# Out of The Mould:

# Contemporary Sculptural Ceramics

# in Vietnam

Submitted for the award of Doctor of Philosophy

by

Ann R. Proctor

University of Sydney

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Nguyễn Manh Thiệu’s pottery, Phù Lãng

# Abstract

‘Out of the Mould: Contemporary Sculptural Ceramics in Vietnam’ is a study of the current practice of sculptural ceramics in Hà Nội, Vietnam and its historical antecedents within Vietnam and in the West. It examines the transition from a craft based practice to an art practice in some areas of ceramic practice in Hà Nội during the twentieth and early twenty first century. The theoretical basis for the thesis centres on Alőis Riegl's writings, especially *Stilfragen* (*Problems of Style*), 1893, in which he makes a close chronological examination of stylistic changes in various media, while intentionally disregarding any hierarchy within artistic disciplines. This is considered an appropriate model for the study of Vietnamese ceramics as the thesis proposes that, in recent years, ceramics has once more resumed its place as one of the major art forms in Vietnam. This status is in contrast to its relegation to a 'decorative', as opposed to a 'fine art', form in the discourse of the French colonial era. As background, the thesis examines the history of sculptural ceramics in Vietnam and discusses what is currently known of ceramic practice and the lineages of potters in particular villages famous for their ceramic works in the area around Hà Nội. The transition in ceramics practice is discussed in terms of the effect of changing conditions for the education of ceramicists, as well as the effect of other institutional structures, the economic changes as reflected in the art market and exhibitions structure and sociological changes. The role which ceramics has played in the emergence of installation art in Vietnam is also examined.

# Preface

This thesis owes a considerable debt of gratitude to many who have encouraged the research that has been involved. It has been a particular delight to explore the pottery villages of Vietnam and get to know many of the ceramic sculptors discussed in this thesis. Their willingness to share their knowledge and histories has been an inspiration. My supervisor, Professor John Clark, has been extremely generous with his time, knowledge and encouragement. I am also extremely grateful to other colleagues, both in Sydney and beyond, who have contributed in their various ways to outcome of this thesis. Finally, my family have been long-suffering in their acceptance of an extended period during which I have been preoccupied with what, for me, has been all absorbing subject matter.

There are many friends and Vietnamese language teachers who have helped enormously with translations and have been extremely patient with numerous requests for help with the Vietnamese language. While errors remain my responsibility, I have made great efforts to check and correct Vietnamese transliterations and translations from French into English.

Vietnamese diacritical marks are used on all Vietnamese words within the text and in captions where the correct diacritics are known. This practice is intended to enable a correct identification of the subject matter. Quotes from English or French references, in which Vietnamese diacritics have not been used, retain the original form of the text.

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# Introduction

A ceramic garden lamp, rather surrealistic in form, resides in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in Hà Nội. It was made in 1994 by the artist-potter Nguyễn Trọng Đoan (b.1942). The garden lamp or *đèn vườn* is 70 cm tall and is made of brown, glazed terracotta.(fig. 1) Its form marks a rupture with previous lamps made by countless generations of potters in Vietnam. Nguyễn Trọng Đoan was commissioned to make the lamp by the Association of Architects. This type of patronage is not, in itself, a new phenomenon, as numerous lamp-stands exist in public collections and on the altars of temples throughout the country and were, like this one, made on commission. However, those earlier lamp-stands are part of a continuity of form and style throughout centuries of high fired ceramic production, in which fine wares were donated to religious buildings as commemorative pieces or to ensure an appropriate accumulation of merit.

Nguyễn Trọng Đoan's lamp, on the other hand, stands apart from the high fired wares, whose history is associated with the introduction of Chinese kiln technology in the early years of the common era, and from the blue and white wares of the fourteenth century onwards, that again have ties to introduced Chinese technology. In contrast to the glassy surface of the blue and white or enamelled wares made in high temperature kilns, the surface of this lamp glows with the warm brown tones of everyday pots produced for general use throughout the countryside since time immemorial.

An exhibition of Đoan's lamps and other ceramics, *Lotus on Fire*, was held in 1997, in what was one of the earliest installations of ceramics shown in a commercial art gallery in Hà Nội.[1] A video of that exhibition shows a similar lamp, now part of a commemorative installation in the city of Nha Trang – the *Tương Đia Chến Thắng* or *Freedom Monument* 1996 (fig.2) – erected to commemorate the 1975 victory of the re-unification of the country. The eight ceramic lamps that are placed around the central garden of this monument are made in varying forms that have references to the mix of ethnic groups which makes up the modern Vietnamese nation. Taken out of the monumental context, one would regard these lamps, like

[1] *Lotus on Fire* was held at Tràng An Gallery (now defunct) in Hà Nội in 1997. A video of the exhibition installation and opening was made by Nguyễn Xuân Tiệp, former director of Tràng An Gallery and at the time of writing, Vice Director of the National Museum of Fine Arts in Hà Nội.

the one in the Museum of Fine Arts, as surrealistic in style, especially compared to the defiantly socialist realist style of the main figures of the enormous main pillar made by the sculptor, Tạ Quang Bạo (b.1941).

Thus this lamp has a form that both resonates with the past and points to a new venture in Vietnamese ceramics. Đoan's ceramics, like those of other contemporary practitioners in and around Hà Nội, reflect changes in politics, economics and institutional structures in Vietnam and the beginning of a convergence between centuries of local ceramics practice and contemporary global art practice. While, in the past, exogenous and endogenous influences have impacted on the form and style of Vietnamese ceramics, the arts in Vietnam are currently at a point where a re-established nation is reacting to international influences in a way that has not been possible prior to this point in history. What are the specific conditions that caused this rupture in the style and presentation of ceramics to occur? This question is central to this thesis – why have a certain number of Vietnamese, working in ceramic sculpture, broken the mould?

The appearance of a small group of artist-potters who work outside the pottery village system but have chosen ceramics as their medium of artistic expression is a phenomenon of the last two decades. In 2001, a book published by the Fine Art Association of Vietnam detailed the work of twenty-five male and female members of that society working as ceramic artists.[2] This number continues to grow and it is the work of these contemporary Vietnamese potters, working in sculptural ceramics, that will be examined and discussed in reference to an historical context and in terms of the conditions existing today that have made certain breaks with past practices possible. What are the conditions that have enabled this efflorescence of pottery as an art practice in Vietnam? In my opinion, there are three main areas in which conditions have changed: the philosophy of art practice generally, economic changes and institutional changes.

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[2] Ngô Dõan Kinh, (ed.) *Gốm Việt Nam Hiện Đại*, 2001

## Theoretical Basis

In order to theoretise the issues involved in an analysis of the position of contemporary ceramic sculpture in Vietnam, the writings of Aloïs Riegl, and to some extent those of John Whitmore, George Kubler and Homi Bhabha, will be applied. The theoretical issues involved in this research centre around questions of the nature of tradition and style and what it is that is conveyed by the use and re-interpretation of particular modes of artistic expression. The specific issues that will be investigated are those involved in an attempt by the ceramic artists to reconcile the traditional and contemporary and the ways in which ideas of national and traditional are employed. These issues are specifically addressed in first and final chapters.

Chapter 1, in particular, focuses on Reigl's model for the development of style.[3] Whitmore, in looking at Vietnamese culture, has suggested a particular methodology that involves looking at the way concepts change.[4] He has examined this transformation through an analysis of what is integral, and thus less susceptible to change, and what is peripheral, and therefore more susceptible to change. This approach meshes well with Riegl's analysis of changes in style. While Riegl deals primarily with formal aspects of change, the approach recommended by Whitmore takes account of beliefs and meanings that attach to modes of expression and are, it is argued, an important aspect for the present generation of artists working in Vietnam today. The author considers Riegl's ideas to be valuable in an examination of sculptural ceramics, as his analysis of art objects did not draw a distinction between fine art and decorative art.

