

CHAPTER 5:

THE CONSTRUCTION AND

DE-CONSTRUCTION OF VIETNAMESE

AESTHETICS OF THE POST-WAR PERIOD

1975-1990



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

The end of the war on the 30th of April 1975 assigned new responsibilities to the visual arts. After 21 years of partition, the two Việt-Nams were unified and artists from both sides commenced dialogue but not without cost. As discussed in previous chapters, the development of contrasting ideologies over many years of war shaped two dissimilar, almost opposite societies and aesthetics. In view of this, national reunification was not simply a merger of existing tastes.

In the first post-war period from 1975 to 1990, Vietnamese artists witnessed the new regime's endorsement of decolonisation, followed by the introduction of Socialist Realism. This was achieved by several campaigns to limit the artistic scope of southern culture, which had a negative impact on the diversity of existing art practice. In addition, the deployment of northern artists to preside over the progress of Socialist Realism in the 'newly liberated land' transformed the drive and vibrancy of local art resources.

This chapter will bring to light the complicated process of aesthetic changes experienced during this period. While the imposition of Socialist Realism turned the South into an arena for Soviet influence, southern artists, under pressure to change their styles, surreptitiously exposed northern artists to western influences. The quest for modernity was replaced by the imperative for great works of art to reflect the great wars that Việt-Nam had won. Although the Party introduced the reform policy in Việt-Nam in 1986, its impact was not realised in the arts until early in the 1990s. This is why Chapter Five is within the timeline of 1975-1990.

Due to the fact that keeping records was not, and still is not a professional practice in the Vietnamese art world, it is difficult to find relevant visual references for this period. A good number of paintings by southern painters who converted to Socialist Realism were printed in some catalogues to prove their acceptance of the new ideology and the Socialist victory over southern 'decadent art'. In contrast, images of paintings created by northern artists who ventured into formalism, in this era, are difficult to retrieve. As a way of rectifying this, I have used images of their later works.

DE-COLONISATION AND DECONSTRUCTION IN THE SOUTH: ADMINISTRATIVE MEASURES FOR THE TRANSITION OF A NEW SOCIETY

The 1975 Socialist victory marked the beginning of a new regime for the South. Vietnamese Marxism, as fabricated by the Political Bureau's leading party figures, Lê Duẩn and Trường Chinh and their successors, introduced the Socialist revolution¹ to complete the national democratic revolution, which gained national independence from American intervention. On July 2nd, 1976, the two Việt-Nams were officially reunited as the Socialist Republic of Việt-Nam and, in the 4th National Party Congress in December of the same year, the Việt-Nam Workers' Party was renamed the Vietnamese Communist Party. Việt-Nam's future was projected toward Communism, and the terms Socialism and Socialist were used to mark the transition from a post-war society to that of Communism.

In an attempt to create a new southern society, administrative measures were applied to deconstruct the machinery of the old society, in favour of a new Socialist order. This brought into force the process of de-colonisation or, more precisely, de-neo-colonisation, to eradicate imperialist traces and the Vietnamese bourgeoisie. Campaigns were carried out to realise revolutionary theories and extend Party control over every aspect of the southern proletariat. During this time, traces of the methods applied by the Socialists in the North, during the 1950s and 60s were clearly evident.

While the Socialists, who commanded the North since 1954, continued their agenda, they initiated their 'triple revolution reforms' for the South: Revolution in Production Relations, Technical Revolution and Ideological and Cultural Revolution. The industrial infrastructure left by the Saigon regime was superior to that of the North, so the Technical Revolution was not a priority. However, the Revolution in Production Relations was set up to control neo-colonial features of

¹Lê Duẩn, 1973 (2nd edition), *The Vietnamese Revolution Fundamental Problems Essential Tasks*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, p. 87.

the economy and to eradicate exploitive manufacturing. The Communist government administrated several campaigns in the first three years after the fall of Saigon. In 1975, the X1 campaign was launched to instigate economic and financial changes. In 1976, Saigon was renamed Hồ Chí Minh City (HCMC), and 1978 saw the launch of the X2 campaign to crackdown on foreign-aligned capitalists and the national bourgeoisie. The currency was changed twice in three years,² causing most retail outlets to cease business. Saigon's once bustling streets were deserted and southerners were driven further into poverty.

Production Relations reform enforced large-scale cooperatives in the Mekong Delta but it met with the peasants' reluctance to cooperate and even if the collectives were formed, they failed to deliver rice production levels to meet domestic consumption. Food stamps were issued to provide the urban population with dried sweet potatoes, cassava and stale rice. The agricultural nation of Việt-Nam, with rice as the staple food was by 1988 having a food crisis that almost instigated a famine.

In addition to economic decolonisation, a series of cultural modifications were constructed to contain the development of an evolving and complex aesthetic.

The Construction of a New Society: *New Socialist man*

To achieve a revolutionary society, it was vital for Việt-Nam's Socialist ideology to construct *New Socialist Man*.³ Several campaigns were carried out through the media and public address systems, installed in just about every second street. Long repetitive proclamations outlined the process of developing *New Socialist Man* and how to get rid of the, "remnants" of "Neo-Colonialist culture." Prostitution and drugs became illegal and groups of Volunteer Youth Guards apprehended fellow

² See Tran Khanh, 1993, *The Ethnic Chinese and Economic Development in Vietnam*, Indochina Unit, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, p. 79-96.

³ To know more of the criteria, read Le Duan, *The Vietnamese Revolution Fundamental Problems Essential Tasks*, p. 97-101 or *Trường Chinh, Về Cách Mạng Tư Tưởng và Văn Hoá* (On Ideological and Cultural Revolution) p. 62-66.

youths. They would castigate them about their long hair or fashionable flared pants and sometimes publicly cut pants as a warning to others.



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

The South, mainly Saigon, was stripped of its vibrancy, with allegations that it was bourgeois. Outfits of urban southern women including the stylish áo dài were either held in safekeeping or exchanged for food. The áo bà ba work garment (fig.2), a pyjama-like top with a short narrow slit on each side and black pants, replaced them. The most apparent modification in clothing, took place in schools, where female teachers voluntarily wore the áo bà ba and sandals, in an attempt to minimise ostentation. This mass uniformity (fig.3) often made it difficult in high schools, to distinguish female teachers from their students. Garments for male teachers did not change to any great extent except shoes were replaced with sandals or slippers. Shoes were considered too elegant by the newly arrived authorities that wore rubber-tyre thongs so common during the war.



Figure 3: High school students in the late 1970s at Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai High School, HCMC, photograph from *Việt Nam*.

The adoption of simple attire did not make daily life for southerners much easier, on the contrary, it illustrated that choices were no longer readily available. Societal change was not only characterised by less colourful garments but the way individuals conducted themselves in daily life. For instance, they feared that their approach to culture might be considered reactionary and cause them to be labelled as “urban intellectual petite bourgeoisie,” a classification used to portray a weak group detrimental to the revolutionary cause, unlike workers and peasants. As detailed in Chapter 3, the image of urban intellectuals rarely appeared in art of the Democratic Republic of Việt-Nam from 1954 to 1975, and was unlikely to emerge in the context of cultural reform of the South during 1975-1985.

The *New Socialist Man* campaign was not as dramatic as the drive to “re-educate” officials and soldiers of the former Saigon regime, who were collected and put into re-education camps. Low officials were recruited into a three-day rectification session; middle and high level officials were told to prepare for a thirty-day session. However, without explanation from the new authorities, many of them ended up in detention from three to 12 years in camps spread throughout remote

areas.⁴ This had a significant impact on the progress of southern art, as under the prior Saigon regime many artists were conscripted into the armed forces and were now subjected by the new regime to re-education camps. This included Trịnh Cung (three years), Tạ Ty (six years) Dương Văn Hùng (six years), Nguyễn Thanh Thu (six years) and Mai Chửng (three years). Detention also affected the academic resources of the National College of Fine Arts of Saigon. Like all high school and tertiary lecturers, National College staff was conscripted into the Saigon regime's Military Reserve Forces, normally as Lieutenants. After the fall of Saigon, these artist-lecturers were removed from teaching and detained in camps for two or three years. Upon release, many found it difficult to recommence creative activities as a result of being thrown back into a new, somewhat indifferent society who treated them like second-class citizens.⁵ Such was the profound impact on the artist Trịnh Cung, that he was unable to 'pick up' his paintbrushes for 10 years.⁶ Other artists, upon release from camps, risked their lives through fleeing by sea, or joined the waiting list of the Orderly Departure Program, run by the High Commission on Refugees. These artists all but ceased their creative pursuits, hoping one day to have an opportunity to resume activity overseas.

