectural projects and the survival of the áo dài. Without the ideological restraints of the North, South Việt-Nam exemplified the evolution of Vietnamese modernism, chiefly through influence of the Fine Arts College of Indochina. In the southern art world, graduates from the Fine Arts College of Indochina and overseas Vietnamese graduates, mainly from France, constructed the National Fine Arts College of Saigon, which guided the continuation of a French, rather than American, influence despite the latter’s military and economic involvement. This led to the development of a diversity of styles and movements in southern Vietnamese art, characterised by freedom of expression and extensive international contact with western nations, particularly through the First International Exhibition held in Saigon in 1962.

Chapter 5 (1975-1990) follows the course of Vietnamese contemporary art after the National unification in 1975. This period witnessed further Soviet influence in northern architecture and, in the South, an expansion of Socialist Realism through painting and art education. Việt-Nam’s conflicts with China and Cambodia in the post-war era created a chaotic environment and ideological constraints became a priority for the sake of political stability. Immediately after the fall of Saigon, the imposition of Socialist Realism was methodically delivered to the ‘new liberated land’. For the following ten years, an administrative structure was set up to coordinate government
policies and campaigns to eradicate ‘degenerate’ American influences in the South. However, paradoxically, the most diverse elements of southern art surreptitiously infiltrated the ‘revolutionary base’ of the North. Finally, in this chapter, the question is asked, when will there be a great Vietnamese work of art in which connections between the political nature of policies, war and artistic achievement is revealed?

In Chapter 6 (1990-2004) an analysis is made of the issues surrounding current Vietnamese contemporary art, through the impact of internationalisation following the launch of the Socialist Party’s 1986 market reform policy. This includes the development of an art market, which resulted in the blossoming of Vietnamese contemporary art through contact with the outside world. After a long period of isolation and ideological constraint, some flexibility was endorsed, although the government still maintains censorship. The canon of Socialist Realism dramatically dwindled in favour of international styles and new media, introduced through exchange programs, conferences and influential expatriate artists. However, as a result of commercialisation and inflation, paintings callously became commodities and mass production was endorsed. The new market-driven economy has presented Vietnamese contemporary art with a dilemma: to either comply with a market economy or explore art practice on its own terms. Concerned artists constantly request critical reforms to art education, criticism, curatorship and prizes, but it is unlikely that the State will change its policies.

The conclusion presents a summary of the changes in Vietnamese visual culture in the 20th century, ranging from the colonial, Socialist and reform eras, to the contemporary. Two major issues are raised: first, the position of Socialist Realism in Vietnamese contemporary art and second, the writing of Vietnamese art history.

The thesis incorporates full diacritics in all words as they are used in Vietnamese texts but Vietnamese names from quotes in other references will remain as they were. Using Vietnamese words in English publications without diacritic accents often causes
misinterpretation. For example the critic Trường Chinh can be confused with the Communist leader Trường Chinh if it was written ‘Truong Chinh’ without diacritic accent. The decision to write Việt-Nam as two separate words with a hyphen is based on historical accounts; it was developed in the 1930s and in use until the early 1970s. Trần Trọng Kim, in his book on Vietnamese grammar in 1940, states that names and compound words should have a hyphen between the two words.³ He applied this in Việt-Nam Sử Lược (Concise History of Việt-Nam) published in 1928. Đào Duy Anh followed this line in his book Việt-Nam Văn Hóa Sử Cường (Concise History of Vietnamese Culture) published in 1938.⁴ To cite a few more scholars and writers who shared the same view: Thế Nguyên (1956), Dương Quảng Hài (1946), Đào Sĩ Chu (1962), Phan Phát Huồn (1965), Thái Tuấn (1967), Lý Chánh Trung (1972) and so on. Later, due to the lassitude of the printing industry, the hyphen was omitted.⁵ In addition, writing Việt-Nam in this way, in my opinion, symbolic of this one nation having dual characteristics: old and new, tradition and modernity, yin and yang – as the story will reveal.

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³ Trần Trọng Kim, 1940, Việt-Nam Văn-Phâm (Vietnamese Grammar), Lê Thăng, Hà Nội.
⁴ Đào Duy Anh, 1938, Việt-Nam Văn Hóa Sử Cường (Concise History of Vietnamese Culture), Bốn Phương Publishers. Note that all publications of this period omitted the hyphen when they were later reproduced by Hà Nội publishers.
⁵ I credited Dr. Nguyễn Ngọc Tuấn from Victoria University for this explanation of the missing of the hyphen in the modern times.