Sculpture has been an important art mode throughout the history of the people who now occupy the modern nation of Vietnam. A preference for works in three-dimensional form is evident in the prevalence of sculpture in wood, stone, bronze and also in ceramics. Although historically sculptural ceramics have formed a very small percentage of the ceramic output from this area, they constitute an important component. Sculptures made from clay have been used from the prehistoric period to the present as grave goods, religious figures, architectural

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[3] Alőis Riegl, *Stilfragen (Problems of Style: Foundations for a History of Ornament)*, 1992. Written originally in German in 1893, an English translation was published in 1992.

[4] John K.Whitmore, 'Foreign influences and the Vietnamese Cultural Core: a discussion of the pre-modern period,' in Truong Buu Lam, *Borrowings and Adaptations in Vietnamese Culture*, 1987, p. 47

ornament, toys and as art works. Furthermore, in many instances during this lengthy history, the ornamentation of functional ceramic articles seems to have given priority to the sculptural, rather than functional, aspects of the piece. The two modalities of ceramics, that of the functional pot and the three dimensional sculpture, appear to have been less distinct within the corpus of Vietnamese ceramics than in many other societies. This aspect is explored in the analysis of sculptural ceramics in Vietnam in Chapter 3.

The current group of Vietnamese sculptural potters seems to have taken the various forms of functional pots as a starting point for a playful exploration of their associations which are then expressed in a creative and imaginative way. The engagement with modernism and post-modernism in the twentieth century has further influenced ceramic sculptors who have used clay as a vehicle to express individuality of style, as well as emotional or psychological states. From the earliest time figural sculptures have been imbued with meanings, whether for apotropaic purposes or to attract beneficial powers or events. However, in the twentieth century, what was common societal knowledge has been augmented by a highly individualistic level of association in sculptural work.

## Definition of sculptural ceramics

Sculptural ceramics, for the purposes of this study, can be defined as ceramic material – terracotta, stoneware or porcelain – that has been worked in a sculptural manner, whereby the functionality of the object, if there is any, is of a secondary purpose. For contemporary artists working in the medium of clay, the medium is part of their artistic repertoire, rather than their output being limited by the use of clay as a medium. Sculptural ceramics produced since the later half of the twentieth century in Vietnam demonstrate that the expressive qualities and creative possibilities of clay and glaze have been uppermost in the mind of the artists. The works are conceptually conceived as the form of the objects, or their combinations, are used to express abstract ideas. Sculptural ceramics have either been created with a purely sculptural intent from the outset – in other words, the artist or sculptor has worked in clay, rather than wood, stucco or metal – or when the sculptural impact of the ceramic work predominates over the functional.

## Artisans and Artists

Styles and aesthetic preferences in ceramic sculpture reflect a combination of influences. Power, technology and trade have all played their part. Throughout the history the area now known as Vietnam, artists and artisans have incorporated influences from other cultures, such as those from China, the Khmer Empire and, more recently, France, Russia and other parts of the Western world. These influences have not always been in one direction. Trade has had an effect on Vietnamese ceramics, which can be seen in the pieces produced to suit certain markets, both domestically and externally. However, it appears that at various times in Vietnam's history, potters have particularly sought to emphasize uniquely local aspects of their work. Such is the case today, where, in a post-colonial, post-modern situation, artist-potters are anxious to be part of an international art world but, at the same time, wish to find a distinctly national, Vietnamese voice in their expression.

Vietnam has been profoundly influenced by French educational practices and the establishment of institutions such as national collections of art. The introduction of these colonial institutions will be discussed in the second section of Chapter 3. As a background to this, an international perspective is given to the changes that have occurred in Vietnam in Chapter 2, in which the changes in ceramic practice that have seen the development of sculptural ceramics in the west are discussed. The introduction of French institutions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in addition to the more recent engagement with global art practices, have altered the way in which sculptural ceramics are practiced and viewed, both in Vietnam and internationally.

Currently in Vietnam, many thousands of artisans are involved in the manufacture of utilitarian ceramics. In northern Vietnam, which is the particular focus of this study, pottery enterprises are generally located in villages where ceramic production has been practiced for hundreds of years.[5] Chapter 4 explores what is known about the villages that have been significant in ceramic production, the lineages of potters working in these villages and the emergence of the artisan potter. Amongst these artisans, there has always been a small group for whom the aesthetic aspects of their ceramics are paramount. The institution of national

[5] This study uses the current geographic divisions for Vietnam, which is divided into northern, central and southern regions. The northern area extends from the border with China down to the province of Thanh Hoa.

awards, competitions and exhibitions in the past century has aimed to encourage master potters to pursue technical and artistic excellence in their work. Chapter 5 explores the differences that have occurred in the ways in which these works are now circulated and the apparatus that has grown around the practice of ceramic sculpture.

Historically, there has been a difference in perception between the way in which art and craft are viewed in Vietnam and the way they have been distinguished in the west. Prior to the introduction of the western dichotomy between art and craft, introduced by the French through their education system and in the promotion of products from their colony, the Vietnamese did not have such a distinction. In addition, pottery practices in the north of Vietnam, in particular, were dismissed by the French as being second rate and derivative of Chinese ceramics in style and technology. Many exported Vietnamese wares were perceived by as being Chinese ceramics until well into the twentieth century, when scholarship and archaeology rectified the mistaken identities of pieces such as a fine vase in the Topkapi Saray in Istanbul. At the same time, however, there was an acknowledgement, at least amongst some French writers, that within the Vietnamese community, ceramics was ranked first amongst the 'crafts'.[6] In recent years, there has been a retrieval of lost Vietnamese ceramic traditions and it is this growing area of creative activity that has been a focus of this research. A major theme of this thesis is that the emergence of contemporary ceramic sculpture in Vietnam is a vehicle whereby artists can reclaim the pre-colonial position of ceramics within their society. This occurs through their choice of motif and style of expression as well as the way in which these works are now circulated. The practice of ceramics in Vietnam, in the traditional context, was viewed as an art rather than a craft practice.

## Issues of Tradition and Modernity

Almost every writer and practitioner of art in Vietnam will refer to a dilemma facing Vietnamese artists: that is, how can they engage with contemporary art issues in what is an increasingly globalized world, without losing their sense of national identity? Or, in other

[6] Pierre Pasquier from *L'Annam d'autrefois*, (original date unknown) Triare, M., *Indochina through Texts*, 2000, p.62, (no date given for the original text)

words, how to negotiate the modern while at the same time preserving the local – their Vietnameseness?

While this particular problem is also an issue for artists in many other Asian countries, it has a particular resonance for the Vietnamese. For centuries they have struggled to maintain, or gain, their independence, at great cost and through amazing effort. In art practices therefore, why should they either persist with a French style – the style associated with the colonizer – or adopt whole-heartedly modern art as it has been defined by the West? The final chapter of this thesis addresses some of the issues involved in the way in which some artists negotiate a position which both maintains national identity and engages with the international contemporary. This is discussed through an analysis of installation art as it is practiced in Southeast Asia and in Vietnam, particularly in relation to ceramic sculpture. The notion of tradition is certainly problematic, being loaded with ambiguities and, in Vietnam especially, with political connotations. It is not inherently an antonym for the modern. Tradition can evoke the authentic, and in one sense desirable, while on the other hand can convey a sense of limitation and deficiency. [7] Some contemporary ceramic sculptors have used installation art as a post-modern format but included references to ritual practices from the past.