In addition to re-education for those who worked with the Saigon regime, their children were hindered or prevented by the Socialist government, from accessing tertiary education or employment in the new society.⁷ Many mainstream Vietnamese and Việt Cộng revolutionaries alike were upset by the way northern cadres took over power in South Việt-Nam. They were disenchanted by the disarmament of both the provisional government of South Việt-Nam and the National Liberation Front. In retrospect, there is a perception that it ruined a unique opportunity of reconciliation between North and South and was the greatest error of

⁴ More about education camps, read
<http://www.ocf.berkeley.edu/~sdenney/Vietnam-Reeducation-Camps-1982>
<http://reference.allrefer.com/country-guide-study/vietnam/vietnam148.html>

⁵ Trần Kim Hùng, Nguyễn Văn Trung, Trương Văn Ý, all had difficulties in getting back to their teaching after their release.

⁶ Interview with the artist in 2001.

⁷ Read Bùi Tín, 1995, *Following Ho Chi Minh*, chapter *Arrogance*, University of Hawaii Press, p. 88-111.

the regime.⁸ In the words of Trương Như Tảng, a former Minister of Justice in the Provisional Government of South Việt-Nam:

They [the Communists] made it understood that a future Việt-Nam would be a single monolithic bloc, collectivist and totalitarian, in which all traditions and culture of the South would be moulded by the political machinery of the conquerors.⁹

Administrative measures in the visual arts

It was in the context of re-education, detention, discrimination and the subsequent weakening of southern artists that in the first week of May 1975, Saigonese artists and writers were invited to a meeting by the new authorities. Many questions were raised about how they could pursue their creative careers and what styles would be acceptable. Some artists were bewildered by the new situation and uncertain about the policies but expressed interest and expectations about the possible opportunities in their new social environment, particularly those who opposed or were indifferent toward the former Saigon regime. The meeting offered some hope of sympathetic communication between the revolutionary government and local artists. But the combination of military, Socialist control and re-education, led to a suite of obscure and incongruous indoctrinations.

After May 1975, southern artists were targeted for two months of cultural and ideological re-education, which fortunately did not include isolation from family or community. Nonetheless, listening to indoctrination speeches for eight hours a day for two months was an unwanted interruption and a nuisance, to say the least. Southern artists were shocked, when a weapon-toting cadre menacingly arrived to deliver a rectification lecture to the class.¹⁰ Cultural workers were gathered into groups according to their specialities: literature, music or performing and visual arts. In one such session, Nguyễn Khai, an active member of The Society of Saigonese Young Artists, was ordered to bring an example of his abstract art and

⁸ See Trương Như Tảng, *Journal of A Vietcong*, especially chapters *Sorrows and Joys*, and *Concord and Reconciliation*.

⁹ Trương Như Tảng, *Journal of A Vietcong*, p. 268.

¹⁰ Interview with Nguyễn Khai on 30 April, 2003 in California at his studio.

explain it to the class of artists, at which point cadres raised questions largely to embarrass the painter. This ‘criticism’ method remained unchanged from the 1950s¹¹ and was used to psychologically modify artists’ egos and to alter their art into figurative styles.

After the re-education sessions, artists were familiarised with the new art administration system and strongly recommended to join the southern section of the Việt-Nam Fine Arts Association. This organisation was presided over by artists who had regrouped to the North, studied in the Eastern Bloc countries or were southern frontline Việt Cộng. The first revolutionary artists assigned as administrators were: Nguyễn Thanh Châu, Quách Phong and Cổ Tấn Long Châu, the first two of whom remain in control to this day. Southern artists who joined the Association were issued a certificate, enabling them to remain in the city and avoid transfer to the New Economic Zones. The Socialist regime had an extremely restricted policy on citizen mobility, especially when the war was just ended.

The Fine Arts Association, through their re-education program, directed southern artists to adopt the dictum of Socialist Realism, “to merge into reality and serve the masses.” Re-educating artists included field trips to the areas of agriculture, fishing, manufacturing or forestry. The greatest numbers of enrolments were in sea-based journeys but an increasing exodus from Việt-Nam by sea, required future boat journeys to be investigated before being carried out. These restrictions resulted in the re-deployment of artists to work with their easel and canvases in factories. Such was the case with Nguyễn Khai and Đỗ Quang Em, who each spent a month at the railway factory in Chí Hòa, in suburban Hồ Chí Minh City. One of Nguyễn Khai’s factory paintings portrayed an elderly worker, surrounded by a scattering of tools. Upon completion, the factory manager instructed him to increase the number of tools in the painting, “fearing criticism from the authorities for not being industrially productive.”¹²

¹¹ Referring to Tạ Tỵ’s case in the Resistance zone in Chapter 3, p.146.

¹² Interview with Nguyễn Khai in California in June 2003.



Figure 4: Đỗ Quang Em, *Railway Worker*, 1970s, courtesy of Nguyễn Văn Trung.

Đỗ Quang Em evoked a harsher reaction from management, “Are you going to stain the regime with this painting? Why didn’t you paint untorn clothes for the worker?” Đỗ Quang Em portrayed his worker sitting (fig.4), with muscular arms resting on his knees and hands clutching each other, his prominent veins displaying strength and hard work. A noticeable tear in his undervest is exposed beneath his uniform. Đỗ Quang Em explored various styles and this painting displays his flair for photo-realism. His father was a photographer and Em touched-up or altered photographs at an early age. This led him to portraiture, clearly adopted in this painting that eventually characterised his career.

The ‘red criticism’ that meticulously relied on revolutionary standards put many Saigonese artists off and Đỗ Quang Em made several attempts to escape Vietnam, which ultimately cost him a year in jail. Nguyễn Khai succeeded after a couple of attempts and in 1981 settled in California. The sculptor Mai Chửng fled in 1981 after three years in re-education camps, other artists simply put away their brushes for another job.

In her book, *Vietnamese Painting from Tradition to Modernity*¹³, Corinne de Ménonville describes the period 1975–1985 as “the dark period,” an interpretation that has aroused significant criticism. For instance, *Mỹ Thuật* magazine published two articles,¹⁴ criticising the writer’s use of the terms, “fratricidal fights” and “dark period” as dishonouring the Vietnamese victory against the American invasion. In March 2004, the Criticism Section of the Việt-Nam Fine Arts Association held “a fierce meeting” to discuss the book, which subsequently aroused *Tuổi Trẻ* (Youth) newspaper, to publish an article in the same month entitled *It Is Necessary to Have an Official Book on Vietnamese Art History*.¹⁵ This anonymous article states, “some experienced artists say that it is an anti-Communist book even just by the look, no need to read.” The book was not officially banned but either removed from bookshop shelves or sold out; that shows the level of sensitivity Menonville’s publication engendered.¹⁶

Art education: deconstructing imperialist influence and constructing Socialist Realism.

The period 1975-1985 witnessed great changes in the arts, with stringent measures applied to de-constructing the former art education system, in preparation for new aesthetics.

The National Fine Arts College of Saigon and the National College of Decorative Arts of Gia Định were amalgamated in 1976 and renamed the Fine Arts College of Hồ Chí Minh City. In 1981, it was renamed as the Fine Arts University of Hồ Chí Minh City. A decree signed by the Cultural Minister, Nguyễn Văn Hiếu, in 1976 stated the five functions of the college:

¹³ The book was published in two versions, English and French (*La peinture vietnamienne, une aventure entre tradition et modernité*) by Les Editions d’Art et d’Histoire, Paris, 2003.

¹⁴ *Mỹ Thuật*, No. 98 (62) in February 2004: one by Hoàng Công Luận (p. 38-40) and one by Nguyễn Quang Việt (p. 40-47).

¹⁵ ‘Cần Một cuốn Sách về Lịch Sử Mỹ Thuật Việt Nam Chính Thức’. This article is cited from anonymous article in Hà Nội Mới newspaper, <http://www.tuoiitre.com.vn/Tianyon/Index.aspx?ArticleID=26156&ChannelID=10>

¹⁶ My inspection with bookshops in Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City in January 2004.

1. The training of cadres in painting, sculpture and art theories to college and vocational level.
2. To upgrade cadres gifted in painting and sculpture through short-term in-service classes.
3. The provision of in-service training to raise staff standards in the study of theories and material techniques in the plastic arts.
4. To assist the Cultural and Information departments in Lâm Đồng, Thuận Hải and Southwards, in strengthening the art movements of the regional masses.
5. To educate cadres and students in the political and ideological management of the College infrastructure and materials according to government policies and principals.¹⁷

The College of Fine Arts of Hồ Chí Minh City was no longer expected to produce or nurture artists but turn out cultural cadres, to help build a Socialist ethos for the new society. To facilitate this, the college was placed under the umbrella of the Ministry of Culture and Information, similar to the College of Fine Arts in Hà Nội.

