

**CHAPTER 2:**  
**THE BIRTH OF MODERNISM**  
**1925-1945**



Figure 1: Nguyễn Phan Chánh, *Rinsing Vegetables at the Pond*, 1931.

Chapter 1 dealt with pre-colonial Vietnamese aesthetics and the impact upon Vietnamese identity through its interactions with foreign influences, and non-official regimes. It repositioned folk art as a resilient and adaptable range of expressions that interpreted Confucianism, among other beliefs and presented Nguyễn imperial art as the ‘other’ of a northern tradition.

This Chapter examines the Vietnamese experience of modernity through the cross-cultural relationships that emerged in response to and, sometimes in spite of, political plurality and French colonialism.

From a Vietnamese perspective, modernity meant accepting western values in the wake of French occupation and it cannot be separated from colonisation. Việt-Nam’s engagement with modernity was shaped by exploitation under colonial rule and the subsequent ‘correction’ by what the 1975 post-war regime perceived as Việt-Nam’s long decadent engagement with colonial reconstruction.

Resistance to colonisation and earlier engagements with modernity in the late 1920s and 30s by scholars, activists and the middle classes have been obscured by political ideology. Conflicting and contradictory radical views have been largely unexplored, as have the origins and diversity of Vietnamese modern art and the era it represents.

The establishment of vocational schools by the French is explained to show how Vietnamese traditional aesthetics interacted with western employment opportunities, rather than colonial exploitation. Likewise, French architecture urbanised the Vietnamese environment and was followed by a local response to the influences of colonial architecture and planning, such as King Khải Định’s Mausoleum. Finally, the foundation of L’École supérieure des Beaux-Arts de l’Indochine (Trường Cao Đẳng Mỹ Thuật Đông Dương), hereafter the Fine Arts College of Indochina, in 1925, is considered as a marriage between Vietnamese artistic endeavour and the French academy, giving rise to the birth of Vietnamese modernism.

The contexts in which the quest for national independence, accompanied by the emergence of modernity, influenced ideas and gave rise to the origins of Vietnamese art are examined. Attention is given to the preference of an emerging Vietnamese middle class to prioritise education and adopt Romanised Vietnamese that paved the way to new ideas. In particular, this chapter emphasises the farsighted alternatives offered by non-Communist movements that, under the guidance of nationalist ideals, resisted colonisation. The growth of literature encouraged individuality and journalism cultivated a unique way of articulating modernity.

Rather than passively ‘suffering’ modernity, Việt-Nam is repositioned as moving toward and negotiating with western influences. In this respect, it is argued that tradition is constructed, rather than natural or universal. From this viewpoint, the birth of modernism in Vietnamese art might be seen as creating a new tradition.

#### **COLONIAL SOCIETY:**

Việt-Nam entered modern history with two great agonies: the loss of autonomy to French colonisation and dramatic social changes in the wake of westernisation. The French seizure in 1858 of Tourane (modern day Đà Nẵng) was followed by the fall of Gia Định’s fortress in 1859, and despite many armed insurrections led by scholars and patriots, Hà Nội then fell in 1882. The 1884 Treaty of the Protectorate outlined French control of Việt-Nam. The northern part then called Tonkin, was under a direct protectorate, the central part called An Nam, was governed by a series of Vietnamese kings under an indirect protectorate that, however, over time became dominant, while the southern part known as Cochinchina, was formally colonised by the French, in the Treaty of 1862. A new society was in the process of formation, which saw one heroic nationalist movement replace another, in a continued fervour of anti-colonial resistance.

Vietnamese colonial society was shaped by the French concept of the “Civilizing Mission” (*Mission Civilisatrice*), arising from the western Christian belief in delivering enlightenment to Asia. From the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century to the first decade of

the 20<sup>th</sup>, the early stages of the colonising process was characterised by little understanding of the local setting and armed force was the order of the preferred way to ‘assimilate’ the indigenous inhabitants. Later, the French adopted a new strategy known as, ‘Franco-Vietnamese collaboration and harmony’ under the liberal authority of Governor-General Albert Sarraut, who held office from 1911-1914 and again from 1916-1919. During Sarraut’s second period in office, the French recognised that collaboration with the locals was crucial to the achievement of colonial goals and to accrue profits from local products, mainly rice and rubber.

French colonists initially saw Indochina and its cultures through a western lens and attempted to change what did not suit their customs.<sup>1</sup> Their *Mission Civilisatrice* was widely regarded as a euphemism for the imposition of western values and, in particular, the superiority of French culture. Professor Nguyễn Văn Trung of the University of Saigon, claimed that the *Mission Civilisatrice* and Franco-Vietnamese collaboration and harmony were “myths of colonialism”<sup>2</sup> devised to obscure their imperialist interests:

The nature of colonialism was exploitation, oppression and obscurantism, but the myth was association and enlightenment. In order to set up a myth, there must be some realisation of part of the myth; because if nothing were done, there would not be myths. How could people believe in enlightenment if some schools were not open and, therefore, some conviction be affirmed...In sum, myths need to be performed partly, just enough to fool people.<sup>3</sup>

French colonial policy continually utilised “assimilation and association” as two aspects of ‘civilising,’ throughout its involvement in Việt-Nam. The French invested in Indochina by developing plantations, hospitals, banks and institutions. They improved roads and dikes, to reinforce the myths they desired Vietnamese to

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<sup>1</sup> Read Thomas E. Ennis, 1936, *French Policy and Developments in Indochina*, in particular *Administrative Maladjustments*, the University of Chicago Press, p. 59-77.

<sup>2</sup> Nguyễn Văn Trung coined this term in *French Colonialism in Việt Nam, Reality and Myth*, 1963, Nam Sơn, Saigon and later on, Pham Cao Duong re-used it in *Vietnamese Peasants under French Colonialism*, 1985, University of California Press.

<sup>3</sup> Nguyễn Văn Trung, 1963, *Chủ Nghĩa Thực dân Pháp ở Việt Nam, Thực Chất và Huyền Thoại* (Colonialism in Việt Nam, Reality and Myth), Nam Sơn, Saigon, p.261.

believe. Construction of the Trans-Indochinois railway, that connected Hà Nội and Saigon, commenced in 1898 and took 38 years to complete. As early as 1902 however, travelling by train was possible between Saigon and Mỹ Tho and between Hà Nội and Lạng Sơn. By 1939 the railway system was 2,997 kilometres and in the same year it was recorded that 23,987 kilometres of roads were accessible. Furthermore, Saigon was ranked as the French Empire's seventh busiest port.<sup>4</sup> The well-known southern writer Sơn Nam described the impact of modernisation:

The areas of Rach Giá, Cà Mau, and Bac Liêu were not yet the bag of rice of the South before the French arrival. The agriculture of the region did not start to prosper until the road between Cà Mau – Rạch Giá was constructed. Rice was then sold at higher prices and some loans made available for farmers, at very high interest.<sup>5</sup>

These new transportation and irrigation systems expanded Việt-Nam's wealth, to the extent that it triggered local production. As pointed out by Jumper & Nguyen, however, the economic benefits to the French were clearly the target for many of these activities:

Indochina was an enterprise, remitting a yearly profit for France. Paul Doumer [the Governor-General in Indochina from 1897 to 1902] reported to the French Assembly that Indochina obtained a loan from France of 30 million francs in 1895; after five years, the loan was reimbursed and there was still a reserve of 30 million francs in the general budget. Beginning at about the turn of the century, Indochina contributed 12,500,000 francs to an item in the French budget labelled "Contribution of colonies to the military expenses of France." This amount was later increased to 14.5 million francs.<sup>6</sup>

The development of French-owned plantations, mines and factories was accomplished by depriving Vietnamese farmers and peasants of their land. At the time, 90% of the population lived with what Vietnamese historians describe as,

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<sup>4</sup> Statistics from Nguyễn Thế Anh, 1970, *Việt-Nam thời Pháp Đô Hộ 1858-1945* (Việt-Nam under the French Rule 1858-1945), Lửa Thiêng, Saigon.

<sup>5</sup> Sơn Nam, 1970, *Đồng Bằng Sông Cửu Long hay là Văn Minh Miệt Vườn* (the Mekong Delta or the Civilization of Orchards), Xuân Thu Publisher, Saigon, p. 172-3.

<sup>6</sup> Roy Jumper & Nguyen Thi Hue, 1962, *Notes on The Political and Administrative History of Viet Nam 1802-1962*, Michigan State University, p.114.

“two yokes on the neck”; one imposed by local authorities and the other by French colonists. These impoverished peasants ended their lives as exploited workers on French owned plantations and mines. Such poor conditions gave rise to many revolts that were initiated in the 1880s by Vietnamese scholar-gentry and then taken up in the 1930s and onwards by the Socialists.<sup>7</sup>

However, after many failed uprisings, Vietnamese nationalists realised that the nation needed modernising social reforms, as advocated by various movements earlier in the century. These movements are discussed in the following section, where it is argued that Vietnamese aspirations for modernisation prepared the ground for the birth of Vietnamese colonial art.

### **The Private Free School Movement (Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục)**

By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Vietnamese intellectuals realised they could not defeat the French without pursuing technology-related national reforms. The Japanese success in modernising their society became a model for many of Việt-Nam’s intelligentsia. Influential figures in the emerging reform movement were Phan Bội Châu (1867-1940) and Phan Châu Trinh (1872-1926) whose commitment made an enormous contribution toward changing the thinking of their contemporaries. Through their founding of the Eastern Movement or Đông Du,<sup>8</sup> students were sent to Japan for technology and military studies. Likewise, their Private Free School Movement, known as Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục<sup>9</sup>, which was active from 1907 to 1908, was aimed toward reforming Việt-Nam.

In the pre-colonial era, families who could afford a private tutor paid for the schooling of their children or alternatively, village-teachers would run a school from home. Teaching was based on Chinese texts such as, *Four Books* (Tứ Thư) and *Five Classics* (Ngũ Kinh), and although students spent years memorising them,

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<sup>7</sup> See David Marr, 1971, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1885-1925*, University of California Press.

<sup>8</sup> For further details see *Vietnamese Anti-Colonialism* by David G. Marr, p.120-155.

<sup>9</sup> Further details about Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục in *Vietnamese Anti-Colonialism*, 1885-1925, by David G. Marr, p. 156-184.

“one can study them [Chinese characters] until old age and still encounter strange words without knowing how they are written.”<sup>10</sup> This long process deprived the children of low income families access to education because they could not sustain the fees and would subsequently, become labourers, to provide a source of income for the family.

However, according to Hoàng Văn Chí the introduction of the Romanised Vietnamese written language (*quốc ngữ*) required just a month’s study for an adult Vietnamese to read and write.<sup>11</sup> *Quốc ngữ* literally means ‘national language’ and was first introduced into Việt-Nam by the French Jesuit, Alexandre de Rhodes (1591-1660) as a means of communication for missionaries. It is a phonetic system based on the 26 characters of the Latin alphabet and had been in use for years in Việt-Nam’s Catholic communities. However, when the French took over Indochina it became the standard form of communication, as the system is much simpler than written Chinese.

The *Private Free School Movement* taught the Romanised Vietnamese written language in its educational reform, which focused on mathematics, geography, history and science. The school organised public speeches by reformists, who emphasised patriotism and social change that influenced the next generation of scholars. The *Private Free School Movement* was first introduced in Hà Nội and spread throughout the nation so rapidly that French authorities decided to open a government ‘counter school’ in Hà Nội,<sup>12</sup> which was followed in 1907 by a university. Then after one year of operation, the French closed the *Private Free School Movement*, when they perceived a connection between the school and the anti-tax movement in central Việt-Nam, where nationalist scholars were challenging French authority. Likewise, in 1909, the *Eastern Movement* came to an end, when Japan signed a treaty with France to cease taking Vietnamese students.