[7] R. G. Knapp, Asia's Old Dwellings: Tradition, Resilience and Change, 2003, p. 4

# Chapter 1: Themes in Vietnamese Ceramic Sculpture

*the most pressing problem that confronts historians of the decorative arts today is to reintegrate the historical thread that had been severed into a thousand pieces*[1]

## Introduction

Since the 1980s, there has been a world-wide burgeoning in the use of ceramics as a sculptural material: it is used in installation art, environmental works, feminist art and sculpture. During the same period in Vietnam, a country with a long history of ceramic production, a small group of studio potters working in sculptural ceramics has come into prominence. This period in Vietnam coincides with a boom in artistic activity following the end of the Second Indochina War and post *đôi mới* or the period of economic renovation which commenced in 1986.[2]

Three male potters- Nguyễn Trọng Đoan, b.1942, Nguyễn Bảo Tòan, b.1950 and Nguyễn Khắc Quân, b.1962, are at the forefront of an expanding group who work as contemporary studio potters in and around Hà Nội. While they all produce utilitarian ceramics as well, it is their work in sculptural ceramics that has set them apart from other contemporary artists in Hà Nội. They are the vanguard of a small but growing group of artist potters who produce sculptural works. The work of this nascent group of artist potters occurs at an intersection between dramatic and rapid changes within Vietnam in the field of ceramics production and world wide changes in the use of ceramic material in art practice.

One of the frequently stated preoccupations of Vietnamese artists in the 1990's (including those working in sculptural ceramics) is how to maintain their traditions, while at the same time engaging in the art of the contemporary, international art world. This chapter will examine the first part of this problem, that is, the concepts involved and the histories associated with elements viewed as traditional aspects of Vietnamese culture. An attempt will be made to identify the salient periods of Vietnamese history and their associated modes of

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[1] Alőis Riegl, Stilfragen (Problems of Style: Foundations for a History of Ornament), 1992, p.12

[2] The Second Indochina War is known as the American-Vietnam War within Vietnam and outside Vietnam is also known as the Vietnam War.

expression which are employed by contemporary ceramists as elements of their artistic past that exemplify 'Vietnameseness'.

In the work of each of the contemporary ceramic artists under discussion, there are instances where they have chosen to utilize styles or motifs from the past. It would appear that these motifs or styles are selected because they signify that the art is Vietnamese, as well as indicating a continuity of 'Vietnamese art' that reaches far back into the past. On the one hand, the selection of a particular motif or style accentuates the concept of persistence of a Vietnamese tradition, while at the same time it also negates large periods of Vietnamese history during which the nation was dominated by other cultures, particularly the Chinese. While the persistence of a Vietnamese tradition, even in adversity, is of prime consideration for these artists, it would appear that the selection of a certain motif or style is dependent on the associated meanings. The tradition is reinvented using styles and motifs that underscore a connection to selected periods of Vietnamese history.

The ceramic sculptors appear to have chosen to emphasize periods of their history prior to Vietnam's colonization by the Chinese Han Empire in 111 BCE and immediately after the country was liberated from Chinese rule in 938 CE.[3] During the later period, under the Lý (1009-1225) and then Trần (1225-1400) dynasties, the art and architecture of the communal halls, *đình,* and Buddhist temples, c*hùa,* took on what they regard as a distinctively Vietnamese expression.

## Riegl and Motifs in Vietnamese Art

The art historical concepts of Alőis Riegl (1858-1905) would appear to provide an ideal model for this study, in view of his concern with the question of the nature of tradition and continuity. There are more recent theorists who have written in the area of style; in particular Sir Ernst Gombrich in *The Sense of Order: A study in the psychology of decorative art*, 1998, Oleg Grabar in *The Mediation of Ornament*, 1992 and James Trilling in *The Language of Ornament*, 2001. Nevertheless, all three of these theorists acknowledge that their own work is

[3] Nguyễn Khắc Viện, *Vietnam A Long History,* Hà Nội, 1999, p.24. 938 was the date of the Bạch Đằng naval victory over the Chinese.

to a large extent underpined by that of Riegl. As Trilling asserts, Riegl's *Stillfragen* is 'still the defintive work'. [4]

Gombrich's analysis is based on the psychology of perception. His corpus is largely concerned with post-Renaissance western art and rests on notions of beauty. A problem which arises when applying his theory to Vietnamese examples is that perception is ultimately culturally determined, as is the notion of beauty.

Grabar's theory is underpinned by Riegl's ideas except for the latter's culturally deterministic position, which was one of the reasons that caused Riegl's theory to be ignored for such a long time, especially after the events of World War 11. Grabar's *The Mediation of Ornament* discusses ornament in terms of beauty and pleasure, for which he uses the neologisms 'calliphoric' and 'terpnopoietic'.[5] Grabar asserts that 'it is pernicious to view ornament as a bundle of historical influences'[6], as Riegl's diagnostic method proposes, but accedes that 'contemporary nationalism may return to it'[7], which is precisely the case with contemporary art in Vietnam. Grabar states that he is not interested in the formal development of motifs in an historical sense but in the 'ontological one of an apparent ambiguity between what we see and the meanings we usually give or can give to what we see'.[8] Thus he employs a semiotic analysis using Jacques Derrida's *Grammatologie*. [9] In views of Riegl's avoidance of the use of meanings, I have also chosen to apply a semiotic approach in discussing the reasons for the use of certain motifs in Vietnamese art.

Both Grabar, whose account is largely based on Islamic art, and Trilling's *The Language of Ornament* are concerned with the development of typologies of ornament rather than the development of styles and the way in which those styles change, thus for that reason, as well as those outlined in this chapter, I have chosen to concentrate upon the analysis of style as proposed by Alőis Riegl.

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[4] James Trilling, *The Language of Ornament*, 2001, p. 183

[5] Oleg Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament*, 1992, p.59

[6] Oleg Grabar, 1992, p.39

[7] Oleg Grabar, 1992, p.39

[8] Oleg Grabar, 1992, p.12

[9] Oleg Grabar, 1992, p.61

Riegl's earliest theoretical work, *Stilfragen (Problems of Style)* 1893, charts changes in decorative ornament from Egyptian antiquities to Western medieval times. *Stilfragen* and his subsequent book, *Spätrömische Kunstindustrie* (*Late Roman Art Industry*)1901, are the two works that have the most relevance to this particular discussion of Vietnamese art, as it is in these two works that Riegl develops his formalist approach to the motif as a conveyor of a stylistic continuum and the notion of *Kunstwollen* as the underlying feature that drives changes in the motif.[10] Furthermore, his writings, in what was considered to be a 'scientific' approach, resonate with the Marxist style of analysis in some recent Vietnamese writings on their ceramic production.

Riegl, writing in Vienna in the late nineteenth early twentieth century where he was curator at the Austrian Museum of Art and Industry and a lecturer at the University of Vienna, was a contemporary of Warburg, Wőfflin, Freud and Klimt. Throughout his works he was concerned with three major questions:

i. Why are things made the way they are?
ii. Why do things made by human beings in different parts of the world and in different times differ over time and place? and
iii. What is the nature of continuity and tradition in art?

Through a positivistic, historical approach he sought to develop an overriding theory of style that was independent of the specific culture in which it was created and that was not subject to the judgement of present day taste. That he considered it was important to find a unifying thread is evident from *Stilfragen* in which he states '…the most pressing problem that confronts historians of the decorative arts today is to reintegrate the historical thread that had been severed into a thousand pieces.'[11] This aim was expressed in *An Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts*, papers written between 1887-1899, as 'We must no longer concentrate on individual works of art or on individual species of art, but on the elements with whose clearer

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[10] Among Alőis Riegl's written works are Alorientalische Teppiche, (Antique Oriental Carpets) 1891, Stilfragen (Problems of Style: Foundations for a History of Ornament) 1893, Spätrömische Kunstindustrie (Late Roman Art Industry) 1901, Das Holländische Gruppenporträt (The Dutch Group Portrait) 1902, Spätrőmisch oder oreintalisch? (Late Roman or Oriental?), 1902 and Die Historiche Grammatik der Bildeden Künste, (An Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts), the later being a collection of papers of unpublished matter written between 1887-1899 that were published posthumously in 1966.