The new administration made many curricula changes to the College of Fine Arts of Hồ Chí Minh City and several compulsory theory subjects were added to accommodate Socialist ideology: History of the Party, Marxism-Leninism, Economical Politics, Scientific Socialism, Government Policy in Arts and Literature and Military Training.¹⁸ Between 1975 and 1977, these subjects, except Military Training, were also introduced to local lecturers in the intention of reshaping their political vision.

The assessment process of these political subjects began with designed questions distributed to the students as preparation for exams. On occasions the answers were also provided so that students could learn the correct answer by heart. Ready-made topics pointed to the Socialist government's mistrust of individuality in student thinking and their wish to ensure that ideas did not exceed policy guidelines. As a result, independent critical thinking was redundant and everyone simply waited for, "the indication from above" – a popular term used in Việt-Nam to show the

¹⁷ Cited from *Từ Trường Vẽ Gia Định đến Đại Học Mỹ Thuật Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh* (From Gia Định Drawing School to Fine Arts University of Hồ Chí Minh City), p.90.

¹⁸ Full program is included in the appendix.

ultimate power of the Party. These curricula changes and methods are still in use today.

This education repressed creativity in favour of imitation and discouraged thinking ‘outside the square’. The initial purpose of setting ready-made topics was to support the repatriation of soldiers or cadres, who had served the nation’s revolutionary cause at the expense of completing their formal education. However, whatever good intentions the Party had in adopting this learning process, the education system today is in dire need of reform.

In 1975 Nguyễn Phước Sanh was appointed Director of The Fine Art College in Saigon and introduced unprecedented changes. In his art practice, he was obsessed with the figure of Hồ Chí Minh and created at least ten known sculptures, installed in Nghệ An, Hải Hưng, Huế, Sa Đéc, Hồ and Chí Minh City.¹⁹ Nguyễn Phước Sanh’s administrative credentials and political affiliations qualified him for the Director’s position and key de-colonising engineer between 1975-1991 in art education in Hồ Chí Minh City and in the South. Every Monday morning, attendance was compulsory for all staff and students at communal assembly for the national salute. With enthusiasm, Director Sanh delivered lengthy speeches, repeatedly reminded ‘his audience’ with an almost fatherly anxiety, to become a *New Socialist Man*, through devoting their work energetically to the Socialist construction.²⁰ This ritual continued until 1985, when it was modified to a monthly assembly.

The other repetitive topic in these Monday salutes was about formalism in art, which was condemned by Socialist Realism by all accounts because, “it was merely a layer of extravagant cosmetic of the capitalist decadent art.”²¹ Director Sanh

¹⁹ Trương Phi Đức, ‘Có Một Người Thầy Như Thế’ (Such A Lecturer), *Mỹ Thuật* (Fine Arts Journal) n.17 (January, 1998) p. 48-49.

²⁰ I was an undergraduate student at the Fine Arts College of Hồ Chí Minh City from 1976-1980 and was subject to all these Monday speeches for the whole four years of study.

²¹ Nguyễn Đỗ Cung, ‘Kế Thừa và Phát Huy Truyền Thống Dân Tộc để Sáng Tạo Một nền Nghệ Thuật Tạo Hình Xã Hội Chủ Nghĩa của Việt Nam’ (To Inherit and Develop Tradition for a Vietnamese Socialist Art), published in *Nghiên Cứu Mỹ Thuật*, (Researches on Visual Arts), Themes on 30th Anniversary of the Fine Arts Institute, Fine Arts Institute, Hà Nội p. 25.

specifically aimed these lectures to the continuing students from the pre-1975 period, to inform them that formalism was not accepted in the new Socialist school.

After May 1975, art students at the National College of Fine Arts of Saigon were held back in their educational development by two years. For example, fourth year students would be sent back to second year, with the intention of re-orientating their creativity toward serving the nation and not the individualism embraced under the Saigon regime. Artworks displayed in the College collection or on the campus grounds (garden sculpture), were reviewed under strict revolutionary guidelines. This led to the demolition without hesitation, of all nude statues at the National College of Fine Arts of Saigon and Đồng Nai College. Nguyễn Kao Thương (1918-2003), a National College of Fine Art lecturer and the first Director of Đồng Nai College after 1975, despite having studied at the University of Surikov in Moscow, considered nude statues immoral and therefore deserving of destruction.²² The relaxed and creative atmosphere of an art college gave way to khaki (northern army) uniforms, which, through the appointment of new staff, began to proliferate, generating a noticeable distinction between new and the old staff.²³ Southerners would address the other as, “Mr.” “Mrs.” Or “Miss.” while northerners and Việt Cộng used terms such as, “cadre,” “brother three, ” or “sister ten.” This not only reflected their revolutionary nicknames but also engendered a feeling that they belonged to a family, while the others did not.

As with all other educational institutions throughout the nation, the Hồ Chí Minh Communist Youth League (HCYL) was set up at college level in order, “to advance forward” the Socialist agenda. Considered the Party’s left hand, students strived for membership and to earn credit toward employment or perhaps a university seat. HCYL members could also voice opinions on the teaching performance of lecturers and in important meetings, cast a vote with directors, vice

²² Interview in California in May 2003 with Mr. Nguyễn Văn Trung, lecturer in lacquer at the National College of Fine Arts of Saigon from 1970 to 1975.

²³ The intake of all universities the first 2 years after the fall of Saigon was made available mainly for Northern soldiers and cadres.

directors, union workers and faculty department administrators. No such right was granted to local lecturers (staff employed before 1975) which led to a lack of respect and one-by-one the loss of their job.

The fate of pre-1975 publications had a vast impact on the quality of art scholarship. The Nhân Văn–Giai Phẩm scandal in 1956 (see Chapter 3, page 152-60)), led to the Socialists increasing their vigilance on cultural artefacts from the former southern neo-colonial culture. After the fall of Saigon, the Ministry of Information and Culture issued three separate resolutions: August 1975, March 1976 and May 1977, regarding a list of banned books and other printed matter published pre-1975.²⁴ However, the common response of local cultural cadres to these resolutions was to consider the possession of all books published under the Saigon regime forbidden, including dictionaries and textbooks on technical subjects. Although bookshops in the South were constantly under surveillance and almost all books were confiscated by the middle of the following year, many still made their way into the black market. Some books were smuggled to Hà Nội and other confiscated books supplemented the bookshelves of cadres. Many book lovers were so resentful of the thought of having to depart with their treasures under such contemptuous measures that they burnt them or buried the most valued, only to discover later that earthworms had fulfilled the destructive task.²⁵ While the painter Tạ Ty was being detained in a re-education camp, local cultural cadres marched into his home and confiscated his personal library of some 3,000 books. The established southern writer Võ Phiến made this critical observation:

Old publications were forbidden then confiscated. A process repeated over and over, until no trace of banned items was left. In 1981, six years after the conquest of Saigon, the cultural police mounted a new operation against old publications and any new releases regarded as unorthodox. Three months later, the campaign published a tally of its

²⁴ Trần Trọng Đăng Đàn, 1993, *Văn Hoá, Văn Nghệ Nam Việt-Nam 1954-1975*, Thông Tin Publishing House, p. 697-699.

²⁵ My father owned two bookshops, named after him, Huỳnh Hiệp; one at 107 Trịnh Hoài Đức Street (now 30April) and one at 24 Lê văn Lễ Street (now Nguyễn Thị Hiền) in Biên Hoà province, 30 km from Saigon. The confiscation of books during 1975-76 was my family's drama, ended up in bankruptcy.

accomplishments in the October issue of *Tạp Chí Cộng Sản* (The Communist Review). It revealed data regarding the millions of copies destroyed nationwide, 60 tons of printed material from Saigon alone.²⁶

This ban consequently made art books increasingly rare. However, some book lovers received support from revolutionary associates who retained their collections and began releasing books onto the black market for food or to fund escape efforts. The 1981 “campaign against imperialism” limited retail in the South and many bookshops ceased to exist. Vietnamese understanding of cultural events in the world at large was limited by the publications ban, leaving a void to be filled by Socialist Realism.