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<sup>10</sup> Pham The Ngu, cited from Neil Jameison, *Understanding Vietnam*, p. 69.

<sup>11</sup> Hoang Van Chi, 1964, *From Colonialism to Communism*, Paul Mall Press, London, p 25.

<sup>12</sup> David Marr, 1971, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, University of California Press, p.181.

These two movements were short-lived but had an enormous impact on colonial society, through their encouraging impulse toward modernisation. By using education as the key to fight colonialism, the *Private Free School Movement* and the *Eastern Movement* were prepared for revolution.

At the beginning of the century, teaching and learning Romanised Vietnamese became associated with innovation and new ways of thinking. For instance, one of the radical changes advocated by the *Private Free School Movement* was a short haircut and this became one of the strongest symbols of a determination to break with the past. The reform activist, Phan Châu Trinh, recommended haircuts in a lecture at the *Private Free School Movement*, arguing that 15<sup>th</sup> century Chinese Ming Dynasty invaders forced the Vietnamese to imitate the long hair they wore. This gave rise to an anonymous ‘haircut chant’ that spread throughout the nation:

Comb in the left hand,  
Scissors in the right,  
Snip, snip, clip, clip!  
Watch out, be careful,  
Drop stupid practices,  
Dump childish things speak openly and frankly.  
Study western customs,  
Don’t cheat or bluff,  
Don’t lie,  
Today we clip,  
Tomorrow we shave!<sup>13</sup>

The poem<sup>14</sup> was created mainly for the purpose of propaganda, but demonstrates the strong inclination toward an abrupt and radical break with the past. Never had western values been praised so candidly and readily accepted. Vietnamese used to

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<sup>13</sup> David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Anti-Colonialism 1885-1925*, p.170; Neil L. Jamieson has a slightly different translation in *Understanding Viet Nam*, p. 60.

<sup>14</sup> It appears more a limerick than a poem. The Vietnamese “vè” used for this kind of poem stands for a composition of verses relating to some current events or beliefs in folklore language. “Vè” therefore can reach an extensive audience within a very short time.

refer to their head and hair as a sacred place, “to honour the ancestors.” However, they reasoned that their failures against the French demonstrated weaknesses in the old ideology and began to disassociate themselves from it. This type of revolutionary thinking laid down foundations for the next generation and introduced a new vision - even a new way of living.

In the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, if Vietnamese were trying to understand the colonisers and their superiority, then some colonists were making efforts to comprehend the Vietnamese life and culture. For instance, colonialists were exposed to Vietnamese woodblock prints through the exceptional work of Henry Oger (1885-1936?). After graduating from the Sorbonne, he served in Việt-Nam from 1908 to 1909 and was so fascinated with Vietnamese life and woodblock prints that he started an encyclopaedia of prints with assistance of local craftsmen.<sup>15</sup> He compiled 4,577 early 20<sup>th</sup> century images of utensils, professional practices and customs in Tonkin, particularly the vicinity of Hà Nội. These images are accompanied by explanations in Sino-Vietnamese and French. Oger went out everyday for months with a local artisan to do the research; he took notes and interviewed people while the artisan sketched the scene or articles. Oger often had more than one artisan assisting him with the images, which were then transferred to woodblocks in preparation for printing on ‘dó’<sup>16</sup> paper and bound into volumes entitled, “The Technique of the Annamese People by Henri Oger – An Encyclopaedia of all The Instruments, of The Utensils, of all the Gestures of the Life and Crafts of the Tonkin Annamese People.”<sup>17</sup> (figs.2-4)

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<sup>15</sup> Nguyễn Mạnh Hùng, 1989, *Ký Họa Việt Nam đầu thế kỷ 20* (Vietnamese Sketches in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century), Trẻ Publisher, Hồ Chí Minh City.

<sup>16</sup> A traditional Vietnamese handmade paper still used today by artists.

<sup>17</sup> According to Nguyễn Mạnh Hùng in *Sketches of Việt-Nam in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, the set kept in National Library of Hà Nội has seven volumes; the one in Library of General Sciences has 10 volumes.

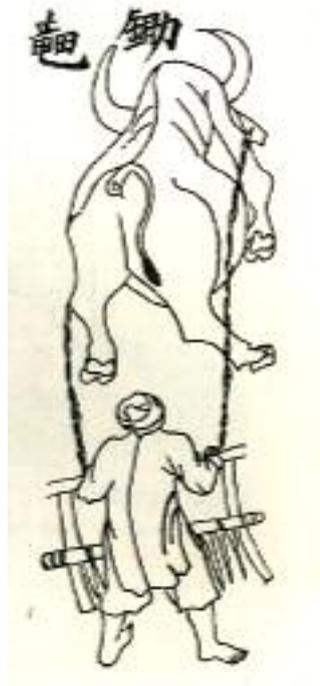


Figure 2: Ploughing.



Figure 3: Powdering bark to make paper.



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

The lines and compositions in these images are similar to Đông Hồ folk prints. Vietnamese craftsmen performed the work but the idea was generated by colonial scholarship. It recorded numerous aspects of early 20<sup>th</sup> century life in Việt-Nam and at the same time offered an insight into Vietnamese drawing and woodblock printing of that era. Oger later returned to Paris and published two volumes entitled, “General Introduction to the Study of the Techniques of the Annamese People.”

What Henry Oger and his team worked on was the physical infrastructure and customs of a society on the verge of change, introduced by political movements in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As such, in the fervent search for modernity, there was some intense promotion of westernisation, such as the folk print *Male and Female Westerners* (fig.5). It represents a western couple standing next to a modern car; the woman with a western hat and an umbrella is holding flowers, the man also in western clothes is about to light another cigar. The words, a mix of Chinese and Sino-Vietnamese, read as *Reform in popular mores converts to an increase in wealth*, which candidly advocates westernisation. The print may have been made in the 1930s to promote the superiority of western values, reflected through a sense of hygiene, physical education, sport and modern science, both in the school curricula and the public.<sup>18</sup>



Figure 5: Folk print *Male and Female Westerners*.

While Vietnamese nationalists campaigned for social and educational reforms aimed at developing their nation, French colonialists introduced vocational schools to serve their own needs, particularly requirements relating to applied arts and craftsmanship.

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<sup>18</sup> This explanation is provided by Dr. Nguyễn Ngọc Tuấn from Victoria University.

Traditionally, Vietnamese artisans were members of various professional guilds, as testified by the traditional formation of Hà Nội's 36 streets, divided into areas that focused on the manufacture of specific products. Craftsmanship was transferred from one generation to another, resulting in close control of apprenticeships in each trade. However, the oral delivery of skills resulted in the loss of some professional secrets. With the primary aim of serving colonial needs and manipulating local resources, French authorities established trade schools to introduce the systematic training of indigenous crafts and art.

The Carpentry School of Bình Dương was established beside a forest in 1901, to utilise the local crafts of cabinet making, woodcarving, inlay and lacquer. French authorities took advantage of the skills of local labour to provide colonialists with cheap domestic furniture. The Bình Dương school curricula, therefore, focused on western style furniture and domestic objects, specialising in carved and inlaid cupboards with designs from artefacts in the palaces and museums of Huế.<sup>19</sup>

In 1902<sup>20</sup>, a vocational school was established in Hà Nội to teach art-related subjects such as: casting, ceramics, embroidery, cabinet making and incrustation. However, it has rarely been mentioned in official Vietnamese publications.

Another vocational school was founded in Biên Hòa in 1903 with 55 students studying four specialties: basket making, casting, carpentry and drawing; two years later, pottery was added to the list. Archaeological studies show that pottery had existed in Biên Hòa for centuries, but 17<sup>th</sup> century Chinese migrants brought new techniques with them, which dominated the local craft. In the 1880s, four families of Chinese origin set up 'a pottery village' in Tân Vạn, close to central Biên Hòa<sup>21</sup> and some Chinese craftsmen moved to set up the pottery area of Cây Mai in

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<sup>19</sup> Catalogue *Les Ecoles d'Art de l'Indochine*, 1937, Imprimerie D'Extrême-Orient, Hà Nội, p. 38.

<sup>20</sup> Nadine André-Pallois, 'Naissance de l'art modern au Việt Nam', essay in *Paris Hanoi Saigon*, p. 26. Nguyễn Phi Hoanh, on the other hand, recorded the year as 1920.

<sup>21</sup> Hy Van Luong & Diep Dinh Hoa, 'Culture and Capitalism in the Pottery Enterprises of Bien Hoa, South Vietnam (1878-1875)', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, March 1991, v.22, n.1, p. 16-33.

Saigon. Their works can still be found on roof decorations of Chinese temples in Biên Hoà, Saigon and Cholon (Saigon's China Town) (fig.6).



Figure 6: Cây Mai's ceramic details on the roof of the Thiên Hậu Temple in Chinatown, photograph by Bôi Tran Huynh.



Figure 7: Robert Balick, *Madonna and Child*, 1936, photograph by Nguyễn Háo Thoại.

One of the teachers at Biên Hoà School of Applied Arts was Robert Balick, who graduated from L'Ecole National Superieure Des Arts Decoratifs de Paris. He taught casting and became director from 1923 to 1940, then again from 1943 to 1946. His unique sculptural work, *Madonna and Child* (fig.7) displayed at Đồng Nai

College of Decorative Arts museum<sup>22</sup>, shows a preference for Art Deco style. His wife, Mariette, a Graduate of L'Ecole des Beaux Arts de Limoge, was appointed as a ceramics lecturer. The local clay firing techniques, where kiln temperatures were set through experience without technical devices, fascinated her. Mariette Balick enthusiastically promoted the school's profile from the 1920s-1940s and through her expertise, she introduced to Việt-Nam new ceramic chemicals and the use of kiln firing cones. Her experiments with local chemicals and materials produced distinguished glazes such as the spotted amber and green bronze-like residue, usually known as, Vert de Biên Hòa.<sup>23</sup> This particular glaze was praised at international expositions in Paris in 1925 and 1932, leading to many commissions and the establishment of a school-run cooperative in 1933 to meet commercial demand,<sup>24</sup> with regular production undertaken by ceramic and bronze casting graduates. In the 1940s a representative office in Paris was also established.

The ceramics of Biên Hoà can be cited as a successful example of the marriage of tradition and modernity and a noteworthy addition to the world of 20<sup>th</sup> century ceramics.<sup>25</sup>



Figure 8: Biên Hoà pot, 1941, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Figure 9: Biên Hoà plate, 1940s, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

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<sup>22</sup> The name Biên Hoà School of Applied Arts was changed to Đồng Nai College of Decorative Arts in 1978.

<sup>23</sup> Boi Tran Huynh, 1999, 'Vert de Bien Hoa', *Pottery in Australia*, (September) p. 32-33.

<sup>24</sup> Société coopérative artisanale des potiers et fondeurs de Bien Hoa.

<sup>25</sup> Kerry Nguyễn Long, 2003, 'Early Bien Hoa Ceramics Viewed in the Context of Trends in France', published in *100 Năm Hình Thành và Phát Triển*, Tổng Hợp Đồng Nai Publisher, p. 102-105. The article is bilingual.



Figure 10: Biên Hoà ceramics, *Mencius' Mother*, 1940s, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.



Figure 11: Biên Hoà ceramics, *Kwan Yin*, 1940s, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

From these influences, Biên Hoà pottery in the 1930s–1940s developed special characteristics. The shapes of pots and vases were governed by western aesthetics but oriental values dominated the Vietnamese glazes and the legendary Chinese figures, which were also produced (figs.8-11).