[11] Alőis Riegl, *Stilfragen* (*Problems of Style*), 1992, p.12

analysis and understanding a true unifying coping stone of the theoretical structure of art history will be built.'[12]

There are important ways in which aspects of Riegl's approach have aided this study of Vietnamese contemporary ceramics in particular and Vietnamese art in general. Firstly, in his study of ornament, he raises the status of architecture and craft as appropriate areas for art history. This foregrounding of media other than painting and sculpture as they are constituted in the history of Western art is particularly relevant to Vietnam, where architecture and crafts have been the principal carriers of visual culture, rather than painting. Riegl's research took into account the vast numbers of anonymous works in the artistic legacy of Europe and West Asia as being fundamental to how particular preferences and styles develop. Secondly, in basing his work on a detailed chronological history, Riegl signals the value of close empirical analysis in tracing the continuing transformation of styles, which frequently occurs as the result of the interaction between various cultures. The benefit of the empirical aspect of his approach can be seen in archeological studies in Vietnam: in such studies an examination of motifs across media and time has contributed to a better understanding of the proto-historical period of the Vietnamese past.[13]

Without some sort of empirically based chronology of design, the complex interactions between cultures could not be addressed. There may be a danger of misinterpretation if such a chronology is taken in isolation; however, when corroborating factors such as archeological evidence and historical context are also taken into account, there may be the possibility of making connections between various cultures. In keeping with Riegl's longitudinal analysis of motifs, the examination of Vietnamese motifs in this study will commence with those from the Đông sơn culture in Vietnam. Not only do these motifs have great antiquity, but they have persisted over time, particularly in textile designs and have been adopted as formal markers of 'Vietnameseness' by contemporary ceramic sculptors.

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[12] Alőis Riegl, Die Historiche Grammatik der Bildeden Künste, 1966, p.210 cited in Iverson, M., Alőis Riegl: Art History and Theory, 1993, p.5.

[13] Riegl's method of a close longitudinal examination of motifs, is found in the book by L. Cadière, *L'Art à Huế,*1919, however, Cadière also emphasizes the meanings of the motifs. Cadière's book covers the period of the Nguyễn Emperors (1802-1945).

## Proto-historical Vietnam: The Đông sơn Culture

In the analysis of recent archeological discoveries in Vietnam, the persistence of motifs across the media of ceramic and bronze has been used as evidence of the indigenous development of the Đông sơn culture, a culture that had previously been thought to have originated either in China, or have been introduced from the West. In view of the paucity of information about the Đông sơn culture in the literature on Southeast Asia, the discussion in the next section of this chapter will attempt to outline the ways in which this culture had been viewed and why it should be so attractive to contemporary artists in marking their work as distinctively Vietnamese. The discussion will focus on what has been published about this culture and speculate on the reasons why elements from it have been adopted by contemporary artists – the ceramic sculptors, in particular.

Extensive knowledge about the material culture of Đông sơn has only become available in the twentieth century. Initially, historians and archeologists linked the styles and techniques of this period to societies outside Vietnam: in particular, China and Indonesia. Only in the past thirty years the prevailing interpretation is that the Đông sơn culture is an indigenous Vietnamese development. The proto-historical Đông sơn culture extended from the seventh and sixth centuries until the fourth and third centuries BCE.[14] It developed from preceding localized cultures in the delta areas of the major rivers of northern Vietnam, each with their own distinctive style of pottery decoration.[15] A rich heritage of extant artifacts from this era of Vietnamese history include metal, ceramic and jade objects. However, Dongsonians are best known for remarkable bronze drums that can be found in Southern China and throughout Southeast Asia.

The large drums have been part of heirloom collections throughout Southeast Asia for centuries. For instance, a Đông sơn style drum known as the *Pejeng Moon* has been in a

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[14] There seems to be a variation in dates amongst scholars. Maud Girard-Geslan suggests that Vietnam entered the bronze age in the 15/14th centuries BCE and that the Đông sơn culture reached its climax in the seventh to the second centuries. BCE. Maud Girard-Geslan et al., *Art of Southeast Asia,* 1998, p. 23. Bernard Philippe Groslier, *Indochina*, 1966, p.33, suggests that it flowered in Tonkin (i.e. North Vietnam) during the third century BCE. Charles Higham, *The Bronze Age of Southeast Asia,* 1996, p.135 considers that the *Đông sơn* culture flourished in the second half of the first millennium BCE.

[15] Hà Văn Tấn,' Prehistoric Pottery in Vietnam and its Relationship with Southeast Asia,' *Asian Perspectives*, vol. XXV1, no.1, 1983, p.141

temple pavilion in Bali for many centuries – and has a local legend concerning its origin.[16] Many more drums and other Đông sơn artifacts are located in various collections within Asia, such as the Shanghai Museum, China, the National Museum in Jakarta, Indonesia and the major museums in Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City, as well as in provincial museums in Vietnam. Đông sơn artifacts, including drums, first came to the notice of European collectors in the late nineteenth century and these artifacts are now found in collections in Europe, the United States and Australia.[17]

## Archeological evidence - links with Southeast Asian Societies

The first archeological excavations of Đông sơn sites were carried out by the French, under the auspices of the *École Française d'Extrême Orient*, from 1919.[18] Geographically, the culture appears to have been centred in North Vietnam and was named after an eponymous site near the city of Thanh Hóa in Thanh Hóa province, where Janse conducted excavations between 1935 and 1939.[19] Excavations have been carried out by Vietnamese archeologists since 1959. Ninety-six sites have been identified in North Vietnam, mainly in the delta areas of the major rivers.[20]

The predominant view amongst archeologists at present is that multiple, indigenous, regional societies evolved to produce this village-based culture.[21] To date, only one centre has been located that is large enough to be called a city and that is the third century capital of the Âu Lạc kingdom. The city was called Cổ Loa and is located twenty kilometers north of Hà Nội.[22]

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[16] A.J. Bernet Kempers, *Monumental Bali: Introduction to Balinese Archaeology and Guide to the Monuments,* 1991, p.21. Located in at Pura Pentatarh Sasih, the *Pejeng Moon* or *Moon of Bali* is 187 cm. high and 160cm. in diameter.

[17] Maud Girard-Geslan notes that the Austrian scholar, Heger, was the first person to study Đông sơn drums and that this occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century. Girard-Geslan et al. *The Art of Southeast Asia,* p.23

[18] B. P. Groslier, *Indochina,* 1966, p.159

[19] see map at fig. 4.13 for the location of Thanh Hóa

[20] Nguyễn Khắc Viện, *Vietnam a Long History*, 1999, p.8-9

[21] see Hoang Xuan Chinh & Bui Van Tien, 'The Dongson Culture and Cultural Centres in the Metal Age in Vietnam', *Asian Perspectives,* vol. XX111, no. 1, 1980, pp.55-65 and Nguyen Ba Khoach, 'Phung Nguyen' *Asian Perspectives,* vol. XX111,no.1, 1980, pp.23-53, also John N. Miksic, 'Evolving Archaeological Perspectives on Southeast Asia', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol.26, no.1, March 1995, pp. 46-53

[22] B.P.Groslier, *Indochina,* 1966, p.37 and Nguyen Khac Vien, *Vietnam A Long History*, 1999, pp.12-15, discuss the site of Cổ Loa and the Kingdom of Âu Lạc.

One of the attractive aspects about Đông sơn culture for contemporary Vietnamese artists is its differentiation from Han Chinese culture. Scholars working under the auspices of the *École Française d'Extrême Orient*, George Coedès[23] and Olov Janse,[24] whilst still doubtful of the autochthonous nature of the culture, discussed the characteristics that are distinctively Southeast Asian. Much of what is known about the way of life during this period has been deduced from scenes represented on the large drums.