To date, no records have been discovered regarding the confiscation of artworks from private collections. However, there are instances of collectors destroying works of art through fear. Nguyễn Xuân Oánh, the first Vietnamese economics graduate from Harvard University, burnt four paintings, including one that was awarded a national prize.²⁷ Likewise, the artist Nguyễn Thân (1954-) who had moved from the North at the age of six in the wave of catholic migration hid the prize-winning medal he won from the previous regime, and destroyed his paintings and sculptures.²⁸

While the Socialist government was propagating its ethos in the South and erasing the cultural vestiges of pre-1975, the reality proved to be ironic. In his long speech at the 40th anniversary of the Draft of the Vietnamese Cultural Revolution, held by the Committee of Social Sciences in 1983, the then Party secretary-general Trường Chinh revealed:

The decadent and reactionary Imperialist, Neo-colonial culture is only partially eradicated in the South and echoes its impact to the North.²⁹

²⁶ Vo Phien, 1992, *Literature in South Viet-Nam 1954-1975*, Vietnamese Language & Culture Publication, p.5.

²⁷ Interview with Trinh Cung in December 2002.

²⁸ Jeffrey Hantover, 1991, *Uncorked Soul*, Plum Blossom, p. 161.

²⁹ Trường Chinh, *Về Cách Mạng Tư Tưởng và Văn Hoá* (On Cultural and Ideological Revolution) Sự Thật, Publishers, Hà Nội, p. 48.

Dialogue between the two sides

While southern artists put up with losing the war, northern artists, especially in Hà Nội, benefited from reunification. It provided opportunities to travel and meet colleagues or relatives, who departed southward in 1954. Bùi Xuân Phái went to Hồ Chí Minh City for two months in 1979 to paint and visit art school colleagues.³⁰ He and artist Văn Cao called in on Tạ Tỵ's studio while the latter was still in re-education camp, to look at what Tạ Tỵ had created prior to detention. Upon Tạ Tỵ's release in 1981, the Hà Nội artist Lê Quốc Lộc visited him and commented, "It will take us 50 years to paint what you are painting today."³¹ Fifty years was probably an exaggeration but it indicates the isolation felt by northern artists under the constraints of Socialist Realism and their yearning for a formalism, which was condemned by the Party. Visits such as these helped develop a merger between two discrete repertoires of visual expression – one based on a rigid doctrine and the other on free expression. Northern artists appointed to administrate culture in the South, were fascinated by the expressive vitality and variety of southern arts. Two emerging artists from Hà Nội, Ca Lê Thắng and Đào Minh Tri, boldly crossed the taboo – formalism - to create a new art and in doing so, opened up opportunity for the exchange of ideas and styles (fig.5).

Ca Lê Thắng (1949-) graduated from the Fine Arts College of Hà Nội in 1976. He was seen as a rebellious student by exploring formalist painting, particularly abstraction. However, as Thắng's family were politically influential in his hometown of Bến Tre and participated in revolutionary insurrections during the second Indochina war, he was recruited after graduation, to lecture at the Fine Arts College of Hồ Chí Minh City, a position he held for ten years in 1977.

³⁰ Bùi Thanh Phương & Trần Hậu Tuấn, 1998, *Bùi Xuân Phái*, Life and Works, Fine Arts Publishing House, p. 219-222.

³¹ Nguyễn Quỳnh, 'A Review on Vietnamese Contemporary Art', *Hop Luu Magazine*, n.10/1993, p. 31. An interview with the artist on 2 December, 02.

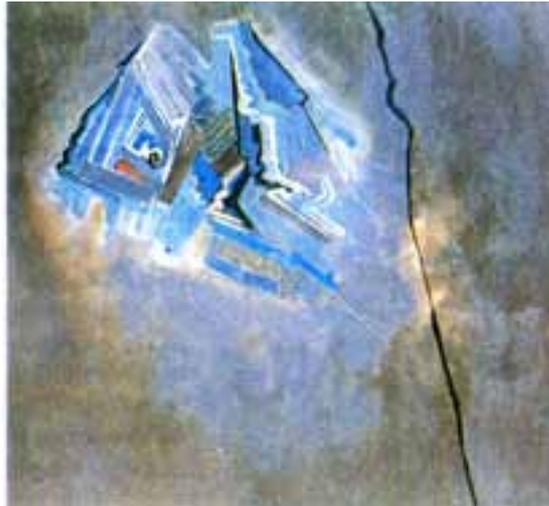


Figure 5: Ca Lê Thắng, *Evening*, 1992.

As a core cadre, his duty was to develop a new Socialist morale in southern art education. Three months after the fall of Saigon, while completing his final year of study, Ca Lê Thắng spent four weeks in the South, visiting relatives and purchasing art books.³² His familiarity with Saigonese art increased little in such a short stay but the books and his eager search for something new, gave him a view of art issues outside those of the Socialist bloc. When he was teaching, Ca Lê Thắng began encouraging students to experiment with media through the concepts in his projects.



Figure 6: Đào Minh Tri, *Traditional Dance*, 1995.

³² Interview with the artist.

Like Ca Lê Thắng, Đào Minh Tri (1950-) (fig.6) graduated in 1976 from the Fine Arts College of Hà Nội. A self-described stubborn student, he claimed to have made art at variance with the school's teaching, albeit while fulfilling assignments and achieving good grades. Tri was appointed to the South immediately after graduating, as a lecturer at the Fine Arts College of Hồ Chí Minh City. He taught there until 1993 and at one point was in charge of the painting department. Once, during a visit to Tri's studio, the art college Director Nguyễn Phước Sanh was shocked by what he saw on Tri's canvas, "God! How could you paint like that while I'm fighting against the decadent arts, is this a way to stab me in the back?"³³ The director, who was nicknamed Bolshevik for his beliefs, was concerned that this threatened his education agenda of 'training revolutionary artists'. Toward this end, he organised a transfer of both Thắng and Tri to the Fine Arts Association.



Figure 7: Cổ Tấn Long Châu, *A Việt-Cộng in action*, 1961.

Another figure prominent during this time was Cổ Tấn Long Châu (1938-) who studied with Nguyễn Trung at the National College of Fine Arts of Saigon in 1960. However, Châu soon dropped out to work in the jungle with the National Liberation Army (Việt Cộng) (fig.7).

³³ Interview with Đào Minh Tri, January, 2002.

He applied himself enthusiastically to his political assignments in the Bureau, [Painting the Liberation]. He used the knowledge he gathered from his brief art school studies to produce propaganda posters, battle sketches and book illustrations. In 1963-64, a collection of resistance sketches from a group of Vietnamese artists were sent to the North and then forwarded to eight Beijing printing houses to be printed into a portfolio.³⁴

Cổ Tấn Long Châu went on to become the first revolutionary after the fall of Saigon, to take charge of two Saigonese art schools.³⁵ After a merger and a name change, he held the position of Vice-Director of the Fine Arts College of Hồ Chí Minh City from 1975 to 1981.

These friendships and the social context of de-colonisation of the South influenced art practices. While Hà Nội-trained artists discovered a more expressive art in the South, Saigonese artists tried to cover a more social content in their paintings. This tendency was reflected clearly in the National Exhibition of 1980.

Nguyễn Trung's *Mother, Child and the Ocean* (fig.8) and Nguyễn Khai's *Two Female Painters* (fig.9) show the artists' great efforts of diverting themselves into the working classes as subject matter. Their women in these paintings become muscular with square shoulders through their involvement in a working environment.

³⁴ Nguyễn Kim Loan, 'Họa Sĩ Cổ Tấn Long Châu' (Artist Cổ Tấn Long Châu), *Mỹ Thuật* (Fine Arts Journal), n. 86 (56), p. 39-40.

³⁵ The National College of Fine Arts of Saigon and the School of Decorative Arts of Gia Định.



Figure 8: Nguyễn Trung, *Mother, Child and the Ocean*, 1980.



Figure 9: Nguyễn Khai, *Two Female Painters*, 1980.



Figure 10: Nguyễn Phước, *Pottery Production*, 1980.

The painting, *Pottery Production* (fig.10) by Nguyễn Phước, presents three young female workers observing the pots in an incandescent light with which the mundane products appear glorious while the workers wearing áo bà ba emerge surreal with their doll-like faces. To some extent, the distinctive Saigonese style of various artists softens the Socialist austerity and adds new aspects to ‘socialist paintings’. However, Nguyễn Trung’s painting received a comment that his subjects, mother and child, “do not have Vietnamese sentiments, but something reluctant and gloomy”.³⁶ Attempts to convert into Socialist Realism faded after several years under this type of strict scrutiny. Furthermore, the contacts between North and South brought about some changes, evident in this National Exhibition of 1980.