Bronze casting was another development, which was used particularly to produce Khmer Buddhist statues (fig.12). This preference may have emerged from a French fascination with Angkor Wat, discovered by missionaries in the 1860s.<sup>26</sup> Archives at Biên Hòa School of Applied Arts reveal that bronze casting studies in 1923 had 21 students, whereas ceramics had 12. Graduates from Biên Hoà School staffed most bronze-casting manufacturers throughout southern Việt-Nam until the 1990s. However, study of the craft disappeared from the curriculum in the late 1970s due to materials costs and a lack of interest.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Nguyễn Háo Thoại, 'Vài Nét về Hoạt Động Đào Tạo của Trường trong Thời Gian Trước Nay' (Review of the former educational activities of the Đồng Nai College) published in *100 Năm Hình Thành và Phát Triển*, Tổng Hợp Đồng Nai Publisher, p. 53-57.

<sup>27</sup> Bội Trân, 1998, 'Mai Một Nghệ Thuật Đúc Đồng', (Fading Away the Bronze Casting) *Tuổi Trẻ Chủ Nhật*, 25 October, p. 29.



Figure 12: A Khmer bust, 1940s, Biên Hoà School of Applied Arts, photograph by Nguyễn Háo Thoại.

The initial intention of exploiting Vietnamese natural resources and skills by colonialism cannot be condoned, however, the value of the establishment and development of vocational schools in Indochina must be acknowledged. The Biên Hoà School exemplifies the systematic teaching of the crafts and the better working conditions.



Figure 13: An art class at the Gia Định School in the 1930s, the teacher wears a tunic while all students wear western suits, courtesy of Nghiêm Trương.

The establishment in 1913, of the Gia Định Drawing School in Saigon (L'Ecole de Dessin), was to meet the growing demands of Vietnamese journalism and press

publications (fig.13). It started with 15 students who were trained as craftsmen for the printing houses of Cochinchina, through courses in drawing, decoration, etching, and lithography. In 1943, the number of enrolled students reached 160 and a new department of architecture was added to develop more media, such as tempera, lacquer, oil, and silk. This offered graduates a scope in painting, apart from the industrial practices, especially in the 1950s and 1960s.



Figure 14: Trần Thanh Nhân, *Temple of Lê Văn Duyệt*, 1950s, courtesy of Nghiêm Trương.



Figure 15: Thuận Hồ, *A Sleeping Girl*, 1950s, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

A good number of reproductions of paintings by graduates from Gia Định Drawing School can be found in journals published in Saigon in the 1950s and 1960s. Two examples are chosen to be included here for their early dates: one by Trần Thanh

Nhàn (graduated in 1935) (fig.14) and the other by Thuận Hồ (graduated in 1941) (fig.15).

The establishment and growth of Gia Định School represents the prominence of the press in Cochinchina due to the introduction of new Vietnamese Roman script and a vision of modernity. The *Gia Định Báo* (Gia Định Journal) was the first Vietnamese journal, which was established in 1865 by two southern catholic journalists, Trương Vĩnh Ký, also known as Pétrus Ky (1837-1898) and Huỳnh Tịnh Của, also known as Paulus Của (1834-1907). Both men were editors of the journal and helped develop Romanised Vietnamese to the extent that it could fluently express all feelings and ideas.<sup>28</sup> These two scholars were fluent in Chinese and French and Pétrus Ky himself was fluent in a number of other languages<sup>29</sup>. Their writings included short stories, dictionaries, textbooks, language aids, and studies in literature, all promoting culture and the new Vietnamese language.

A number of journals gradually introduced quốc ngữ, such as: *Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm* (Agricultural Journal), 1901-1924; *Lục Tỉnh Tân Văn* (News of the Six Provinces), 1908-1909 and *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (Women's New Literature), 1929 - 1934. The first issue of *La Cloche Fêlée* was printed in 1923, with frequent articles opposing colonial policies. It also introduced western writings by: Leo Tolstoy, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean Jaures, Romain Rolland, André Gide, and Anatole France. However, the French withdrew permission for its publication in 1928, after considering it too critical.

The expansion of Romanised Vietnamese and Vietnamese literacy was strongly influenced by the arrival of two other journals: *Đông Dương Tạp Chí* (Indochina Journal 1913-1918) and *Nam Phong Tạp Chí* (Southern Ethos 1917-1934). Several publications advocating westernisation followed the influential initiative of *Đông Dương Tạp Chí*, with contributions from many established scholars including: Trần

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<sup>28</sup> Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, p.69.

<sup>29</sup> Nguyễn Văn Trung, 1993, *Trương Vĩnh Ký Nhà Văn Hoá* (Trương Vĩnh Ký: a Cultural Scholar), Hội Nhà Văn, Hà Nội, p. 138.

Trọng Kim, Nguyễn Văn Tố, Nguyễn Khắc Hiếu and the prominent chief editor and prolific writer, Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh (1882-1932). Vĩnh wrote a vast number of articles criticising Việt-Nam's backwardness, in most instances from a western viewpoint.<sup>30</sup> However, he also translated into French, the famous narrative poem *Kiều* by Nguyễn Du (1765-1820), to enlighten his western audience about Vietnamese literature. Furthermore, he provided the Vietnamese translation of numerous French novels: *Les Trois Mousquetaires* (The Three Musketeers) by Dumas, *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, as well Rousseau's philosophical work, *The Social Contract* and Montesquieu's *The Spirit of Law*.

In 1917, *Nam Phong* (Southern Ethos)<sup>31</sup> was published under the chief editor Phạm Quỳnh (1892-1945), who had worked as a librarian at the École Française d'Extrême-Orient from 1908 to 1917. This background gave Phạm Quỳnh an outstanding profile and his journalistic skills turned *Nam Phong* into a more interesting journal than *Đông Dương* where he had previously worked part-time. *Nam Phong* published material that advocated the preservation of Vietnamese traditions within western influences.

The expansion of journalism at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century indicated the growth of Romanised Vietnamese and the formation of an elite middle class, who received a westernised education and embraced the modern culture of Việt-Nam, as Neil Jaimeson states:

In urban centres during the early 1930s, especially in Hanoi, there was a sudden and self-conscious rush to replace the old with the new, to westernise, and to be modern.<sup>32</sup>

New ideas evolved through the increasing number of speakers fluent in quốc ngữ, which led to the formation of a new ideology and a detachment from Neo-

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<sup>30</sup> See more about Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh by Niel Jamieson, 1993, *Understanding Vietnam*, p. 65-80.

<sup>31</sup> Phong has two meanings: wind and ethos or customs. The intention of editorial committee is that, Nam Phong means Southern Ethos more than Southern Wind.

<sup>32</sup> Neil L. Jaimeson, *Understanding Vietnam*, p. 100-101.

Confucianism. The 1930s witnessed, “a new literary outburst,”<sup>33</sup> described by Shawn McHale as, “the rise of a print culture.”<sup>34</sup> The urbanised middle class played a large role in this literary flourishing.

In 1933, a policy statement advocating a new Vietnamese literature was announced through the formation of *Tự Lực Văn Đoàn* (The Self-Reliance Literary Group). This group reacted against the reign of Confucianism and inspired prominent works including: *In the Midst of Spring* by Khái Hưng (Trần Khánh Giư) and *Breaking the Ties* by Nhất Linh (real name Nguyễn Tường Tam).<sup>35</sup> The characters in these novels were set in an urban environment and received an education in quốc ngữ. They were fascinated with individualism and found themselves caught between the old and the new - Confucian morals and western values, filial piety and romantic love. The conflicts focused on a western view of love and individuality, set against the Vietnamese convention of repressing individuality in compliance with family duties. In these novels, love was presented as more beautiful and vital than family but the latter always took control in the end. This central theme had a strong influence on the young urban class. When *Southern Ethos* published Hoàng Ngọc Phách’s novel *Tố Tâm*, it caused many young people to commit suicide for the sake of love.<sup>36</sup> Most were women who wanted to escape the obligations and restraints of Confucianism that their mothers and grandmothers had tolerated for centuries. Interestingly, it was male writers who made significant contributions to female liberation. Nguyễn Công Hoan depicts Miss Minh, the main character in his novel of the same name, in the following way:

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 106.

<sup>34</sup> Shawn McHale, 1995, ‘Printing and Power: Vietnamese Debates over Women’s Place in Society, 1918-1934’, in *Essays into Vietnamese Past*, edit. K.W. Taylor & John K. Whitmore, Cornell University, p.174.

<sup>35</sup> Neil L. Jamieson gives the summary of these novels in his book *Understanding Viet Nam*.

<sup>36</sup> Phạm Thế Ngũ, 1965, *Việt Nam Văn Học Sử Giản Ước Tân Biên* (New Concise History), v. 3, Quốc Học Tùng Thư, Saigon, p.356.

She loved individualism. She was economically independent. She wanted emotional independence as well. She wanted to follow the new completely.<sup>37</sup>

There were so many female characters in the dramatic action of these works that Jamieson devotes a whole chapter in his book, *Understanding Vietnam*, to it.<sup>38</sup> The dominance of female images also emerged in paintings of this period, through the work of the first graduates from the Fine Arts College of Indochina as will be discussed later in this chapter.

Another theme was the intolerable gap between colonised and coloniser and portrayed in modern novels such as: *The Buffalo* (1938) by Trần Tiêu, *Tất Đền* (1939) by Ngô Tất Tố<sup>39</sup> and *Cold Wind of the Early Season* (1937) by Thạch Lam. These novels describe the misery of country life in vivid details, with peasants ruthlessly sandwiched between high colonial taxes and harassment from village mandarins. Realism in literature of this period heralded a new political trend, paving the way for the infiltration of Socialism from the 1930s onwards.

Similarly, a new tradition was initiated in poetry known as the *New Poetry Movement*, pioneered by Phan Khôi, with his poem *Old Love* (1932) that embodied a new way to express emotion. New poetry used strange rhymes or no rhyme at all and revealed contemporary feelings that were real, specific and passionate. Love was a popular topic and appeared within an exotic context in nearly every poem, enriching all other human feelings. Nguyễn Thị Kiêm, a female contributor to the *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* journal, wrote poems in the new style and gave public speeches in praise of new poetry. Soon new style poems were published in numerous journals, giving rise to the emergence of vocal disapproval regarding the poetry. A polemical battle between the pro-and anti-new poetry stirred up the public throughout Việt-Nam. The argument became stronger when the poem, *An Unemployed*, was

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<sup>37</sup> Nguyễn Công Hoan, *Miss Minh, the Schoolteacher*, p 104, Văn Nghệ Publishers, Hồ Chí Minh City, 1998.

<sup>38</sup> *The Yin of Early Modern Vietnamese Culture challenges the Yang of tradition, 1932-1939.*

<sup>39</sup> English translation by Ngô Vĩnh Long in *Before the Revolution: the Vietnamese Peasants under the French*, published by Cambridge, Mass, MIT Press, 1973.

published in *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*,<sup>40</sup> which saw for the first time, the New Poetry Movement introduce the reality that nearly every colonised Vietnamese had to endure. This, “ugly thing” was never a topic in poetry of the old times. To adherents of traditional poetry, it seemed that new poetry was about to kill poetry all together, by exploring such ordinary issues.

