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Thesis

VIETNAMESE AESTHETICS

FROM 1925 ONWARDS

by

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THEORIES OF ART PRACTICE

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Abstract

Twentieth century art in Việt-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 Việt-Nam (South Việt-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 Việt-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 Việt-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 Việt-Nam's drive for modernity.

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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 Đẳng 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.² 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

² See Maurice M. Durand & Nguyen Tran Huan, 1985, *An Introduction to Vietnamese Literature*, translated from the French by D.M. Hawke, Columbia University Press, New York, p. 107-133.

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 Trương Chính 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 Hoá Sử Cương (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 Hàm (1946), Đào Sĩ Chu (1962), Phan Phát Huôn (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 is, 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.

³ Trần Trọng Kim, 1940, *Việt-Nam Văn-Phạm* (Vietnamese Grammar), Lê Thăng, Hà Nội.

⁴ Đào Duy Anh, 1938, *Việt-Nam Văn Hoá Sử Cương* (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.