The unification of the two Việt-Nams and the emerging contact between northern and southern artists, witnessed a growth in Hà Nội artists’ interest toward form in art, but not yet at the expense of content.

³⁶ Chu Quang Trứ, cited from Nguyễn Phước, ‘Một Chặng Đường Quyết Định trong sự Phát Triển Mỹ Thuật thành phố Hồ Chí Minh’ (A Decisive Part in the Development of Fine Arts of Hồ Chí Minh City, *Mỹ Thuật*, n.4(11) 1982, p.51.



Figure 11: Đặng Thị Khuê, *American Pirates*, 1980.

This tendency was surprisingly accepted in the case of the Cubist painting *American Air Pirates* (fig.11) by Đặng Thị Khuê (1946-), who won first prize in the 1980 National Exhibition. It is unclear, however, if the award was acknowledging a disjointed war as represented by the fragmentary nature of Cubism or whether it was posing a challenge to the prohibited boundary of formalism in painting.

Nevertheless, when *American Air Pirates*, completed in 1980, is compared to southern paintings of the 1960s and 70s, it displays no eminence in style or technique. Cubism as an art movement is by no means new to the world or in South Việt-Nam, but it was then a novelty to Hà Nội's art world. As an artwork, the underlying theme in *American Air Pirates* was still locked in Socialist Realism and had it been a romantic subject, it would unlikely have been awarded the prize.

Nora Taylor, the first U.S. Doctorate in Vietnamese contemporary art history, agrees with Nguyễn Quân, a Hà Nội art critic that the changes in art styles took place during the post-war period, “when artists from Hà Nội met with their counterparts in Saigon and when the arts association admitted southern artists into the union.”³⁷ It can be added that if artists of the calibre and with the strong Socialist education of Ca Lê Thắng and Đào Minh Tri, plunged into discovering ‘unknown areas’ of Vietnamese contemporary art, then other Hà Nội artists would unquestionably have a similar impulse toward a new art.

³⁷ Nora Taylor, 2004, *Painters in Hanoi, An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art*, University of Hawaii Press, p. 80.

SOVIET INFLUENCES 1975-1985

Immediately after the war, the new regime placed significance on the development of architecture and war monuments. However, financial difficulties between 1975 and 1985 failed to deliver the expected reconstruction boom witnessed in post-war Germany, Japan and South Korea. Other factors besides poor economic management contributed to the failure of national restoration: the prolonged U.S. trade embargo, Việt-Nam's costly invasion of Cambodia in 1978, its conflict with China in 1979 and last but not least, the successive rice crop failures through all those years. It was not until the introduction of the reform policy, doi moi in 1986 that Việt-Nam experienced a boost in economic reconstruction. Throughout this period the Soviet Union was the sole foreign aid donor upon which Việt-Nam could rely and its influence became increasingly visible in the emerging architecture and war monuments.

Soviet influence on post-war architecture in Việt-Nam is exhibited most clearly in the monumental edifices of the Hồ Chí Minh Mausoleum (1975), Hồ Chí Minh Museum (1990) (fig.12) and the Soviet-Vietnamese Cultural Friendship Palace (1985) (fig.13) all located in Hà Nội. These constructions were accomplished with technical and financial assistance from the Soviet Union and Czech Republic, under the supervision of Soviet architect, Garold Gregorievich Isakovitch. Vietnamese Socialists stated their interest in preserving tradition but this was not evident by their choice to place modern monumental edifices next to heritage structures. As with one case observed, "The Hồ Chí Minh Museum sits uncomfortably next to the Một Cột (One Pillar) Pagoda."³⁸

³⁸ William S. Logan makes this comment under the picture of the building in his book *Hanoi, Biography of a City*, p. 201.



Figure 12: Hồ Chí Minh Museum, 1990, photograph by Boi Tran Nguyen Huynh.



Figure 13: Soviet-Vietnamese Cultural Friendship Palace, 1985, photograph from *Việt Nam*.

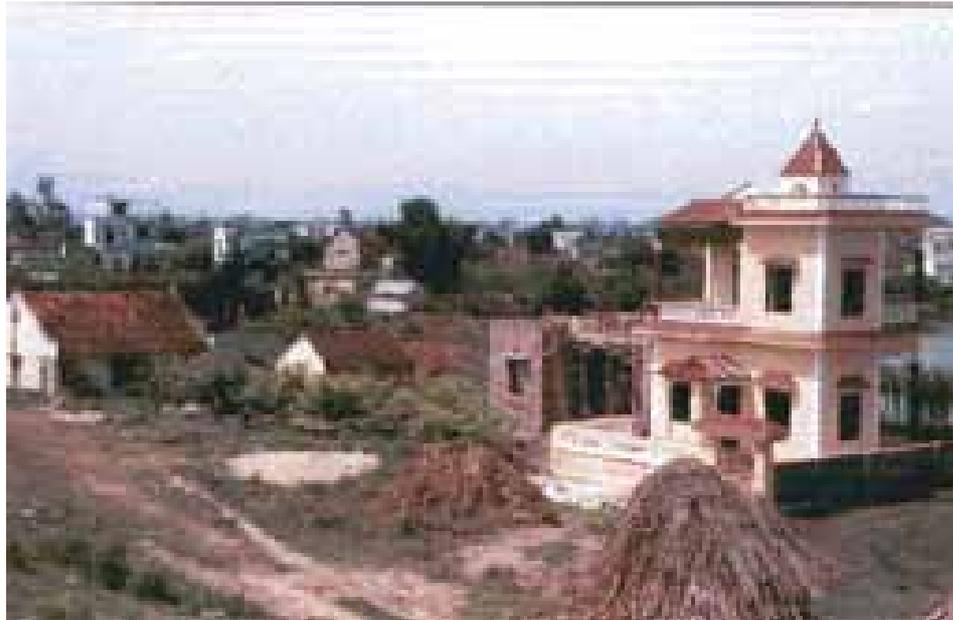


Figure 14: A Hà Nội pointed house, reminiscence of guest workers from the Soviet Union, photograph from Vinko.

Another significant agent of Soviet influence was the Vietnamese ‘guest workers’ that returned from the Soviet Union. As a way of settling Việt-Nam’s debt to the Soviet Union, Vietnamese labour was exported and part of their salary withheld to offset Việt-Nam’s Soviet balance.³⁹ By 1998 there were around 50,000 Vietnamese nationals in the Soviet Union. After completing a two or three year contract, these guest workers returned to Việt-Nam, bringing with them new social and cultural habits. The improvement in their financial status helped construct new homes, which in most cases, brought in the style of ‘pointed’ houses (fig.14).

Soviet influence can also be seen in public monuments of Socialist heroism in the post-war era. Hoàng Đạo Kính, was Vice-President of Vietnam’s Architects Association and former Director of the Planning Centre and Preservation of National Heritage. He reflected on the significance of monuments in the post-war era by questioning the relationship between monuments and nationalism:

Our ancestors never had monuments or statues on the streets and Vietnamese citizens are not yet interested in this western art form,

³⁹ D.R. SarDesai, 1998, *Vietnam Past and Present*, Westview Press, p.153.

although we understand that it is impossible for a modern city not to have monuments.⁴⁰

His statement voiced dissatisfaction with the quality of public monuments, most of which were hastily installed in the post-war period on behalf of Socialist sentiments.

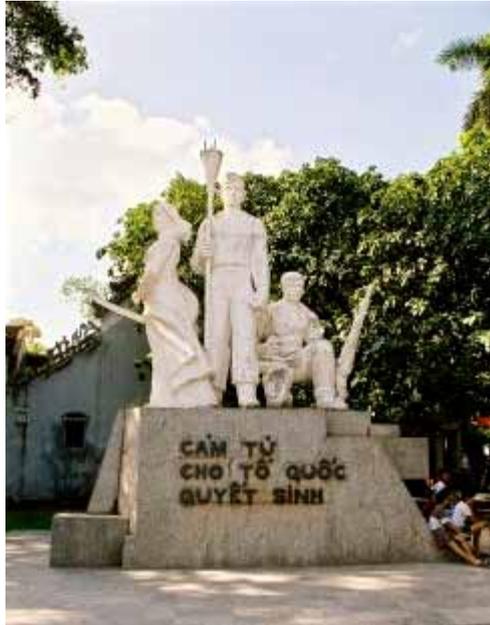


Figure 15: Nguyễn Kim Giao, *To Die Bravely for the Fatherland's Survival*, 1980s.
In the background is Bà Kiệu Temple, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh

For example, the colossal, Soviet influenced war monument, *Cẩm Tử Cho Tổ Quốc Quyết Sinh* (To Die bravely for the Fatherland's Survival) (fig.15), was controversially sited in the ancient quarter of Hà Nội, with little consideration of the location's cultural heritage. The monument is squeezed in the enclosure of Bà Kiệu Temple, thus depriving the original site of its religious significance.⁴¹ The 1990 Quang Trung Monument by Vương Học Báo (1950-) is an impressive 10-metre edifice at the base of an unassuming hill at Chi Lăng near Hà Nội. The huge statue commemorates the conqueror Quang Trung, who fended off a Chinese invasion in 1789. However, the Quang Trung sculpture is facing southward with his sword pointing in that direction but it should be aimed north in the direction of China. This led a southern historian to comment:

⁴⁰ Hoàng Đạo Kính, reported by Phạm Thanh Hà in 'Mỗi thời đại đều nên có dấu ấn của mình' (Each Era Should have Its Own Landmark), *Thể Thao Văn Hóa*, 18/12/2001, p. 32

⁴¹ The temple Đền Bà Kiệu was listed as National Heritage on 2 May 1994.