The dramatic growth of quốc ngữ literature during this time had a strong influence on the aesthetics of the first generation artists of L'École supérieure des Beaux-Arts de L'Indochine (the Fine Arts College of Indochina, FACI) established in 1925 in Hà Nội. The search for modernity in literature was transferred to visual arts, the awareness of “T” advocated by literature was adopted in painting in that artists worked from a subjective position. Furthermore, many of the painters were also literary figures in Hà Nội and took part in literary activities.<sup>41</sup>

Vietnamese journalism and politics in the 1920s and 1930s was a period of dynamic revolution<sup>42</sup> and the drive for modernisation was not separate from attempts to break French colonialism. In 1924, Phạm Hồng Thái, a Vietnamese patriot, attempted to assassinate the French Governor General in Canton, while on his return from Japan to Indochina. Thái drowned on his way home and was buried by the Chinese Kuomintang leaders with ceremony, next to the famous 72 martyrs of the abortive April 1911 Canton revolt against the Ch'ing.<sup>43</sup> The news was reported widely and Vietnamese interpreted it as an appeal for action. Phạm Hồng Thái may well have created the impetus for the Vietnamese National People's Party (Việt-Nam Quốc Dân Đảng) to be established that same year. Founded by Phan Bội

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<sup>40</sup> n. 208 on 20-07-1933.

<sup>41</sup> Nguyễn Tường Tam studied one year at the FACI before leaving for France. On his return, he assumed Nhất Linh as pseudonym to run the Tự Lực Văn Đoàn. Nguyễn Tường Lân graduated from the FACI, but devoted his life into literature under pseudonym Thạch Lam. Nguyễn Gia Trí contributed illustration for magazines.

<sup>42</sup> Nguyễn An Ninh was chief-editor of *La Clôche Fléchée* and operated a Secret Society in Cochinchina in late 1920s.

<sup>43</sup> David G. Marr, 1971, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1885-1925*, University of California Press, p. 258.

Châu, his reputation attracted many members from Vietnamese intellectuals educated in Franco-Vietnamese schools.

In 1925, Phan Bội Châu was arrested by the French police in Shanghai and returned to Việt-Nam where he received a death sentence. It is not clear if Phan Bội Châu was sold-out by Nguyễn Ái Quốc (one of Hồ Chí Minh's aliases) and his associates<sup>44</sup> for the sake of national and international appeal. This event marked a division between nationalists and left-wing activists whose leader was Nguyễn Ái Quốc. Nevertheless, Phan Bội Châu's case stirred anti-colonialist reactions from Canton to Paris and hundreds of amnesty petitions and demonstrations placed the new Governor General Alexander Varenne under pressure. Subsequently, the death sentence was changed to house detention and Phan Bội Châu was resettled in Huế under French police surveillance. Although he eventually had to cease his political pursuits, his patriotism and support of the new generation, including Nguyễn Ái Quốc, was an important impetus for later revolutionary activities.

In 1930, the Việt-Nam Quốc Dân Đảng plotted an armed revolt that started in Thái Nguyên province and spread throughout Tonkin. Due to inadequate communication, its factions did not act concurrently, resulting in the French arrest of hundreds of dissidents. The leader, Nguyễn Thái Học, and 11 party colleagues were sentenced to death, which put a halt on all nationalist movements and left the stage open for the Communists.

Nguyễn Ái Quốc, later known as Hồ Chí Minh, established the Indochinese Communist Party in Canton in the same year. He organised political and ideological training for new recruits who, by and large, were drawn from the middle and upper class intelligentsia. Nguyễn Ái Quốc was aware that Communism would be alien to the Vietnamese, so he formed a new political party to attract Vietnamese patriots. In 1941, he formed the League for the Independence of Việt-

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<sup>44</sup> More about this scandal, read Hoang Van Chi, 1964, *From Colonialism to Communism*, Popular Library, p. 18 and David G. Marr, 1971, *Vietnamese Anti-Colonialism*, University of California, p. 260, 265-267.

Nam (Việt-Nam Độc Lập Đồng Minh Hội), widely known as Việt Minh. From that time on, competition for the leading role on Việt-Nam's political stage was between the Việt Minh, Quốc Dân Đảng and powerful religious sects, like the Cao Đài and the Hoà Hảo. In 1940, Japan joined the axis of powers and began taking over Indochina from France, but allowed French administration to continue. In 1943, the Việt Minh began to penetrate Việt-Nam from Canton, to wage guerrilla operations against Japanese rule. When the Japanese surrendered to the Allies in 1945, Việt Minh units seized control of Hà Nội and declared the independent Democratic Republic of Việt-Nam, thus the nation's history turned a new page.

The colonised and coloniser in Việt-Nam were each constructing a colonial society for their own reasons. Most Vietnamese revolutionaries, up to the 1940s, agitated for national independence and advocated modernisation. For French colonisers it was imperative to impose their 'Mission Civilisatrice' on Việt-Nam and initially, architecture was their priority to achieve this aim.

### **COLONIAL ARCHITECTURE AND URBANISATION:**

Throughout history, most Vietnamese lived in a village cluster, surrounded by a bamboo perimeter to fend off wild animals and intruders. This feature helped define a community, which was committed to preserving customs and beliefs. Apart from the capital city, the only other type of municipality was the citadel, typically built on geographical and military sites of importance.

French influence on early 20<sup>th</sup> century Vietnamese culture was most discernible through changes in the built environment. This was accompanied by a population increase from two percent of the nation at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to eight or ten percent in the second and third decades.<sup>45</sup> The colonialist ideal, "to build a French Indochina"<sup>46</sup> was viewed as an authority to assert coercive force and

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<sup>45</sup> Statistics from *Viet Nam's History*, published by Institute of History, p. 176.

<sup>46</sup> Title of chapter 3 in *France in Indochina* by Nicola Cooper, 2001, Berg, Oxford.

superiority over the Vietnamese people.<sup>47</sup> Cities were developed according to the administrative requirements of ever-increasing numbers of French troops, civic officials and a local population. The new architecture was French in style, a combination of mostly Neo-classical, art nouveau, art deco and baroque. Often, these colonial constructions required the destruction of existing Vietnamese heritage. This urbanisation produced a stratified society and the establishment of a Vietnamese middle class, who received a western education and worked toward cultural changes through liaising with western customs.

The changing architectural landscape altered both the social fabric of Vietnamese cities and the way its citizens envisaged beauty in other areas. A range of ambiguous relations evolved through the destruction and renovation of the urban landscape in colonial interests, leading to the emergence of a middle class, with cross-cultural artistic and architectural aesthetics. However, through Governor Albert Sarraut's policy of 'association,' redevelopment was only partially realised, and so Hà Nội's ancient quarter and the Chinese commercial precinct in Saigon were preserved. While French colonisation was a powerful influence, it was neither exhaustive nor evenly implemented.

## **Saigon**

Saigon was Khmer territory until the late 17<sup>th</sup> century when Nguyễn Lords annexed it. When the Vietnamese joined the local Khmers, some Ming Chinese refugees who were accepted by Nguyễn Lords also took up residence. Saigon lost many historical buildings due to conflict between Vietnamese troops and the colonial French army: the Saigon citadel was destroyed in 1859,<sup>48</sup> the Phoenix Citadel (Thành Phụng) was blown up and the Khải Tường Temple<sup>49</sup> was demolished in

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<sup>47</sup> Nicola Cooper, *France in Indochina*, p. 49

<sup>48</sup> Built in 1789 in Vauban style by Nguyễn Ánh and rebuilt in 1836 by King Minh Mạng.

<sup>49</sup> Where King Minh Mạng was born in 1791 during his parents' escape from the Nguyễn Tây Sơn.

1860, after a French lieutenant was killed by a group of Vietnamese patriots who had hidden in the temple.<sup>50</sup>

Despite widespread damage, there were some positive outcomes for the colony in terms of architectural development, mainly through the interests of talented architects who realised their innovative ideas:

The major setting for transforming the concerns of architects and intellectuals into policies and for putting theories into practice was not France or Europe but the cities of the French colonies. The reasons for this were imminently practical. The colonies had an immediate, pressing need for policies that could quell the possibility of social disorder and encourage economic development. They had to provide homes and workplaces for French settlers and for the indigenous populations drawn to the new colonial metropolises. Most of all, their political system provided policy-makers with a degree of authority for carrying out their plans that simply did not exist in France.<sup>51</sup>

Georges Lhermite arrived in Saigon in 1866 as the first French Beaux-Arts trained architect. He was invited to design two monumental buildings in Saigon: the Cathedral of Notre-Dame and the palace of the Governor-General. However, Pulin Vial, the first director of the Bureau of Governmental Buildings, who had been promised the commission, blocked Lhermite's cathedral proposal. Finally, in 1875 after a decade of squabbling, an international competition awarded the commission to Parisian architect, Jules Bourard and Notre-Dame was completed five years later (fig. 16).

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<sup>50</sup> Vương Hồng Sển, 1960, *Saigon Năm Xưa* (Old Saigon), Khai Trí, Saigon, p. 202-203.

<sup>51</sup> Gwendolyn Wright, 1991, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p 18.



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

On top of granite foundations its redbrick facade featured Romanesque architectural characteristics and ceilings with the character of Gothic vaults. Most of the building materials were transported from France and that included red bricks from Toulouse and coloured glass from Chartres. The cathedral occupied a prominent location in Saigon and was among the first examples of French architecture in the city. Homage to Christianity was the principle justification for its presence in a nation so remote from France. However, Gaston Bonnefont, a traveller to Saigon in the 1880s, made the observation, “a large cathedral that is always empty.”<sup>52</sup> The Cathedral was built as a symbol of authority, not for a demand from the local population – the majority being Buddhist.

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<sup>52</sup> Gaston Bonnefont, cited from Gwendolyn Wright, 1991, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism*, University of Chicago Press, p. 161.



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



Figure 18: Municipal Theatre in Saigon, 1900, photograph by Boi Tran Nguyen Huynh.

Before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, numerous important buildings in the French styles were built, including the Palace of Justice (1885); the Saigon Post Office (1891) (fig.17); Custom House (1887); and the Palace of the Governor of Indochina (1890), which was a colonnade resembling Claude Perrault's colonnade from the Louvre.

The Municipal Theatre in Saigon (1900) (fig.18) was built for French recreation and the expansion of their colonisation of Việt-Nam. Designed by Joseph-Victor Guichard in the Neo-Classical style, it was opened in 1900 with a splendid ceremony<sup>53</sup> as the finest theatre in the Far East. The Palace of Justice, also designed by Bourard, features an unusually high bas-relief sculpture on the façade, and intriguingly, features the Goddess of Justice at the centre, wearing a Roman dress (fig.19). On her right is a western female holding a traditional northern Vietnamese hat, while to her left rests a Vietnamese male dressed in a tunic and turban. The implication is that some collaboration between colonised and coloniser has taken place. However, it is more symbolic than sympathetic, because of the emphasis on western features, poses and expressions.



Figure 19: High bas-relief on the Palace of Justice, 1885, photograph by Boi Tran Nguyen Huynh. These French edifices facing long avenues reflect European aesthetics and became a landmark in colonial Saigon. A foreign visitor to Saingon in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century made the following observation:

Saigon is the Paris of the East. Manila, which the Americans call “the Pearl of the Orient”, may be more sanitary and show greater commercial activity, but it is neither so pretty nor so attractive as Saigon.

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<sup>53</sup> Vương Hồng Sển, 1960, *Saigon Năm Xưa*, republished by Xuan Thu in California in 1990s, p.106.

The town is well laid out on broad and artistic lines. The public buildings, such as the Cathedral, the theatre, and the Governor's Palace, are chefs-d'oeuvre of architecture, and are set off to advantage by their position at the end of some broad avenue or grass-covered square.<sup>54</sup>

Nonetheless, not all French architecture displayed aesthetic excellence. The sumptuous baroque design of Saigon's Town Hall (fig.20), completed in 1908 from a design by Fernand Gardès, is an example that some commentators cite as inferior French taste.<sup>55</sup> Standing 200 metres from the theatre designed in the Neo-Classical style, the Town Hall looks like a woman wearing too much jewellery.