Characteristics that are shared by other Southeast Asian cultures – and that are distinct from those found in Han Chinese culture – were noted by Janse and Coedès. For instance, the Dongsonians lacquered their teeth, tattooed their bodies and chewed areca nut and betel leaf. They also built their boat-shaped roof houses on stilts. Commonly depicted motifs on the bronzes were the sun, birds, toads and human imagery. It was suggested that Dongsonians worshipped the sun and natural forces and performed fertility rites for crops and for their progeny. In decoration, there was a predilection for animal motifs, especially toads and birds, and for the representation of human figures in the round, many of which are depicted as engaged in sexual activities. This preference for three-dimensional figural sculpture has persisted in 'Vietnamese' art until the 20th century, and is manifest in the ceramic sculptors' work today.

Besides figural elements, there was also a repertoire of geometric motifs which included spirals, wave or comma-like motifs and tooth ornaments, commonly arranged in distinct registers (fig.1.1). Janse mentioned ceramic plates, only found at Đông sơn sites, that have patterns which are still found in the textile designs of the Meo-Hoa people. He also postulated that they employed belts as magical charms, a characteristic shared with other Southeast Asian societies.[25] This point will be addressed further at a later point in this discussion.

## Linguistic and Legendary Sources

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[23] George Coedès, The Indianized States of Southeast Asia, 1968, pp.8-9

[24] Olov Janse, Archaeological Research in Indochina, 1958, vol.111, p.18

[25] O. Janse, 1958, vol 111, p.70

With regard to written and linguistic evidence of the Đông sơn civilization, Janse noted that there were no references in Chinese writings.[26] Coedès wrote about the communality of peoples in Southeast Asia, including the Đông sơn. Amongst the shared features of these Austro-Asiatic people were those of language, as well as fundamental beliefs and rites.[27] Recently, Vietnamese writers have examined Chinese writings and their own oral tradition of the creation of the Vietnamese people.[28] As well as citing Chinese sources, Vietnamese legends, such as those of *Sơn Tinh Thủy Tinh*, *The Genie of Gióng*, and the *Betel Nut Story*, are thought to have originated in this era of Vietnamese history.[29] Some of these legends refer to the eighteen Hùng Kings who ruled over northern Vietnam between 2879-257 BCE,[30] within which the Đông sơn era existed. The euhemeristic stories are largely concerned with the origin of the Vietnamese people and their struggle against historical and legendary enemies.

## Metalworking Technology

The origins of the Đông sơn culture have been hotly debated over the years. Certainly, there have been various theories about the origins of the people, including one that proposed their origin in Europe.[31] With regard to metalworking and pottery techniques, many researchers have argued that the bronze working techniques were brought to Vietnam from China, noting similarities in modes of production and in ornament to that of the Warring States period in China.[32] The parallels in decoration have since been shown to be too tenuous. Other scholars have proposed a connection with Indonesia, noting links with Dayak culture, but so far no

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[26] O. Janse, 1958, vol.111, p.17

[27] G. Coedès, 1968, p.9

[28] Vu Minh Giang, *The Hung Vuong Era of Vietnam, 1999* and Trần Quốc Vượng, 'The Legend of Ông Dóng from the Text to the Field', in K.W. Taylor & John K. Whitmore, (eds) *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts,* 1995, pp.13-41

[29] 'The Legend of Tan Vien Mountains', 'Areca, Betel and Lime', and 'The Genie Giong' in Hoa Mai & Hữu Ngọc, *The Peasant the Buffalo and the Tiger: Vietnamese Legends and Tales*, 1997.

[30] Albert Schroeder, Chronologie des Souverains de L'Annam, 1909, p.10

[31] B.P. Groslier, *Indochina,* 1966, p.173, mentions the theory of Robert von Heine-Geldern, who suggested that the Dongsonians originated in the Hallstatt culture, south of the Danube valley.

[32] O. Janse, Archaeological Research in Indochina, 1958, p.87

contemporaneous evidence of Đông sơn culture, apart from the drums, has been excavated in that country.[33]

Goloubew, in 1936, was one of the first to argue for an indigenous bronze industry in Vietnam, basing his arguments, amongst other evidence, on an analysis of the chemical composition of the bronzes, which he showed to be different from that of the Chinese bronzes.[34] The difference in metallurgical composition was also mentioned by Gray, following the analysis of Đông sơn material newly acquired by the British Museum in the late 1940s.[35] While there are still some scholars who consider that the indigenous nature of the Đông sơn culture and bronze technology remains polemistic, recent opinion seems to favour the view that it is an autochthonic development.[36]

## Recent Revisions

Hà Văn Tán detailed the characteristics of a number of the pre-Han colonization cultures in the north of present day Vietnam.[37] He provided a stylistic chronology of motifs on the ceramics, as has been previously mentioned. Many of these cultures also made articles in bronze. Although few bronze artifacts survive, there is evidence of crucibles used for molten metal. Nguyễn Ba Khoach demonstrated, in a similar manner, that geometric motifs on the Đông sơn bronzes had their origins in the pre-Đông sơn ceramics.[38] This recent connection has confirmed the indigenous development of the Đông sơn culture.

Vietnamese archaeologists stress the autochthonous nature of the cultures preceding Đông sơn, based on the evidence of continuity in pottery styles and decoration and of skulls excavated from archeological digs.[39] The development of ceramic technology is a necessary precursor

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[33] André Masson, *Histoire du Vietnam,*1960, p.17

[34] Victor Goloubew, L'Archéologie du Tonkin et les Fouilles de Đông -Sơn, 1937, p.15

[35] Basil Gray, 'China or Dongson', *Oriental Art,* vol.II, 1950, p.104

[36] Maud Girard-Geslan, 'Introduction to Đông Sơn Bronzes', *TAASA Review,* vol.7, no.4, 1998, p.16

[37] Hà Văn Tấn, 'Prehistoric Pottery in Vietnam and its Relationship with Southeast Asia', *Asian Perspectives*, vol. xxvi, 1983, pp. 135-147

[38] Nguyễn Ba Khoach, 'Phùng Nguyên', *Asian Perspectives*, vol. xxiii, 1980, pp. 23-53

[39] Nguyễn Khắc Viện, *Vietnam A Long History,* 1999, p. 7, suggests that the 'Skulls found in Hòa Bình, Bắc Sơn, Quỳnh Văn and Minh Cầm suggest that the people belonged to the Australo-Negroid group. However,

to that of bronze technology, as it provides the technological skills required for mould making and for achieving the high temperatures necessary for melting metals. Miksic, in surveying the progress in Southeast Asian archeology from 1970-1995, stated that 'the indigenous development of the style should now be beyond doubt'.[40] He noted that there are two main reasons for a re-assessment of the origins of the art from this area, namely: the replacement of a diffusionist model of development with interpretations that emphasize independent local innovation and increased archeological activity in the area plus the fact that this research is increasingly carried out by Southeast Asian scholars instead of foreign scholars.

Recent archaeological discoveries in China have also thrown the notion of centralized cultures and provincial outposts into question. Numerous startling finds have shown that there were numbers of cultures from throughout the bronze age and beyond with their own characteristic style of decoration, independent from the main centre of Chinese civilization.[41] Such discoveries, in addition to those made of the Đông sơn culture in Vietnam, lend weight to the claim of autochthonous development of styles of art in many early cultures. There appears to have been less diffusion of cultural influence outwards from the early Chinese capitals of the Shang and Zhou dynasties than was previously thought to have been the case.

## Relevance of Đông sơn culture to Contemporary Art

The Vietnamese art historian, Phan Cẩm Thượng, considers that the art of the Đông sơn was an art of direct expression, concerned with food, clothing, power and reproduction. He notes that the figural elements are 'moderately stylized'.[42] They 'served usefully as objects and yet they were faithful portrayals'. As there are no written histories from this early period, it is impossible to discern the precise meaning of the motifs. Certainly, the prevalent use of the toad motif and of copulating humans points to concerns with fertility.