Mr. Quang Trung was appointed the task by the Party of liberating the South; therefore the big statue [of king Quang Trung] at the hill base of Đống Đa turns his face and indicates his sword to the South, in the manner of a vanguard soldier of Tôn Sĩ Nghị [the Chinese General defeated by king Quang Trung in 1789].⁴²

War monuments in Socialist Việt-Nam are normally installed on the sites of heroic events to commemorate laudable acts, but also to satisfy the administrative regionalism of most local Peoples' Committees. Each province tends to have a war monument related to a victory or a specific battle in the two Indochina wars.



Figure 16: *Ấp Bắc Memorial*, the rice fields are scared with a placard of a burning helicopter marking the former battle site, photograph by Huỳnh Vinh Thanh.

One such example is the 1998 monument in Ấp Bắc village 100 kilometres southwest of Saigon, where the Việt Cộng won a substantial guerrilla encounter in 1963. The commemoration site stretches from the road running between rice fields to a small park surrounding a monument. A series of clumsy two-dimensional placards in the shape of burning tanks and helicopters are installed in the rice fields as a reminder of past military actions and 'the American guilt' (fig.16). The main monument displays three soldiers in assault-like poses on top of a tank (fig.17). The physical strength and courage of soldiers is embodied in the *Ấp Bắc* monument through emphasised muscular masses and sculptured features. Nearby are the in-house graves of three soldiers who sacrificed their lives in battle. A retired cadre who offers incense and maintains the surrounding garden in the manner of a communal housekeeper welcomes visitors to the monuments (fig.18).

⁴² Ta Chí Đại Trường, 1999, *Những Bài Văn Sử* (The Historical Essays), Văn Học, California, p. 149



Figure 17: Nguyễn Hải, *Ấp Bắc Monument*, 1993, photograph by Huỳnh Vinh Thanh



Figure 18: Three tombs of the three martyrs in the Ấp Bắc battle, photograph by Huỳnh Vinh Thanh. The sculptor Nguyễn Hải (1933-) is a southerner who became a Việt Minh cadre and in 1954 was regrouped to the North. He graduated from the Fine Arts College of Hà Nội in 1963 and by the 1970s was considered an innovative sculptor. Hải is known for his historical themes, such as Genie Gióng or Hero Nguyễn Văn Trỗi,⁴³ that express assertive masculinity in a style characterised by exaggerated sculptural masses.

⁴³ A Việt Cộng commando attempted to assassinate Robert McNamara, the US secretary of defence 1961-1968.

The increasing number of war memorials in the late 1980s and 90s was aimed at strengthening revolutionary morale and characterised Hồ Chí Minh's dream, "to build our nation ten times more beautiful." Most monuments follow a format of advancing soldiers or determined women, accompanied by text praising 'heroic people' and 'a heroic army'. Emphasis on this political agenda is at the expense of compositional aesthetics and most monuments share a structural similarity - an obelisk crowned with a star and a relief panel depicting a battle scene behind a small group of sculptured soldiers or citizens displaying solidarity, as typified in the memorial cemetery in Long Hồ District of Vĩnh Long province (fig.19). It is one of numerous local martyr cemeteries for soldiers who fought against both the southern regime and America. The relief panel was designed to commemorate a successful battle against the French in 1947 at Giồng Dừa, with the idea of getting the community involved with their historic past. Regardless of the context of an eternal resting place, these graveyard sculptures, typically, appear too alert and vibrant.



Figure 19: Long Hồ Cemetery in Vĩnh Long Province, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

In contrast to the building of martyr cemeteries, the Socialists destroyed some old cemeteries in Saigon. A burial site at the junction of Phan Thanh Giản and Hai Bà Trưng Streets was established in colonial times on the periphery of the city as the

eternal resting place for many of the elite middle class. The Socialist authorities declared demolition necessary for the health of the local community and developed it into a park. Soon after the fall of Saigon, a garden of remembrance for the Army of the Republic of Việt-Nam, located half way between Biên Hòa and Saigon on the Biên Hòa Highway was vandalised and the commemorative bronze statue *Lamentation*, erected there a decade earlier, was removed and demolished. While erasing the 'other' collective memories of the south, a few kilometres away, on the other side of the highway, the Socialists built a revolutionary martyr memorial.

In post-war Việt-Nam Soviet influence increased, particularly through publications which were well received by a sizeable audience (fig.20). An emerging publishing industry in the post-war period was aimed at constructing a nation-wide Socialist society and to fill the gap created by confiscating pre-1975 publications. The Vietnamese import-export publisher Xunhasaba,⁴⁴ introduced art books published in the Soviet Union by Aurora Art Publishers. These books were primarily about Soviet museums and artists whose styles were associated with Socialist Realism but they also published books on major western artists, in English and Russian.⁴⁵ The early 1970s through to the 1980s saw the authorised import into North Vietnam of the Soviet art journal *TBoTrstvo*, which referenced western art and made it available to the Vietnamese community. The official magazine of the Việt-Nam Fine Arts Association, *Mỹ Thuật*, published some feature articles on overseas art and in 1982 printed a special issue on Soviet art with 48 of the 56 pages committed to it. Special issues on contemporary art from other nations were also featured but not to the same magnitude.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ <http://www.xunhasaba.com.vn/>

⁴⁵ See Appendix for the list of Russian art books imported by Xunhasaba in the 1980s.

⁴⁶ *Mỹ Thuật* (Fine Arts Magazine) n. 28 (8-2000) is for Australian art, n. 42 (35) October 2001 for Chinese art, n. 46 (36) December 2001 for Russian art; n. 60 (43) July 2002 for American art.



Figure 20: A Soviet book fair, Hồ Chí Minh City, 1984, photograph from *Việt Nam*.

Many Vietnamese graduates returned from the Soviet Union and Eastern Block, in order to stimulate revolutionary art. After Trịnh Kim Vinh (1932-) completed postgraduate study in Germany, she was appointed Head of Graphic Design at the Fine Arts College of Hồ Chí Minh City. Similarly, Nguyễn Hoàng, a southerner who regrouped to the North as a boy with his family, graduated from the Fine Arts College of Việt-Nam, then studied in the Soviet Union. Upon his return, he was appointed Vice Director of the Fine Arts University of Hồ Chí Minh City in 1991 and succeeded Nguyễn Phước Sanh, as Director. The present Vice-Director Trịnh Dũng also graduated from the Soviet Union in the 1990s. The number of Soviet and Eastern Block trained staff at the Fine Arts University of Hà Nội was higher and some were committed to establishing more distinctive careers.

Trần Lưu Hậu (1928-) graduated in theatre design from Surikov Institute in Moscow in 1962 and taught at the Fine Arts University of Hà Nội until 1989 when he retired. In comparison between his *Sewing Clothes* (1982) (fig.21) and *Flower Market* (1996) (fig.22), one can see that he shifted from realism to symbolism with freed-up brushstrokes and greater colour expression. Due to the Socialist Realist dictum of content over form, it was common in this era for Vietnamese artists to

present realistic works to national exhibitions and public displays but kept formalist and experimental works for themselves.



Figure 21: Trần Lưu Hậu, *Sewing Clothes*, 1982.



Figure 22: Trần Lưu Hậu, *Flower Market*, 1996.

Trần Lưu Hậu is one of few artists trained in the Soviet Union, who explored formalism in his later years; the majority retained their realistic styles. Of his generation, he was unique in declaring, “The difference between East and West is not the question, what is important is to express one’s emotion and for me that is the most important thing.”⁴⁷ Hậu’s endorsement of individual emotions, in lieu of accountability to the masses, was strikingly opposite to the state’s sanctioned arts policy.