Figure 20: Saigon Town Hall, 1908, photograph by Boi Tran Nguyen Huynh.

When the French arrived in Saigon, the Chinese had settled there for some two centuries and developed a community five kilometres from the Vietnamese district. With their history as experienced traders, they established the large market zone of Chợ Lớn (later pronounced by the Americans as Cholon) that identified the Chinese settlement as a whole.

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<sup>54</sup> Gabrielle M. Vassal, *On & Off Duty in Annam*, p. 21.

<sup>55</sup> Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism*, p. 178. This comment is also raised by Nguyen Huu Thai & Vo Dinh Diep, *A General View of the City's Architecture*, published in *Địa Chí Văn Hoá thành phố Hồ Chí Minh*, p.421.



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



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

While the French ruined the legacy of many traditional Vietnamese buildings, their support of the economic-oriented Chinese meant the district remained intact. Temples constructed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by various Chinese ethnic groups such as: Hakka, Hokkien and Tchieu Chau, became landmarks of Chinese culture in Saigon. The Chinese quarter continued to grow in the colonial era due to affluent Chinese traders, like Quách Đàm, who constructed the Big Market and surrounding townhouses (figs.21-22).

## Hà Nội:

The ancient capital of Hà Nội experienced serious cultural damage under the impact of colonial planning. The Báo Thiên Pagoda completed during the Lý dynasty, was replaced in 1886 by the Hà Nội Catholic Cathedral (fig.23). With its dull facade and massive scale it was considered, “a master piece of size and ugliness.”<sup>56</sup> Hà Nội’s relatively temperate climate attracted the French and from 1887 they chose it as the headquarters for their colonial administration. Further to this decision they developed living quarters for new settlers separated from the indigenous inhabitants, to preserve hygiene and security. Roads in the district were lined with intersections and roundabouts, first employed in 1907 at the Place de l’Etoile in Paris.<sup>57</sup> The 1,000-year old Miếu Hội Đồng (Community Temple) was razed to become the site for the Governor-General’s Palace in 1907 (fig.24), built in the French Beau-Arts tradition. William Logan, an expert in Hà Nội’s Planning and Development Project funded by UNESCO and Aus-AID, considered that the palace “had no connection with Vietnamese culture and in many ways was ill-suited to Vietnamese climatic conditions.”<sup>58</sup> Ventilation, for example, was not considered in constructions for a semi-tropical region like Tonkin. After much investment in Saigon, the French demonstrated their intention to turn Hà Nội into a ‘little Paris.’ by constructing the Municipal Theatre in 1911 (fig.25). Governor Albert Sarraut’s policy of association, instituted early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, also took into account numerous existing cultural and aesthetic traditions. The Cơ Mật (Secret Council) building in Huế was enlarged in 1913, retaining proportions and ornamentation of the original structure.

Perhaps the most sustained French colonial architecture was realised with the arrival, in 1921, of the French urban-designer Ernest Hébrard who was selected to

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<sup>56</sup> Alfred de Pouvourville, cited from Nguyễn Văn Kỳ, 2002, *Hanoi City of the Rising Dragon*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, INC p. 49.

<sup>57</sup> Gwendolyn Wright, 1991, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism*, p.24.

<sup>58</sup> William S. Logan, 2000, *Hanoi, Biography of a City*, University of New South Wales Press, p. 86. More cultural impairments are mentioned by the author especially p.80-91.

be Director of the Department of Urbanism in 1923. Hébrard's architectural achievements testify to his ability to combine local features and French influences. Examples of his work are the Pasteur Institute, the Louis Finot Museum and the urban planning of Dalat. The Louis Finot Museum (1932) (now the National History Museum) (fig.26) was exceptional in the way that European and Asian architectural features were blended. The building was described as, "a hodgepodge of architectural motifs, the steep tiled porch roofs reminiscent of Hindu temples, while the two-tiered roof of the central core alluded to Siamese, Cambodian and Laotian temple structures."<sup>59</sup>



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



Figure 24: The Governor-General Palace, now Presidential Palace of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 1907, photograph by Damien Acheson.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p. 207-208



Figure 25: Hà Nội Municipal Theatre, 1911, photograph by Boi Tran Nguyen Huynh.



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

### **Dalat – a French city in Indochina:**

Hébrard's talent became broadly known through his plans for the new city of Dalat. In the early colonial years, urban development of Saigon and Hà Nội presented the French many problems – primarily in relocating the local population to demolish existing buildings and make way for their enterprising structures. Dalat on the contrary, was a completely new urban planning project and ideal for original architectural initiatives.

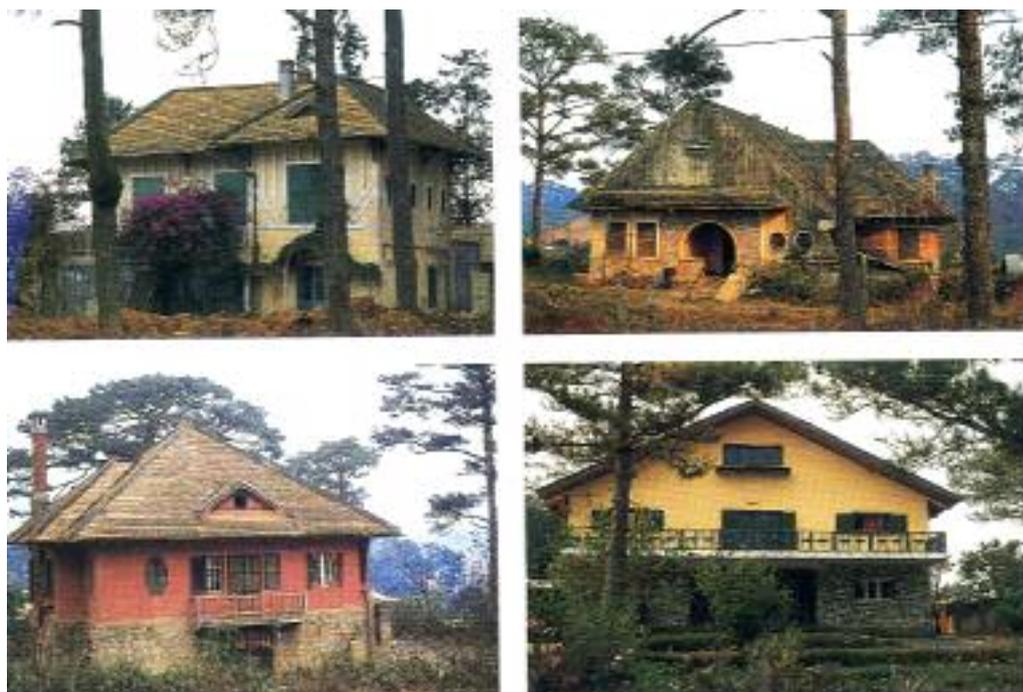


Figure 27: Dalat villas with different designs in the Indochinese style, photograph by Léonard de Selva.

The Swiss bacteriologist Doctor Alexandre Emile-John Yersin (1863-1943) discovered Dalat in 1897.<sup>60</sup> He proposed to French authorities that the temperate climate of the highland location, 300 kilometres northeast of Saigon on the Lang Biang plateau, was ideal for Europeans. His tender was approved and Ernest Hébrard drafted the urban layout and design facilities. The land was divided into large blocks on which villas were built (fig27) and Dalat gradually developed into an exquisite French town, specifically designed as a retreat for the colonial French. In 1922, further developments in Dalat saw the construction of the French-styled Sofitel hotel that, in its day, was considered the most luxurious hotel in Indochina. While retaining its French character, the Vietnamese attempted in the 1960s to modify Dalat into an intellectual centre, by establishing private and public universities. However, by the 1980s the ‘city of the elite’ had gradually declined, when migrants from the rural North spread throughout the villa gardens. Due to a

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<sup>60</sup> The founder of Pasteur Institute in Nha Trang and Medical School in Ha Noi in 1903.

lack of heritage awareness accompanied by political pragmatism, the beauty of the city was destroyed.<sup>61</sup>

### **Mixing French style with traditional architecture**

As this chapter reveals, many architectural works of this period were built by the French, of which some incorporated Asian features. The Phát Diệm Cathedral (fig.28), however, was built by the Vietnamese priest, Trần Lục (1883-1899), from 1883 to 1899 with the intention of preserving Vietnamese traditional architecture and merging it with the Romanesque style of Christianity.

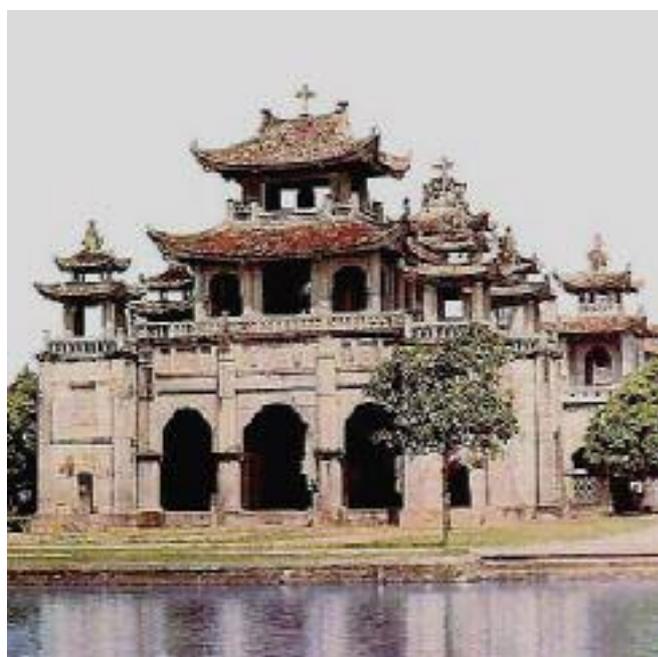


Figure 28: Phát Diệm Cathedral, 1883-1899, photograph from Viettouch.

The Cathedral was built by stone retrieved from a local quarry and stands 22 metres tall (including the cross) and spread over 71.5 metres by 21 metres. The plan was made with many references to the royal palaces in Huế, but the space was manipulated on Roman principles with domes in order to create the height. All the decorations inside were carved in the manner of Vietnamese folk art of the đình.

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<sup>61</sup> Hoàng Đạo Kính, interviewed and recorded by Nguyễn Hàng Tinh in 'Đừng Để Kiến Trúc Đà Lạt Tàn Phai' (Don't let Dalat Architecture Fade Away), *Tuổi Trẻ Chủ Nhật*, n. 39, 7/10/2001, p. 16-17.



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

From the 1930s onwards, Vietnamese architects began to blend French architectural features into their constructions, including residential homes and communal houses. A common Vietnamese expression embodying a standard of living and underlying the Vietnamese acceptance of the ‘alien element’ into their culture is, “eating Chinese food, living in a French house and marrying a Japanese wife.” Corinthian and Ionic columns often replaced the plain traditional Vietnamese columns. For instance, Vĩnh Tràng Temple in Mỹ Tho (fig.29) was renovated in 1907 with Corinthian columns on the façade and in 1910 Giác Viên Temple in Saigon with Doric columns.