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Mongoloid elements appeared at a very early date.' He postulates that this mix gave rise to an autochthonous group with its own culture.

[40] John N. Miksic, 'Evolving Archaeological Perspectives on Southeast Asia', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 26, no.1, March 1995, p. 7 (electronic copy), Charles Higham, *The Bronze Age of Southeast Asia*, 1996, p.111, notes that current archaeological evidence provides compelling evidence for the local origin of the Đông sơn culture.

[41] see Yang Xiao Meng, The Golden Age of Chinese Archaeology, 1999

[42] Phan Cẩm Thượng, Điêu Khắc cổ Việt Nam (Ancient Sculpture of Vietnam), 1999, p.14

While legendary stories, previously mentioned, have been familiar to Vietnamese over the centuries, the material aspects of these early cultures have only recently become accessible. The legends of the eighteen Hùng Kings are taught in primary schools in Vietnam and depictions of these stories are frequently encountered in Vietnamese painting. Motifs from Đông sơn artifacts have been used in Vietnamese art during the twentieth century; however, as can be appreciated from the overview of the research into this culture, the significance of these motifs as being distinctly Vietnamese has only recently been established. In fact, the motif of a famous Đông sơn drum, the *Ngược Lủ* drum from the National Museum of Vietnamese History, Hà Nội (fig.1.2) is now used as a symbol of the modern Vietnamese state and designs from Đông sơn drums are used on many publications, particularly those about Vietnamese culture and history. The Đông sơn motif has also been appropriated by popular culture. Since 1999 these designs have been incorporated as blue and white decoration on ceramic tableware, as printed designs on fabric and as imprinted designs on paving bricks.

None of the ceramic sculptors under consideration in this chapter would have learnt about this culture at school. Nguyễn Trọng Đoan who was born in 1942 went to school in China from 1951-1958. Đoan, like many other children during the first war of resistance, was sponsored by the Chinese government and attended school in China while his parents were involved in the resistance against the French. In Hà Nội, Vietnamese history was taught in primary schools until 1954, however, in secondary schools, French history was taught, and there were no courses on Vietnamese history taught at University.[43] After independence was gained from the French, the schools in the North quickly adopted Vietnamese as the medium of education as the country became socialist in focus. Apparently, pre-history was taught in the south of Vietnam but it was not taught in the north, as it did not fit in with the socialist curriculum.[44]

Each of the three ceramic sculptors who are considered to be at the forefront of contemporary sculptural ceramics in Vietnam, has worked in the conservation workshop of the National Fine Arts Museum in Hà Nội. Nguyễn Khắc Quân and Nguyễn Bảo Toàn continue to work there in a part time capacity. This institution has a collection of fine Đông sơn period pieces.

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[43] Hưu Ngọc, Sketches for a Portrait of Vietnamese Culture, 1998, p. 590

[44] Personal correspondence with Dr. Elizabeth Craven, Education Specialist, Trần Việt Thanh, Lawyer, Hà Nội, and Nguyễn Gia Khang, Director of Information and Exhibition, Vietnam History Museum, (now retired)

Thus, through being closely connected with the actual pieces and with archeologists and historians associated with the museum, they would have been amongst the first to appreciate the implication of these recent discoveries and their importance for a reading of Vietnamese history. All make allusions to Đông sơn culture in their works. They all prefer the natural glazes or terracotta of the early ceramics. Đoan uses geometric motifs – especially the registered wave pattern – found on early ceramics and then on Đông sơn bronzes, as can be seen in his jar (fig.1.3). He has also employed the sunburst pattern characteristic of Đông sơn on some of his works. Many of Đoan's ceramics have combed and incised marks on their surfaces, a characteristic decorative technique of the early ceramic wares. Such surface tooling, which gives a highly textured surface, can be seen on a garden lamp made by Đoan in the collection of the National Fine Arts Museum in Hà Nội (fig. 1).

All three potters imbue their works with a ritualistic element, not entirely Dongsonian, but alluding to the probable ceremonial function of some Đông sơn pieces. This is particularly so in works by Toàn, who has used the form of Đông sơn bells in his installation works (fig.1.4). Toàn's bells are unglazed, fired in low temperature kilns and have a similar shape to that of the Đông sơn bells (fig.1.5). While his bells have a similar shape to Đông sơn bells, they are also related to temple bells of later periods. The bell motif is used because of its general reference to the ancestral spirits for whom the bells are tolled. For Toàn, it is the directness of expression in Đông sơn work that appeals to him. Đông sơn art, he believes, reflects a concern with basic human needs, especially those to do with food, fertility and spirituality.[45]

Nguyễn Khắc Quân has used the toad motif in some of his early work and it can be seen to be linked to the Đông sơn toad motifs. (fig.1.6) The toads in the early 1980's works by Quân are direct quotes from those found of the tympanum of some Đông sơn drums. (fig.1.7) The bell adjacent to the toad pieces in Quân's studio is also of a similar form to the Guimet bell shown in fig. 1.5.[46] Furthermore, aspects of sexuality and reproduction have been continuing themes throughout Quân's work since the 1980's.

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[45] Interview with the artist, Hà Nội, 29 January, 2000

[46] There are many bells in Vietnamese collections of a similar shape.

In summary, the potters use the following motifs, techniques, context and forms that relate their work to that of the Đông sơn culture:

i. use of incising and combing as methods of decoration;
ii. use of natural glazes or unglazed wares;
iii. frequent firing of their wares at lower temperatures than stoneware;
iv. use of geometric, sunburst motifs and figural motifs found in *Đông sơn* art;
v. display of their wares in installations that accentuate a ritualistic reading; and
vi. engagement with issues relating to basic human needs.

The use of motifs from Đông sơn art expresses the notion of a tradition that is indigenous, unrelated to the cultures of either China or India, the cultures after whom the West named the area 'French Indochina'. Even though the Dongsonians were from the delta areas of northern Vietnam, their designs have been perpetuated in the textile designs of ethnic minorities from the mountains, underscoring a link between the mountain and delta people, which has legendary, historical and political significance in Vietnam today. The importance of this point will be developed in the following section, which also relates to an earlier comment about the persistence of Đông sơn motifs in textile designs.

## Geometric patterns as social signs

Fraser-Lu, in her study of the textiles of Southeast Asia, notes that the design motifs of the tribal minorities in northern Vietnam are 'deeply rooted in Đông sơn-style, Neolithic geometric patterns based on the triangle, lozenge, zigzag and key and hook patterns'.[47] A 1997 survey of the textiles of ethnic groups in Northeast Vietnam shows that belts, referred to in Janse's research and mentioned previously, are still used by shamans in these communities. The latter survey illustrates examples of belts that have a range of patterns, including a tooth form pattern, found both on early pottery and on Đông sơn artifacts.[48] Many of the textile patterns from these groups, and the silver buttons of the Northern Dao group, have a star or sun pattern, similar to those depicted on the Đông sơn drums. The persistence of Đông sơn motifs in textile designs is consistent with a position developed by Riegl in *Stilfragen*, that

[47] Sylvia Fraser-Lu, Handwoven Textiles of South-East Asia, 1988, p.135

[48] Diep Trung Binh, *Patterns on Textiles,*1997

motifs created by anonymous artisans tend to persist for long periods and thus become imbedded in an artistic repertoire. Cheeseman, as a result of her research in Laos and Vietnam, argues for the endurance of these designs amongst shamanic communities, as the patterns represent the spirits of the ancestors and through wearing textiles with such patterns, the shamans are able to become one with the ancestral spirits.[49]

The textile patterns are viewed as signs that both link the wearer to the community and are themselves symbols for the community and their ancestry. Adaptation of patterns from other ethnic groups is seen as an expression of the relationships between interacting groups. A parallel can be made between the way in which textile patterns function as signs and the manner in which the contemporary sculptural ceramists use particular motifs in their art. Đông sơn motifs are used to connect contemporary art to the art of the past, in order to emphasize a common tradition. In terms of the first mentioned significance, they can be interpreted as a sign, linking the piece to the community and standing for the community. The ceramists also use these Đông sơn motifs to convey their links with cultures outside their immediate group, paralleling that aspect of textile patterns which expresses the relationships between interacting groups.