⁴⁷ Trần Lưu Hậu, interviewed by Jeffrey Hantover in *Realism is Dull*, *Asian Art News*, v.1 n.2, September/October, 1991, p. 22.

TURNING TOWARDS MODERNISM

It is difficult to trace when the expression “Nghiem, Lien, Sang, Phai” began circulating in Hà Nội’s art circles. The phrase positioned four established artists as the “four pillars” and elevated them to the rank of Masters in Vietnamese painting. As examined in Chapter 3, these four artists did not align themselves with the official view but created an independent aesthetic that stood outside the propaganda-driven art system. The expression “Nghiem, Lien, Sang, Phai” was coined by both ‘the masses’ and younger art colleagues, in praise of their independence and courage. Eventually, the Party had to tolerate with that classification, as there was a need for national icons in the visual arts. In 1984, the Việt-Nam Fine Arts Association granted Nguyễn Sáng his one and only solo exhibition, at 61 years of age. In December that year, Bùi Xuân Phái was also privileged by the Association with his first and only solo exhibition that comprised of 108 oil paintings, gouaches, prints and collages. The Việt-Nam Fine Arts Museum bought three of his paintings: *Phát Lộc Street*, *Hàng Mắm Street* and *Ô Quan Chưởng*.⁴⁸ Similarly, Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm’s first solo exhibition was held in 1985 but Dương Bích Liên was deemed, “so humble that he never had a solo exhibition in his career.”⁴⁹

The Socialist government through the sanctioning of these exhibitions ironically honoured these painters, who experienced isolation or discrimination between 1954 to the early 1980s. In the past, Bùi Xuân Phái and Nguyễn Sáng participated in political issues, while Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm and Dương Bích Liên refused to align themselves with Socialist Realism. It was the art community and not Party officials who initiated their eventual recognition and endorsement as Vietnamese Modernists, with their French influences from the colonial era. The “four pillars” had studied at the Fine Arts College of Indochina, where the seed of French influence was planted. By the 1950s it had grown into a young tree and some fruits

⁴⁸ Bùi Thanh Phương & Trần Hậu Tuấn, 1998, *Bùi Xuân Phái, Life and Works*, bilingual text, Fine Arts Publishing House, Hà Nội, Việt-Nam p. 439

⁴⁹ Tô Ngọc Thành, ‘Dương Bích Liên’, *Mỹ Thuật & Đời Sống*, n. 18, extracted from Vietnam Express News 22/12/2000.

could have been harvested in the 1960s, had it not been frozen by the Socialist straightjacket. Resulting from this overdue recognition of Vietnamese modernism and despite a time lag of at least 20 years, the Vietnamese art community was reasonably satisfied because it was “better later than never.” On the other hand, this recognition did not re-assess their partition in the “Nhân Văn – Giai Phẩm” scandal and no rehabilitation of their reputations were made.

The Hồ Chí Minh awards for artistic achievement were granted for the first time in 1996, with the honour awarded to seven painters and one sculptor. They were: Nguyễn Phan Chánh, Tô Ngọc Vân, Nguyễn Đỗ Cung, Trần Văn Cẩn, Bùi Xuân Phái, Nguyễn Sáng, Diệp Minh Châu and Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm. All were elderly career artists and recognition was, “mainly for their artistic contributions and consideration of other State legal resolutions.”⁵⁰ Sadly though, only two of them were still alive to receive their acknowledgement.

When will there be a great work?

Why has Việt-Nam not produced a great work equal to the scope of two heroic wars? This remains the great question posed to the authorities, as well as to artists and critics, despite many attempts in literature and the visual arts to lay the issue to rest.⁵¹ In literature, for example, Trần Đăng Khoa (1958-) established himself as a young prodigy from Hà Nội, with two poetry books published in 1973 and 1974 respectively. Later, he enrolled into Nguyễn Du University of Writing in Hà Nội and upon graduation was mobilised into the army under the Party’s expectations that he would produce great works on historic war themes for the nation. As it turned out, the Socialist Writing University only succeeded in exhausting his talent.⁵² Similar expectations occurred in the visual arts, through the mobilisation of artists to accompany troops into combat.

⁵⁰ Vũ Giáng Hương, General Secretary of the Việt-Nam Fine Arts Association, interviewed by Mỹ Thuật (Fine Arts Magazine), n. 18-19/97, p.30-32.

⁵¹ See Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, 1991, *Văn Học Việt-Nam Dưới Chế Độ Cộng Sản* (Vietnamese Literature under Communism), Văn Nghệ, California, p.193.

⁵² Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, *Văn Học Việt-Nam dưới Chế Độ Cộng Sản* (Vietnamese Literature under Communism), p.62.

Since the war, the Fine Arts Museum of the Army in Hà Nội has held an annual art prize to commemorate the anniversary of the establishment of the army. In 2003, the first prize was 8,000,000 VND⁵³ (around 800AUD), second prize 6,000,000VND and third prize 4,000,000VND. In Hồ Chí Minh City, the financial investment is much greater. The Peoples' Committee of Hồ Chí Minh City annually allocates around 100,000,000 to 120,000,000VND (10,000 to 12,000AUD) toward an art endowment on Revolutionary War themes. A Fine Arts Association jury adjudicates all sketches and nominates the rate of endowment, from a maximum of 20,000,000VND (2,000AUD) to a minimum of 7,000,000VND⁵⁴. The Association also organises field trips to former battlefields and revolutionary establishments, hoping that artists will be stimulated to create something with the status of a 'Guernica' for Việt-Nam. In an interview published in *Thể Thao & Văn Hoá* (Sport & Culture Review), Vice-General Secretary of the Việt-Nam Fine Arts Association, Huy Oánh stated:

Apparently, in the recent campaign for the theme of Revolutionary history and armed forces in art, there were commissions, but there has not yet been a work that is up to the level of the heroic war that our whole nation passed through. Obviously, we owe a debt to history, a big debt.⁵⁵

Nguyễn Thanh Châu, chairman of the Hồ Chí Minh City Branch of the Việt-Nam Fine Arts Association bitterly affirmed:

There is no interest in historic and revolutionary war art. It is an imbalance in art creation and appreciation.⁵⁶

Seemingly, the authorities have been and still are obsessed with glorifying war art but their dreams are not yet realised. For instance, the Soviet Nghệ Tĩnh event in 1930 is regarded as the first landmark of the Party's leadership and became the

⁵³ A monthly salary of a tertiary lecturer is between 1,200,000 to 1,500,000VND (120 and 150 AUD in 2003).

⁵⁴ Statistics from the Fine Arts Association of Hồ Chí Minh City branch. Minh Loan and Nguyễn Xuân Đông provided through Uyên Huy.

⁵⁵ Đạm Thủy, reported, 'Những Vấn Đề của Mỹ Thuật Đường Đại' (Problems of Contemporary Art), *ThểThao & Văn Hóa*, n. 62, published 03August 2001, p. 33

⁵⁶ Nguyễn Thanh Châu, 1998 'Mỹ Thuật trong Thời Kỳ Đổi Mới' (Fine Arts in the Doi Moi Era), *Saigon Giải Phóng*, 7 January, p.2.

topic of many paintings and public monuments. The most dramatic artwork of this period is a four-panelled (160 x 320 cm) lacquer painting titled *Soviet Nghệ Tĩnh*, (fig.23) dated 1958, a collaborative work by six artists: Nguyễn Đức Nùng (1909-1983), Trần Đình Thọ (1919-), Phạm Văn Đôn (1918-), Nguyễn Văn Ty (1917-1992), Huỳnh Văn Thuận (1921-) and Nguyễn Sỹ Ngọc (1919-1990). The painting depicts a rebellious crowd of rural workers bearing the simplest of weapons, such as bamboo sticks, sickles and rakes. There is a cut line between ‘us’ and ‘the enemy’ as seen in the mass of angry protestors surging toward their reduced-in-scale adversaries, who are pushed back to the distant corner of the painting. Architectural features include a village gate, a watchtower, communal house and a perimeter wall, all are portrayed over-emphasised, with the eggshell and gold leaf decorative lacquer technique. This ornamentation distracts viewers’ attention from the protesting crowd and the pictorial composition. For instance, in the crowded front row, individuals hold aloft three red flags, the poses have been carefully studied but their symbolic leadership is dominated by an abundant use of red to anxiously depict a ‘revolutionary spirit.’ Such graphic simplification is at the expense of a more dynamic compositional resolution. In order to balance the flickering ornamentation of the village gate, watchtower and communal house, the artists distributed bright spots on the low wall in the painted foreground, thus increasing the number of decorative distractions. Vietnamese art history is not in the habit of reciting anecdotes but did one of the six artists make a wrong decision in need of correction? Or as the saying goes, “too many cooks spoil the broth”.