Adoptions of western influences developed further, becoming more exuberant in the controversial Khải Định Royal Mausoleum (fig.30). King Khải Định reigned from 1916 to 1925 and when he attended an exposition in Marseille in 1922, he was the first reigning Vietnamese monarch to visit France. The construction of King Khải Định’s Mausoleum began in 1920 and, because of its combination of eastern and western influences, it was regarded as a novelty when completed 11 years later. In baroque style, Asian dragons entwine Ionic colonnades (fig.31), accompanied by mosaics of eastern decorative motifs and all surrounding a French-made bronze statue of Khải Định on the throne (fig.32). The mosaics in Khải

Định's Mausoleum are a development of coloured tile art in pre-colonial Huế. Thousands of ceramic shards form patterns of bamboos, daisies, birds, dragons and a Chinese string instrument, with colours that to the viewer mingle like the effect gained by French Impressionist paintings.



Figure 30: Khải Định's Mausoleum, 1933, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.



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



Figure 32: Interior of Khải Định's Mausoleum, postcard.

The stylistic combinations startle most viewers and trouble some Vietnamese art historians, who often overlook the mausoleum's aesthetic values, to reflect on political and historical events. In contrast, unlike his rebellious predecessors,<sup>62</sup> Khải Định antagonises many historians due to his collaboration with the French. On the occasion of King Khải Định's fortieth birthday, citizens in Annam had to endure an annual 30% tax increase. It was presented as a standard levy but used by the monarchy to fund royal celebrations and to complete the mausoleum.<sup>63</sup> As an edifice built by a king, the mausoleum was expected to manifest a 'national spirit' but instead, it was condemned as a failed hybrid and a 'loss of identity.'<sup>64</sup>

Colonial architecture and urban planning radically changed the Vietnamese society and the way people saw beauty. An emerging urban class began adopting and modifying western aesthetics to serve their own needs, first in architecture and then in clothing. French citizens were considered the most fashionable of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Europeans and, in the colonies, generally dressed in white, perhaps to draw a distinction from the 'coloured' locals. Through their enterprise, they managed to

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<sup>62</sup> King Hàm Nghi (reigned 1884-1885) then exiled to Algeria, King Thành Thái (reigned 1889-1907) then exiled to Reunion Island and King Duy Tân (reigned 1907-1916) took initial roles in the resistance against the French.

<sup>63</sup> *Lịch Sử Việt-Nam* (Việt-Nam's History), 1985, The Institute of History, p. 181.

<sup>64</sup> Nguyễn Phi Hoanh, 1984, *Mỹ Thuật Việt-Nam* (Vietnamese Art History), Hồ Chí Minh Publishing House, p. 173.

have, “dresses and equipages worthy of Paris itself.”<sup>65</sup> Despite the convenience of western clothing, traditional costumes continued to be worn in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Việt-Nam, largely in acknowledgement of a political point. Initially, Vietnamese who adopted western costumes were labelled sinister co-operators and treated with disdain by their fellows. A European traveller’s diary tells how western and traditional accessories were put together in the early modern era:

Among them we saw interpreters with their hair cut short, wearing black turbans arranged in absolutely equal folds around their heads, black tunics, white linen trousers, and European shoes and socks. It is a curious fact that the boots of the Annamese, if they wear them at all, invariably look quite new, as though they had just come from the shop, and are also of the latest fashion.<sup>66</sup>

Through time, colonial attire was gradually adopted by urbanised Vietnamese and increased in popularity among the ever-growing western educated class.



Figure 33: a Chăm woman wearing a traditional dress, photograph from Nhân Dân.

Figure 34: Imguiberty’s drawing of a four-flapped dress worn by a northern female peasant.

Figure 35: Photograph of Mrs Nguyễn Thị Bính in 1937, courtesy of Đinh Trọng Hiếu.

Aesthetic shifts throughout the colonial era are demonstrated by modifications of the traditional áo dài. It remains unclear when the áo dài became popular but it is

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<sup>65</sup> Gabrielle M. Vassal, 1910, *On & Off Duty in Annam*, D. Appleton, p. 17.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, p.23.

known to be a combination of the four-piece Vietnamese traditional northern dress called áo tứ thân, and the Chàm dress (fig.33). The typical northern dress has four flaps, two at the back joined by a seam and two front flaps tied together at the waist, leaving a space at the chest covered by a ‘yếm’ - a short bodice rather like a brassiere (fig.34). The Chàm dress covers the whole body with two pieces of close-fitting fabric, joined by seams at the sides that tend to restrict movement. The áo dài combines these garments, with two flaps joined at the waist, leaving the rest to flow in the wind; the lower body covered by a pair of pants (fig.35).



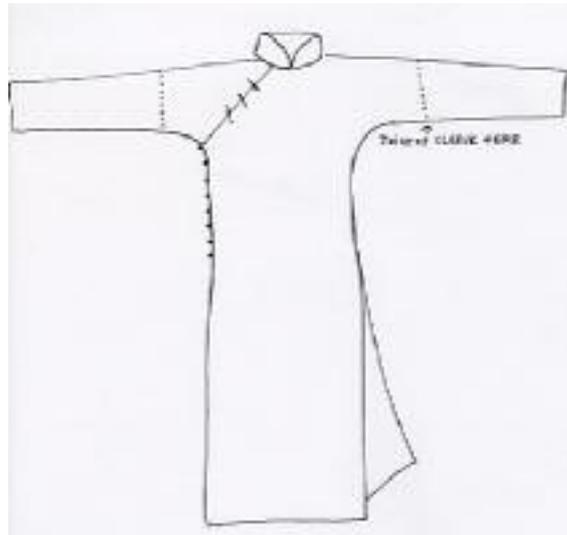
Figure 36: Áo dài Le Mur, worn by Ms Nguyễn Thị Hậu, photograph printed in Phong Hoá journal.

Figure 37: Ms Vũ Thị Hoà Vân wearing the new áo dài by Nguyễn Cát Tường Le Mur. Photo taken in 1939, courtesy Mr Trịnh Bách.

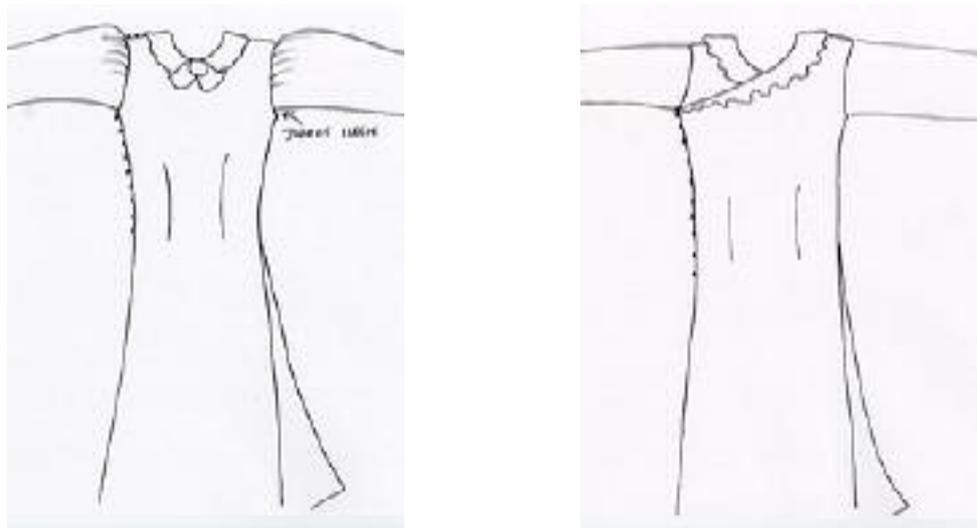
Nguyễn Cát Tường (1912-) (known as Le Mur - The Wall) graduated from the Fine Arts College of Indochina in 1933. He created a modern look for the áo dài, possibly based on designs in French fashions magazines, such as *L'Illustration*, imported for French readers in Indochina. The ‘Le Mur’ áo dài fitted the body, with cuffed sleeves joined at the shoulders and a round-cut laced collar (fig.36-37). However, by 1943 this áo dài style ceased to exist<sup>67</sup> and the traditional design

<sup>67</sup> Trịnh Bách, ‘Áo Dài Việt Nam’ (Vietnamese Áo Dài), *Xưa Nay*, n. 131, January, 2003, p. 46-48.

reappeared, with its original high collar and sleeves joined at the upper arm, which continued until the early 1960s.



Drawing 1: Traditional áo dài with the seam at the sleeve



Drawing 2 & 3: 'Le Mur' áo dài shows the shift of sleeve joint and application of western collars. Four pleats are added so that the dress fits the body.

In the old days people dressed basically to conceal their bodies, so they always presented a baggy appearance. But now one should dress so the body is presented in a natural manner or sometimes to modify it a bit so it appears more flowing and graceful.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Pham The Ngu, cited from Jameison, *Understanding Vietnam*, University of California Press, p. 101.

This awareness of self-appearance and beauty is represented in paintings, particularly in colonial times, and had not occurred previously.

### **THE MAKING OF A NEW TRADITION: THE FOUNDATION OF THE FINE ARTS COLLEGE OF INDOCHINA**

Prior to the establishment of the Fine Arts College of Indochina (FACI), Việt-Nam had very few oil paintings. The Fine Arts Museum of Hà Nội has the official record of the earliest oil paintings - *Portrait of the Scholar Tú Mền* (1896) and *Reciting Literature* (1898) (fig.38) by Lê Văn Miến (1873-1943), also called Lê Huy Miến, who studied at L'École des Beaux Arts in Paris from 1891 to 1894. Upon his return, he was appointed as a teacher and then headmaster of the National Institute in Huế, where princes and mandarins sons were educated.



Figure 38: Lê Văn Miến, *Reciting Literature*, 1898.

Vietnamese art history has no documentation about oil paintings done between Lê Văn Miến's *Reciting Literature* and the establishment of the FACI. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that Việt-Nam failed to produce any oil paintings for quarter of a century, in light of the expanding French influences and the existence of four vocational applied arts schools. More research is necessary to fill this gap. Recently, however, when the international art market started to pay attention to Vietnamese art, some records of early art auctions revealed a few names.



Figure 39: Ung Mông, *Perfume River*, c. 1900, courtesy of Đinh Trọng Hiếu.

For instance, the oil painting, *Perfume River* (c.1900), by Ung Mông (fig.39) was auctioned at Christies of Singapore in 1999. It embodies an understanding of perspective in European landscape painting, with a panoramic view of the Perfume River, from a well-known location opposite the Thiên Mụ Pagoda. The detailed rendering of a cloudy sky with the river meandering through the scene and a patch of foreground pasture convey a love for the site. Vietnamese art history has no data about this artist but, the surname 'Ung' is related to the royal family and the picture is about Huế's landscape. This artist could well have been a student of Lê Văn Miến.



Figure 40: Tran Thien, *Old Man*, 1912, courtesy of Robert Bezuijen.

Another early Vietnamese oil painting, *Old Man* (1912) (fig.40), by Tran Thien<sup>69</sup> (1890-?) was offered for auction at Sotheby's in 2001 by Melbourne art collector Robert Benzuijen,<sup>70</sup> An old man is portrayed in traditional costume and headwear, holding an umbrella in his hand; his figure clearly refers to 'Vietnamese-ness'. Again, there is no record of this artist in Vietnamese art history.

L'École supérieure des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine, hereafter the Fine Arts College of Indochina (FACI), was established in 1925 as the first fine arts school, through the efforts of Victor Tardieu (1870-1937) (fig.41) and Nguyễn Văn Thọ (1890-1973) (fig.42), best known by his art pseudonym, Nam Sơn. Tardieu graduated from L'École des Beaux-Arts de Lyon, and then studied in Paris under Gustave Moreau together with Henry Matisse and Georges Rouault. He won the National Prize at the Salon in 1902, which enabled him to travel to Spain, Italy and Holland prior to receiving a number of commissions. The winner of the Indochina Prize<sup>71</sup> in 1920, Tardieu embarked on a trip to Indochina in 1921, as his son Jean Tardieu notes, perhaps called to it as Gauguin was called to Oceania.<sup>72</sup> Upon arrival, Tardieu became fascinated with the nation and its people; in addition, he was commissioned by the colonial authority to complete a 77 square metre oil painting for the Indochina University in Hà Nội. While there he met Nam Sơn, who was then working in the colonial administration. Nam Sơn practiced Chinese ink painting and had an ardent love for art and art education.<sup>73</sup> Along with Nam Sơn, Tardieu completed the necessary paperwork for the inauguration of an art school in Hà Nội. As part of a long-term plan for the college, Nam Sơn was sent to Paris for a year, from 1924 to 1925, to qualify for his new post as instructor at the FACI.