The notion of interdependence between many ethnic groups, which together form the Vietnamese nation, has been emphasized throughout Vietnamese history, including that of the current government. A legend of the origin of the Vietnamese people tells the story of the birth of the Vietnamese through the union of the nymph from the mountain (i.e. an immortal) and the prince from the sea (i.e. a dragon).[50] Interdependence of mountain and delta people is stressed in present day Vietnam: the ethnic minorities, that is to a large extent the mountain people, are seen as people who have been able to retain their distinctive cultures throughout many centuries. Two museums, one in Thái Nguyên Province that opened in 1961 and one in Hà Nội that opened in 1998, are manifestations of the importance that the Government places on the preservation of this part of Vietnam's cultural heritage. While the political motivations behind the emphasis that has been placed on the notion of unity in diversity cannot be

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[49] Patricia Cheeseman, lecture 'Cosmic Connections: Shamanic and Buddhist Rituals in Laos', Power House Museum, 14 March 2006

[50] Hưu Ngọc, Sketches for a Portrait of Vietnamese Culture, 1998, p. 648

overlooked, both historically and in the current context the concept does have ramifications for the way in which contemporary Vietnamese see themselves.

Given the increasing awareness of the proto-historical Đông sơn culture with its dramatic artistic heritage – and the knowledge that it developed on their own soil – it is not surprising that Vietnamese artists in recent years have incorporated references to this art in their works. In doing this, they mark their art with what they perceive as a distinctly Vietnamese sign and create a tradition out of an autochthonous Vietnamese style. From the point of view of a developmentally based theory, such as Riegl's, a direct unilateral link cannot be validly made when motifs are manipulated and appropriated by cultures that are, in fact, ethnically removed and removed in time from one another. However, when the meanings of the motifs are of importance and the motifs are viewed as signs, this author proposes that a conceptual link can validly be made.

From the discussion so far, it will be evident that there are a number of problems in relying solely on Riegl's analysis in order to understand the choice and perpetuation of certain motifs. These difficulties are especially evident when considered from the viewpoint of the discussion of contemporary Vietnamese art, as his analysis, for the most part, avoids the question of the meaning of the motifs.

While Riegl's detailed evolutionary account of the minute changes in ornamentation over the centuries provides an excellent formal series unfolding in time, however objective it may purport to be, there is a danger that in avoiding any discussion of the meaning and context of the art, an interpretation based on the observed changes will tend to rest on value judgments and personal aesthetic preferences. Thus, a weakness of Riegl's approach is that, in avoiding issues of meaning, there is a possibility of being dismissive of, or misunderstanding any other mode of conveying meaning in art other than those that conform, in his case, to the 'classical' Western ideal.[51] Riegl states in the early part of his discussion of vegetal ornament in

[51] Margaret Iversen, in comparing the theoretical stance of *Stilfragen* with that of the Neo-Grammarians, notes that both methods, through their concentration on the development of form, lose sight of the 'fact that language and art have meaning for a community'. Margaret Iversen, 'Style as Structure : Alőis Riegl's Historiography', *Art History,* vol.2 no.1, March, 1979, p.66

*Stilfragen*, that religious symbols don't belong in a chapter on vegetal ornament and furthermore that:

> Any religious symbol can become a predominantly or purely decorative motif in the course of time if it has artistic potential. When a motif is frequently and continuously executed in a variety of materials because of its religious associations, a stereotype is created, which can then become so familiar as to seem to a certain extent ingrained.[52]

He goes on to say that within various early cultures which adopted symbols such as the lotus, their hieratic meaning was lost. Such motifs were perpetuated, especially by the Greeks 'with their consummate sense of the beautiful' because of the motif's potential for artistic elaboration.[53] While this may have been the case in the adoption of Egyptian, Assyrian and Phoenician motifs by the Greeks, it was clearly not the case in the adoption of the arabesque by Islamic cultures and it is not the case with either geometric or realistically based motifs within the Southeast Asian context. In the Islamic context, the arabesque, which indeed derived from late classical West Asia, was in part adopted for its non-figural qualities and came to be associated with the infinite and omnipotent nature of God.[54] Over time this naturalistic scroll developed into a highly abstract and rhythmic pattern and the arabesque became one of the most distinctive artistic motifs of the Islamic world. In the Southeast Asian context, the arabesque was taken on as part of the repertoire of motifs on blue and white ceramics linked initially to West Asian patrons. However, its use was also assimilated into the decoration on vessels for a Buddhist context, where the lotus, with its association with purity, was incorporated into vegetal scrolling decoration. It was also incorporated into the Chinese world of flowers of the seasons with their specific connotations. As Rawson notes, 'when religious or social needs demanded specific motifs' the scrolling decoration inherited from West Asia was 'reinterpreted and altered to provide patterns that referred to, even if they did not reproduce, real flowers'.[55] The motif can, as Riegl noted and as has been seen in relation

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[52] Alőis Riegl, 1992, p.50

[53] Alőis Riegl, 1992, p.50

[54] Linda Komaroff, Islamic Art in the Metropolitan Museum: The Historical Context, 1992, p.5

[55] Jessica Rawson, Chinese Ornament: The Lotus and the Dragon, 1984, p. 64

to Đông sơn geometric motifs in textiles and the use of the arabesque, become ingrained, but its religious associations or associated meanings may also remain intact.

From the Southeast Asian perspective, the meanings of certain motifs are related to religion, ritual and metaphor. They are selected by the artist or patron because of their appropriateness to a certain context. Kerlogue, in discussing approaches to Southeast Asian art notes, as Riegl presumably would have agreed, that certain functional elements of art such as symmetry, line and contrast can be translated across cultures.[56] Where differences do occur, however, it is on the level of function and meaning. While certain Southeast Asian art forms are ephemeral, those that are substantial 'may be regarded primarily as a shell to be entered by a spirit, and the surfaces of artifacts conceived in part as a kind of screen behind and beyond which a deeper reality operates.'[57]

Despite Riegl's intention, as described by Iversen, to 'guarantee historical continuity and to rescue the past from the imposition of our aesthetic values', [58] in *Stilfragen*, Riegl nevertheless falls into the trap of making inappropriate value judgements about art from cultures with differing belief systems. A case in point is his assessment, when making general introductory remarks about the architecture, sculpture and painting of the Byzantines, that stagnation and rigid conservatism in Byzantine art led to a reversion to mannerism.[59] Statements such as this reveal his bias to the Greek ideal of truth to nature and reflect the false illusion, that by using an objective/scientific approach, one can avoid making subjective mistakes. What Riegl perceived as 'mannerism' in Byzantine art can also be interpreted as an attempt by the artists to accentuate the spiritual rather than literal nature of the subject matter of their art.

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[56] F. Kerlogue, Arts of Southeast Asia, 2004

[57] F. Kerlogue, 2004, p.16

[58] Margaret Iversen, *Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory,*1993, p.150. Iversen makes this comment in relation to Riegl's notion of *Kunstwollen.* Michael Podro in *The Critical Historians of Art*, 1982, p.97, notes that due to the fact that Riegl doesn't use the art of any one period as the norm, there is a misperception that his analysis is value free. In some respects, as noted by Castriota in the introduction to *Problems of Style*, 1992, Riegl suffered due to the limitations of knowledge about some of the cultures he examined.