Soviet Nghệ Tĩnh was initially commissioned as a national gift to the former Soviet Union to commemorate 40 years of the October Revolution,⁵⁷ a political move in praise of the relationship between the two nations. In that same year, this group of artists produced a scrupulous copy of the original, now displayed in the Fine Arts Museum of Hà Nội. Việt-Nam’s Socialists believe that the *Soviet Nghệ Tĩnh* painting is a significant work, representative of a historic event, to the extent, that

⁵⁷ Information was given from staff member of the Fine Arts Museum of Hà Nội.

yet again, it was replicated and displayed at the Museum of Soviet Nghệ Tĩnh Movement in Vinh City of Nghệ An province (fig.24). This copy follows the sketch of the original but varies in colours and it comprises of six panels, instead of the original four.



Figure 23: *Soviet Nghệ Tĩnh*, 1958, collaborative work by Nguyễn Đức Nùng, Trần Đình Thọ, Phạm Văn Đôn, Nguyễn Văn Ty, Huỳnh Văn Thuận and Nguyễn Sỹ Ngọc.



Figure 24: *Soviet Nghệ Tĩnh*, copy, Museum of Soviet Nghệ Tĩnh Movement in Vinh City, photograph by Huỳnh Vinh Thanh.



Figure 25: artist unknown, *Soviet Nghệ Tĩnh*, oil copy of the lacquer painting *Soviet Nghệ Tĩnh*, Fine Arts Museum, Hà Nội. This copy is displayed at the Museum of Revolution, Hà Nội.

Soviet Nghệ Tĩnh was copied once again for the Museum of Revolution in Hà Nội, this time in oil by an unknown artist (fig.25). Unfortunately, it is a clumsy copy without fidelity to the original. Furthermore, no information accompanies the painting and curious visitors are left to wonder.⁵⁸ The example of the *Soviet Nghệ Tĩnh* painting indicates that the authorities put such a great focus on collective identity that when they find a work describing the masses' power, they have no hesitation in duplicating the work for various venues, resulting in the intentional forfeiting of its originality.

Another example that can be cited here is the recently installed public monument *To Die Bravely for the Fatherland's Survival* in Hà Nội in December 2004. The work commemorates the uprising of Hà Nội in 1946. In comparison to the similarly titled *To Die Bravely for the Fatherland's Survival* (fig.15, p.291) created two decades ago, the new one is not much different. The drive for 'great works reflecting the great history' is in vain.

⁵⁸ Information is taken by my research assistant Huỳnh Vinh Thanh on 19 August, 2004.



Figure 26: *Die Bravely for the Fatherland's Survival*, photograph by Boi Tran Nguyen Huynh

In conversations and interviews, I raised the awkward question to Vietnamese artists, “When will there be a great work?” Some thought that it would take more time than we could imagine because the government did not provide sufficient investment, while others mentioned State censorship as an obstacle. The split in Việt-Nam’s resources during the partition of 1954-1975 was cited as a reason why the nation could not afford great works to equal her impressive war record.⁵⁹ In addition to the loss of talent that fled or drowned at sea, when the nation was finally united, the north systematically attempted to suppress what was a flourishing art community in the south.

I would argue that the split in national resources is one of many reasons, of which the most significant is the methodology. Socialist Realism’s authoritarian stance emphasised content at the expense of form and placed so many restrictions on artists that they lived in constant fear of breaching guidelines. To ensure that their work stayed clear of the “unauthorised zone,” artists had to apply self-censorship by closing off their minds and derive inspiration from subject matter which guaranteed a safe niche. Fear fossilised the imagination and artists became habituated to the situation. Like a bird used to a cage, it forgets how to fly.

⁵⁹ I credit this answer to Võ Quốc Linh, a poet living in Sydney and a member of Tiền Vệ Group.

War themes in art are not new and artists direct their efforts to distinct aspects of it. However, Party guidelines instructed, Vietnamese artists not to engage in the ruthless face of war and the expression of mourning or loss was not endorsed, consequently, artists were constrained emotionally as well as mentally.

Reform policy

The victory in 1975 did not realise Hồ Chí Minh's wish in his testament, "to build the nation ten times more beautiful". Instead, the reality in the 1980s was tragic:

Inflation is running at more than 700% a year, and electricity prices rose by 1,000% last year. Many factories work at a third of their capacity because of power shortages; more than one worker in ten is underemployed or has no job at all. Vietnam's transport and communications are in a disastrous state; roads are bad and telephones few. The bureaucracy is in disarray and much of it is corrupt.⁶⁰

Under pressure of China's reform and Soviet Perestroika, Việt-Nam had no reason to isolate itself in its stagnant economy. The 6th National Party Congress in 1986 released its new economic Reform Policy (*doi moi*), outlining the principles whereby, "individual capitalist activities would be directed into the Socialist orbit through various forms of the State capitalist economy, by means of its control and links with State run and collective economies."⁶¹ In other words, the state-controlled centralised economy was gradually turned into a market system, witnessed by the privatisation of state run corporations and abandonment of collective farms.

The reform policy was aimed at encouraging international investment to help national reconstruction. In the initial phase, Hồ Chí Minh City, with its active pre-1975 role in commerce, was particularly predisposed to business adventures. The second gain of *doi moi* was a rise in living standards, accompanied by the appearance of local and international consumer products in the market place. To assist relatives, commodities were frequently sent to Việt-Nam by overseas

⁶⁰ Anonymous, 'Perestroika, *doi moi*, shall we call the Whole thing off', *The Economist* (US), March 5 1988, v. 306, n. 7540, p.35 (2)

⁶¹ Report of the Sixth Party Congress, p.14

Vietnamese (Việt-khieu) throughout the 1980s and in the 1990s the economy really took off with lots of investment from expatriates. Shipping agents inundated Việt-Nam with imported goods and the nation was overwhelmed by the arrival of international companies. Competition grew between Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City for foreign commerce and the benefits of a growing tourist industry. Whereas Hà Nội approached business from a bureaucratic Socialist view, Hồ Chí Minh City displayed an understanding of western trading practices.⁶²

These changes gradually built a new society in the later phase of the post-war era and significantly influenced the arts in terms of styles, market and motivations that will be investigated in the last chapter.

Conclusion

In the name of ideological triumph and nationalism, Vietnamese contemporary art from 1975 onwards experienced great and unprecedented turbulence in artistic expressions. The Socialist victory over the south witnessed the introduction of Socialist Realism and the imposition of art for humanity's sake, with images of peasants, workers and soldiers as subjects for a new utopian society.

Socialist Realism reinforced the role of a collective identity and the arrival of Soviet influences on the scene in the south was formally sanctioned. Publications aimed toward de-colonisation, particularly in cultural matters were mainly written by the Party leaders: Phạm Văn Đồng, Trường Chinh, Lê Duẩn and articles written by Hồ Chí Minh were republished repeatedly, to help fill the deserted State bookshops.

The north introduced special administrative measures to deconstruct neo-colonialism, a process that effectively stripped the South of its life and colour. An increased revolutionary ambience transformed the southern environment but greater communication between the 'two' Việt-Nams clandestinely introduced former southern artistic adventures to the art community in the north.

⁶² Anonymous, 'Still Divided', *the Economist* (US), April 4, 1992, v323 n7754, p.40

Southern artists fell into the 'losers' category after the fall of Saigon and despite the vibrancy of an existing art world, Socialist Realism rejected most of the talent. Subsequently, artists departed en masse for foreign lands.

On the other hand, over 30 years of persistence from some of Hà Nội's leading dissident artists eventually paid off in the mid 1980s, through State sponsored solo exhibitions for Nguyễn Sáng, Bùi Xuân Phái and Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm. However, recognition did not mean re-evaluation of their involvement in the Nhân Văn – Giai Phẩm scandal of 1956-57. Had it done so, it would have questioned Socialist Realism's role in providing the foundations for most allegations.

Socialist Realism dominated the arts until the end of the 1980s and hindered the government's request to produce great works about the wars the nation had won. But as long as war is seen in terms of national heroism at the expense of suffering or tragedy this call will remain unfulfilled. The dissipation of Socialist Realism began, not only because artists grew weary and suspicious of its imperatives and propaganda but also for its failure to deliver any great works. This would be attested to in the last decade of the twentieth century when Việt-Nam was opened up to the world and exposed to the influences of international art.