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<sup>69</sup> This signature with diacritics can be Trần Thiên, Trần Thiện or Trần Thiên. I prefer to leave the name without Vietnamese accents for later research.

<sup>70</sup> Sotheby's Catalog, October 2001, p. 65.

<sup>71</sup> This prize was held from 1910 to 1938 in order to promote Indochina to the French public; it initially enabled the beneficiaries a trip to Indochina for half a year, from 1926 onward it was increased to two years, including one-year's teaching post at the FACI.

<sup>72</sup> Jean Tardieu, catalogue of The Victor Tardieu Painting Exhibition, 1977, Jonas Gallery.

<sup>73</sup> See Hữu Ngọc & Hoài Việt, 2003, 'An Artistic Legacy Revived', *Vietnam Cultural Window*, n. 59 (February), p.2 - 5



Figure 41 Victor Tardieu (1870-1937), the founder and first Director of the FACI.

Figure 42: Nam Sơn Nguyễn Văn Thọ (1890-1973), co-founder of the FACI.

The establishment of the FACI was within the social framework of westernisation and the 1920s drive for modernity. Breaking from the past heralded some influential political and literary events of the era including: the *Private Free School Movement*, the blooming of new Romanised Vietnamese and the rise of individuality against Confucian values as manifested in the new Romanised Vietnamese literature. Had the College been founded earlier, it is unlikely it would have produced the same outcomes. The founding of the FACI is highly regarded, to the extent that the artist Tô Ngọc Vân (1906-1954), a first generation graduate, commented:

Were there not the Fine Arts College, a lot of ardent hearts devoted to fine arts would have been wasted in a certain unrighteous art.<sup>74</sup>

The College provided a place where talent could be nurtured and it was here that lacquer craft was transformed into a new art form. While colonial values exploited the Vietnamese, there were two French teachers at the FACI, who conveyed their genuine concern for the people and its culture by inaugurating an art education. One was Victor Tardieu, who dared to affirm that, “the Annamese had all the gifts to become true artists and that they had this right.”<sup>75</sup> Tardieu continued working in Hà Nội, until his death of pneumonia in 1937 and his French colleague, Joseph

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<sup>74</sup> Tô Ngọc Vân, cited from *Painters of the Fine Arts College of Indochina*, p. 143 (English version)

<sup>75</sup> Quang Phòng, 1998, ‘The Fine Arts College of Indochina and Vietnamese Painting’ in *Painters of the Fine Arts College of Indochina*, Fine Arts Publishing House, Hà Nội, p. 133.

Inguimberty (1896-1971), whose passion for lacquer craft helped develop it into a new painting medium, did not leave Việt-Nam until 1945. Inguimberty studied architecture at L'École des Beaux-Arts de Marseille for three years and then switched to L'École des Arts Decoratifs. He was awarded the Blumenthal Prize (1922) and the National Prize (1924) with which he travelled around Europe. These journeys instigated his dream of travelling further.<sup>76</sup> In 1925, he was offered a post at the Fine Arts College of Indochina where he as well as Victor Tardieu developed good teacher-student relationships and appreciated Vietnamese culture by encouraging the study of indigenous arts. Students were required to attend field trips to ancient temples and to paint people or landscapes in rural areas. Drawing classes were held with plaster models of classical Greek and Roman statues, which are still used today. Lecturers from the School of Medicine taught anatomy and scholars from École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) offered theory studies. The Louis Finot Museum, a branch of EFEO, was also a good resource for Vietnamese cultural heritage.<sup>77</sup>

The FACI inaugurated the biggest aesthetic shift in arts and crafts through its new vision and status for artists. It expanded painting practice, so it was on equal terms with the existing tradition in sculpture and set up a distinction between fine and applied arts. It was strongly recommended that conventional Asian planar perspective be replaced by the teaching of western linear perspective, thereby, creating a modern perception of the visual world. The establishment of the FACI initiated a new profession in Vietnamese culture, denoted by the word 'họa sĩ' (painter), to describe a creator of artistic painting, as opposed to 'thợ vẽ' meaning a person who draws or paints as a craft. Furthermore, artists – the creators – started to sign their names on their works, an action that reveals individuality, which had not

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<sup>76</sup> Nadine André-Pallois, 1997, *L'Indochine: Un Lieu d'Échange Culturel?: les peintres français et indochinois, fin XIXe-XX siècle*, École française d'Extrême-Orient, p. 157-8

<sup>77</sup> Phan Thanh Thuý, 'L'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient et les études Vietnamiennes', p. 289-294, paper at the *Conference 90 Ans de recherches sur la culture et L'histoire du Vietnam*, 1992. The conference was held in Hà Nội in December 1992 to commemorate the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of EFEO with thirty-three papers by Chinese, French, Japanese and Vietnamese scholars.

happened before, in Vietnamese culture. Painting was not a prevalent practice in the pre-colonial era but its recognition grew immensely, leading to it surpassing sculpture. Out of 128 graduates from 1925 to 1945, only 10 students majored in sculpture.<sup>78</sup> Cost was perhaps the main reason for this. Furthermore, sculptural artisans in the old times could live on commissions from temples and pagodas but colonial sculptors often portrayed everyday human activities, under Neo-Classic influences (figs.43-44) and with few patrons or a market.



Figure 43: George Khánh, *The Porter*, 1930s.



Figure 44: Vũ Cao Đàm, *A Vietnamese*, 1931.

The achievements of the FACI in painting under Victor Tardieu's guidance fostered a pride in the fine arts, by impelling students to rise out of the artisan level and be 'a real artist'. This ultimately led to a disdain of craft and when Evariste Jonchère<sup>79</sup> (1892-1956) replaced Victor Tardieu in 1938, he introduced applied arts courses into the curriculum. However, he was strongly opposed, even hated, by

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<sup>78</sup> Statistics from *The Fine Arts University of Hà Nội 1925-1990*, the Fine Arts University of Hà Nội, p. 54.

<sup>79</sup> Grand Prix de Rome of 1925 and holder of the Indochina Prize of 1932

students,<sup>80</sup> who regarded applied arts as inferior to fine arts. Discrimination between ‘high and low’ arts was further fostered by allegations that Annamites were only enthusiastic copyists of works. I would argue that most duplication was at French insistence. Vocational schools were established to meet the colonisers’ needs and focused on copying French or Chinese representations, which with the growth of the FACI was detrimental to these crafts.

French painters who arrived in Việt-Nam because of a fascination with the Orient also advanced the unique qualities of oil painting: Alix Aymé (1894-1989), Jules Galland (1896-1971) and André Maire (1890-1984). Subsequent to winning the *Prix Indochine*, other painters arrived, such as: Victor Tardieu (1921); Jean Bouchaud (1924); Évariste Jonchère (1932, and Louis Bate (1938) and others.<sup>81</sup> The French teachers at the FACI strongly promoted oil painting and in 1929 Joseph Inguimberty held his first solo exhibition. For the first time, Vietnamese could witness the beauty of their nation, as interpreted by foreign eyes in this imported medium. Art historian Quang Phòng, a graduate from the College in 1945, commented:

Inguimberty opened his personal exhibition in Hanoi and left the Vietnamese students dumbfounded by the expressive capacity of oil painting.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Phan Bảo, ‘Trường Mỹ Thuật Đông Dương Ngày Trước’ (The Fine Arts College of Indochina in the Old Times), paper at the conference *Vietnamese Arts of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, Fine Arts University of Hà Nội & Fine Arts Institute, p. 112.

<sup>81</sup> Please refer to Appendix for the list of French artists who interacted with art schools in Việt-Nam during colonial times.

<sup>82</sup> Quang Phòng, *The Fine Arts College of Indochina and Vietnamese painting*, Fine Arts Publishing House, p. 134 in English version.



Figure 45: Victor Tardieu, *At the Mausoleum in Huế*, 1930s, Sotheby's catalogue April 2004.



Figure 46: Joseph Inguimberty, *Landscape and People of Tonkin*, 1933.

Victor Tardieu's teaching was primarily Neo-Classic<sup>83</sup> but he was receptive to Impressionist works (fig.45), as was Inguimberty (fig.46), so French Impressionist artists were introduced in the art history curriculum. Tardieu and Inguimberty

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<sup>83</sup> See Ingrid Maun, 2001, *Citing Angkor: The "Cambodian Arts" in the Age of Restoration 1918-2000*, Ph D thesis, Columbia University, particularly p. 67-70, where teaching methods between Groslier and Tardieu are discussed. See also his works in the catalogue Paris, Hanoi, Saigon, Paris-Musées, 1998.

taught and had great influence on Việt-Nam's first-generation artists, such as, Lê Phổ, Mai Trung Thứ, Tô Ngọc Vân, Nguyễn Gia Trí, Nguyễn Phan Chánh, Lương Xuân Nhị and others. At the same time, Vietnamese literature blossomed as Romanticism permeated throughout the urban class of the society. These features became characteristics of Vietnamese modernism in visual arts.

Under the FACI, Vietnamese artists adopted oil painting as an expressive medium, in similar circumstances to the national acceptance of the Romanised Vietnamese alphabet. In both instances, foreign influences were used to swiftly convey the progress of modernity. Images of youthful females evolved into a dominant painting topic, just as it did in literature of the 1930s, but in terms of hairstyle and clothing, these were 'new girls.' Enclosed within romantic urban interiors, these women displayed in their poise a physical awareness enhanced by the áo dài, which showed off "two little hills"<sup>84</sup> Many artists displayed an interest in painting the female theme including: Lê Phổ (1908-2001), Mai Trung Thứ (1906-1980) (fig.48) and Lương Xuân Nhị (1914-). If Lê Phổ's *A Mandarin's Wife* dated 1931(fig.47), is compared to Lương Xuân Nhị's *Young Woman by Lotus* dated 1940 (fig.49) and Tô Ngọc Vân's *Young Woman by Lilies* dated 1943 (fig.50), one can see the changes of female imagery within a decade. Lê Phổ's subject is reserved, in a large space and the painting is more about the wealth displayed in the interior than the person. Lương Xuân Nhị's subject becomes more challenging in her pose; the artist clearly focuses on her, but still takes in account the surrounding environment. The young woman's body in Tô Ngọc Vân's work is closely framed, thus she occupies most of the canvas and appears seductive to the viewer: her breasts and the adjacent lilies are symbolically related and heighten her erotic appeal. All three paintings adhere to the Neo-Classic rule of composition by thirds.

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<sup>84</sup> Annam Nouveau, January 4 1934, cited from Shawn McHale, 'Printing and Power: Vietnamese Debates over Women's Place in Society, 1918-1934' in *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts*, edit. K.W. Taylor & John K. Whitmore, Cornell University p.189.



Figure 47: Lê Phổ, *A Mandarin's Wife*, 1931.

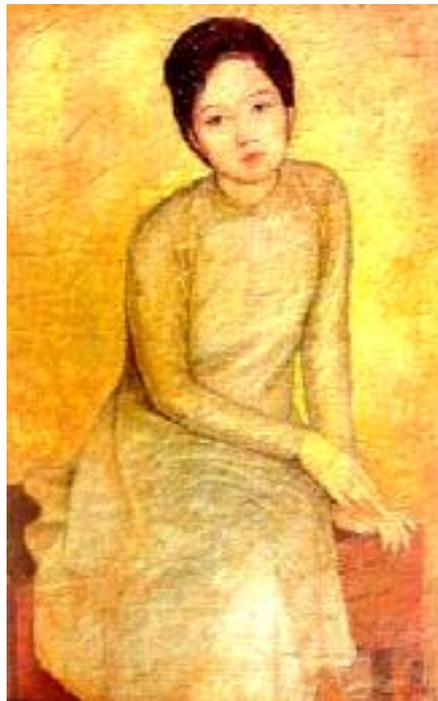


Figure 48: Mai Trung Thứ, *Young Lady*, 1934.



Figure 49: Lương Xuân Nhị, *Young Woman by Lotus*, 1940.

Figure 50: Tô Ngọc Vân, *Young Woman by Lilies*, 1943.

The FACI's reputation was further developed through the transformation of traditional lacquer craft into an art form. Việt-Nam's humid climate creates termite problems for damp wooden furniture and architectural structures. However, lacquer extracted since the third or fourth centuries from *Toxicoderdron succedanea* trees, a natural resource growing in hilly Phú Thọ Province, offered a solution to the problem. Coatings of this lacquer controlled termite infestation when applied to a vast range of items including: altars, pillars, beams, statutes, jewellery boxes and jars. From its practical and decorative origins, lacquer craft was transformed into a fine art medium at the FACI. While Joseph Inguimberty was teaching oil painting at the FACI he visited an old temple in Hà Nội and was astonished by the beauty of lacquer ware on display. His admiration led to the establishment in 1928 of a department in lacquer painting at the FACI, under the supervision of master craftsman, Đinh Văn Thành.



Figure 51: Nguyễn Gia Trí, *Young Girls by Hibiscus*, 1944, courtesy of Bùi Quốc Chí.

Lacquer paintings were not recognised as an important and powerful art medium until the 1940s, when Nguyễn Gia Trí (1908-1993) (fig.51) displayed his work, portraying young females with, “Watteau’s style and Botticelli’s grace.”<sup>85</sup>

In this domain, Nguyen Gia Tri was an experienced magician, used to handling materials and colours unknown to all: dark colour as dark as shadows at night, clear colour as 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...<sup>86</sup>

Victor Tardieu made efforts to broaden students’ outlook by extending his teaching to incorporate examples of Chinese silk paintings and 17<sup>th</sup> century Japanese woodcuts. The artist Nguyễn Phan Chánh (1892-1984) became so influenced by silk painting that he established himself as a master of the medium. Chánh was considered a somewhat awkward student, who insisted on maintaining traditions by

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<sup>85</sup> Claude Mahoudot, Nguyen Gia Tri – A Lacquer Painter, *Indochine n. 217*, extract from Quang Phòng & Quang Việt, 2000, *The Fine Arts of the Capital Hanoi*, p.70.

<sup>86</sup> Quang Phòng & Quang Việt, *The Fine Arts of Capital Ha Noi*, p. 410 (English version)

wearing the customary black tunic in the art classroom. He began studying art in his early thirties and struggled to master oil painting but when Tardieu showed him Chinese silk paintings, it proved to be the medium for his gifts. Nguyễn Phan Chánh displayed ‘Vietnamese-ness’ in his silk paintings by combining western drawing skills that he learnt at the FACI, with the flat qualities of folk woodblock prints of Đông Hồ and Hàng Trống. However, he ignored the bright colours of woodblock prints by using browns, ochres and dark greens to represent rural life, a subject of great interest to him. His silk painting, *Girls Playing with Pebbles* (fig.52) was displayed in the 1931 International Exposition in Paris to lavish praise of critics.<sup>87</sup> It was sold at the exhibition and repurchased in the 1950s by a Vietnamese businessman, Bùi Đình Thảo, who attended its auction in Paris.



Figure 52: Nguyễn Phan Chánh, *Girls Playing with Pebbles*, 1931.

Southern artist, Lê Văn Đệ (1906-1966), was one of the first graduates from the FACI and secured a scholarship to continue studying at L'Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris and then Rome. He retained an Asian heritage in his art despite an extended period abroad and all his female images, including the 1935 commission for the Vatican, *Madonna at the Cross*,<sup>88</sup> evoke Vietnamese beauty.<sup>89</sup> He displayed his

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<sup>87</sup> Jean Gallotti, ‘The Hanoi’s Art School’, *L’Illustration*, n. 4608, 27 June 1931.

<sup>88</sup> In 1935 Lê Văn Đệ was invited to work in Vatican for a year.

professionalism in silk painting through the tenderness of his urban female figures, particularly the softness of their hair, as well as the harmony between subject and environment (fig.53-54). Nguyễn Phan Chánh and Lê Văn Đệ, both studied in the same class and became masters of the same medium, but Lê Văn Đệ has been ignored in official Vietnamese history due to his association with the Saigon regime, which is seen as decadent by historians. His story will continue in Chapter 4 and the history of Saigonese art.



Figure 53: Lê Văn Đệ, *St. Madeleine*, 1930s, photograph from *History of Vietnamese Christianity*.

Figure 54: Lê Văn Đệ, *Girl Combing Hair*, 1943, photograph from *Vietnam Fine Arts Museum*.

Silk paintings are vulnerable and preservation is not yet prioritised in Việt-Nam. Significant works such as *Flower Semblance* (1943) by Nguyễn Tường Lân (1906-1947) and *Portrait of Madame Ch* (1943) by Lê Văn Đệ (1896-1966) held in the Fine Arts Museum of Hà Nội, are fading with time.

With a strong emphasis on anatomy, most students from the FACI developed keen drawing skills and coupled with a western vision they introduced a new look, if not

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<sup>89</sup> Phan Phát Huồn, 1965, C. SS. R., *Vietnamese Religious History*, v. 2, Cửu Thế Tùng Thư Publisher, Saigon, p. 544

a totally alien one, to the traditional craft of woodblock printing. *Boat on the Red River* (1931) (fig.55) by Đỗ Đức Thuận might symbolically relate to colonialism: the bulky shapes of boats occupy most of the picture, while Vietnamese labourers, mostly women, are bent under from the heavy load of buckets they carry. The boats are impressive looking vessels that seem to be about to march onto the land, while the workers appear modest and compliant.

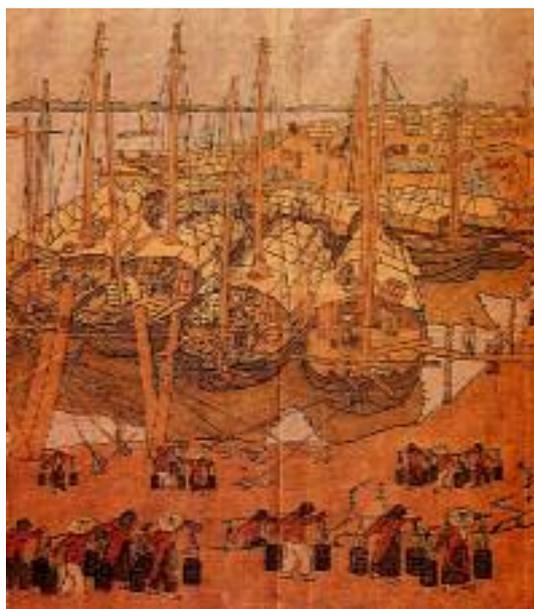


Figure 55: Đỗ Đức Thuận, *Boat on the Red River*, 1931.

Figure 56: Trần Văn Cẩn, *Hair Washing*, 1943.

Vietnamese woodblock prints customarily represented a moral view but *Hair Washing* (1943) by Trần Văn Cẩn (1910-1994) (fig.56) transgressed the tradition, by portraying a half naked woman bending to wash her hair. When the work is compared to Hàng Trống's woodblock print *Four Ladies*, which also exemplifies female beauty, it can be seen that *Hair Washing* had been given a modern look, through emphasising western compositional perspective.

The Fine Arts College of Indochina was closed in 1945 after the colonial French were disarmed by Japan, who subsequently surrendered to the Americans. In the

brief power vacuum, Hồ Chí Minh and his troops<sup>90</sup> declared independence but the French returned, which instigated the first Indochina war in 1946, forcing Hồ Chí Minh's government to evacuate. During this period, colonial art ceased to be active, as the choice for Vietnamese artists was either the 'resistance war' or alignment with nationalists. Most graduates from the FACI participated in the uprising of the 1945 revolution under the leadership of Vietnamese Communists. From this point on, the quest for independence was prioritised and the pursuit of modernity declined.

## CONCLUSION

Việt-Nam's contact with the West was a cultural shock for the local populace, not only because of the differences between the two cultures, but also because of colonial imposition and assimilation policies. Westernisation became an inevitable process, initiated by colonists and then taken up by local people in the drive to modernity to escape colonialism. As this chapter shows, developments in Romanised Vietnamese literature and the visual arts were used to counter colonialism and assert a new, modern Vietnamese identity. The incorporation of Vietnamese characteristics in the later phase developed positive features at different levels. French-built architecture became the landmark of this period, and, perhaps, more dominant than other forms of western visual culture. Yet, the Vietnamese imprint can still be seen, as in Phát Diệm Cathedral or Khải Định Mausoleum. Clothing of this era underwent great changes, and at the same time, maintained a strong identity: apart from the western suit, the áo dài was modified but still retained its traditional form. Visual arts became prolific with the establishment of vocational schools relating to visual practices, the most influential institution being the Fine Arts College of Indochina. It was modelled on the European academy and nurtured a new national art. It not only introduced oil painting and transformed traditional lacquer into high art but fostered new visions

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<sup>90</sup> League for Việt-Nam's Independence, or Việt Minh, was established in 1941 to attract all Vietnamese patriots to fight against French rule. General Võ Nguyên Giáp developed an army from this force.

and aesthetics. As a result, it led to the formation of painters as a new profession, which gave rise to new forms of expressions and the birth of modernism.

French methodology in visual arts contrasted with the Vietnamese mode of expression: artists of the past, like their counterparts in China, evoked the subliminal ‘spirit or essence’ of a topic. By subjectively realising an ideal concept, Vietnamese artists were honoured if they could replicate the manner of their master. In contrast, it was a requirement at the FACI that students make directly observed anatomy and linear perspective studies, which led Vietnamese artists to new ways of seeing. Furthermore, the academy insisted that students develop their individual style and toward this end, they were exposed to the full spectrum of European movements, from Italian Renaissance to French Impressionism.

Despite fundamental differences in methodology, Vietnamese colonial artists comfortably ventured into Modernism with the backing of the FACI - “Such a school, like railways, never existed in Việt-Nam before.”<sup>91</sup> Unlike Vietnamese literature, which had to bear a painful break from the Sino writing system and the conflict of individualism with Confucianism, the visual arts, on the contrary, benefited more than suffered in the movement toward modernism. French artist-lecturers encouraged the continuation of traditional crafts, by incorporating its values into individual creativity. Vietnamese artists began to sign their work with the perception that they were no longer controlled by a sense of the collective. All these factors are critical in characterising the changes of aesthetics in this period.

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<sup>91</sup> Phan Bảo, ‘Trường Mỹ Thuật Đông Dương Ngày Trước’ (The Fine Arts College of Indochina in the Old Times), paper at the conference *Vietnamese Arts of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, p. 111. The conference was held by the Fine Arts University of Hà Nội on 30<sup>th</sup> March 2000.