[59] Alőis Riegl, 1992, p.241

Podro distinguishes two types of art history.[60] One, he contends, concentrates on objects and tends to formalism. The other is based on context and may, in the extreme, reduce the art to a trace. Riegl's analysis in *Stilfragen* tends towards the former. Riegl focused on the intrinsic qualities that could be seen in the works he examined rather than extrinsic qualities. In stressing the evolution of motif as a process concerned with the artist's ability either to copy or abstract from nature, or the artist's genius for adaptation or innovation, Riegl misses central aspects regarding the intention of the art and does not answer the question of why the motifs are used. From the point of view of contemporary Vietnamese art, it is precisely the meanings and the associations with former periods in their country's history that motivates the artist's selection of particular motifs or modes of expression.

Kubler noted that archaeology had been primarily concerned with the technical aspect of objects, in contrast to art history in which, at the time he was writing, in the 1960's, the emphasis had been concerned with meanings. He concluded that it is necessary to look at both meaning and being in order that an over emphasis on one would not deform the other.[61] This balance in approach to the technical and formal aspects of ceramics, combined with an exploration of the meanings associated with the pieces, is of interest in relation to Riegl's insistence in *Stilfragen* that meaning was unimportant. Riegl's concentration on the purely formal aspects of the art object or motif as it changed over time and his aim to achieve a rigorous, value free assessment of changes in style over historical periods caused him to eschew any consideration of meaning as he felt, as interpreted by Iverson, that iconography had more to do with religion and poetry than art history.[62]

## Evolution of motifs

In relation to the evolution of a particular motif, a number of examples from *Stilfragen* illustrate the pitfalls of an approach that concentrates on the evolution of style, assuming that changes are due to artistic genius, the mimetic capabilities of the artists or, as Riegl sometimes acknowledges, the effect of material or technique. Despite the fact that, in many respects, *Stilfragen* is a counter to the materialist based theory of Gottfried Semper, (1803-

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[60] Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art,* 1982, p. xx

[61] George Kubler, The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things, 1962, p.126

[62] Margaret Iversen, Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory, 1993, p.73

1879) who argued that changes in style were related to technique and materials, Riegl acknowledged that there may indeed be instances in which form is dependent on material or technique but they are not the overriding factors that determine the evolution of a style. In the introduction to *Stilfragen* Riegl makes the aim of his research quite clear. He states that in attempting to establish the 'Foundations for a History of Ornament', the subtitle of the book, that he was countering the 'theory of the technical, materialistic origin of the earliest ornaments and art forms (that is) usually attributed to Gottfried Semper.'[63] However, he acknowledged that whereas Semper had suggested that technique and material play a role, his followers, 'the Semperians' had 'jumped to the conclusion that all art forms were always the direct product of materials and techniques'.[64] Therefore, Riegl's project was to show that the development of ornament was due to things other than, for example, textile designs in the case of geometric ornament.

While Riegl sought to show that styles change due to an impetus that comes from within the culture, not from the individual artisan or the particular technique or material used, there are many instances where particular forms are developed, introduced or re-introduced because of their particular significance when used in a certain context. Particularly when considering Vietnamese art, the meanings of the motifs cannot be entirely ignored.

### Tree Motifs

Riegl, in discussing the development of vegetal ornament and the development of the tendril, notes that in Egyptian Art the tree motif has no meaning.[65] In the annotations to the English translation of *Stilfragen*, David Castriota notes that in ancient Near Eastern art the tree motif has a 'deeply symbolic function'.[66] In fact, tree worship is prevalent in many areas of the world, including Vietnam. A popular Vietnamese saying is:

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[63] Alőis Riegl, 1992, p.4

[64] Alőis Riegl, 1992, p.4

[65] Alőis Riegl, 1992, p.51

[66] Alőis Riegl, 1992, p.325, annotation i

| | |
|---|---|
| Thần cây đa | (The spirit of the Banyan tree, |
| Ma cây gạo | The ghost of the cotton tree |
| Cú Cáo cây đề. | Owls and Foxes of the fig trees)[67] |

Even in Hà Nội today, one can see venerated tree shrines bedecked with flowers and spiked with innumerable incense sticks in their twisted roots that have been placed there and lit by worshippers. (fig.1.8) Thus in neglecting or dismissing the meaning, one may loose sight of the reason for using a certain motif and/or attribute its existence to false reasons. Kubler concluded that:

> ..what a thing means is not more important than what it is; that expression and form are equivalent challenges to the historian; and that to neglect either meaning or being, either essence or existence, deforms our comprehension of both.[68]

The use of specific trees as a motif is not as evident in Vietnamese art as it is in the art of China or Japan where, for example, particular trees such as the pine and prunus are metaphorically associated with the ideal characteristics of the Confucian gentleman. However, these Confucian motifs do occur, as can be seen in the decoration on some Vietnamese blue and white ceramics, particularly those of the Nguyễn dynasty, (1802-1945) a dynasty when Confucian motifs in art played a prominent role.[69] Fig. 1.9 shows an earlier, 15th century ewer with a pine tree in a cartouche on its side: the pine tree is symbolic of longevity in a Confucian context. In Buddhist art certain trees are closely associated with particular events in the life of the Buddha, for example, the Bodhi tree is associated with the Buddha's enlightenment. Leaves of the Bodhi tree are a motif that is frequently encountered in historical Vietnamese ceramics (fig 1.10). Nevertheless, when the whole tree motif is used, it is more difficult to trace changes in style than when individual parts are studied such as in

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[67] Trần Quốc Vượng, 'The Legend of Ong Dóng from the Text to the Field', in K.W. Taylor & John K. Whitmore, eds. *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts,* 1995, p.20

[68] G. Kubler, The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things, 1962, p.126

[69] See, for example, figs. 117, 121, 147, 152, and 329 in Bùi Minh Trí & Kerry Nguyễn-Long, *Gốm Hoa Lam Việt Nam: Vietnamese Blue and White Ceramics,* 2001 and figs. 295, 343, 411 and 431 in John Stevenson & John Guy, *Vietnamese Ceramics a Separate Tradition*, 1997. fig. 431 and other pieces of this type of ceramic called *Bleu de Huế*, were actually made in China, however the designs were made in Vietnam. John Stevenson & John Guy, *Vietnamese Ceramics a Separate Tradition*, 1997, p. 396

Riegl's *Stilfragen*, Chapter 2. Riegl chooses to trace the development of the use of blossoms, tendrils and leaves as motifs that are frequently used as the basis of decoration.

In contemporary Vietnamese art the tree motif has been used by the ceramic sculptor Nguyễn Khắc Quân. (fig.1.11) For him, this use of the tree motif has no links with the past either in meaning or in motif. His tree forms are based on the saggars that are used to protect ceramics in the kiln during firing. Quân has created these sculptures to highlight environmental concerns within Vietnam today in addition to his underlying theme concerning the cycles of life. There is some irony about the work in that the particular saggars from which he has derived his work, are used in coal fired box kilns that were introduced from North Korea in the 1970's, as coal was a cheaper and more readily available resource than the wood that was used previously. However, the coal fired kilns have produced their own environmental problems in that the coal dust and smoke proved to be deleterious to the health of the potters living at the village of Bát Tràng, where this type of kiln was first introduced to Vietnam. Quân's family have pottery enterprises in Bát Tràng where he used to fire his ceramics in a gas kiln until he bought his own in gas kiln for his home in Hà Nội in 2005. Prior to 2002 Quân also used a coal firing box kiln in the back courtyard of his Hà Nội home.

There is definitely something more than a continuation of, or re-appropriation of motif operating in the way that Quân has used trees in his ceramic sculpture. In Quân's case the motif has been chosen primarily for its meaning, reversing Riegl's order of importance of the factors involved in a change of style. The individual concerns of the artist, the meanings and the techniques predominate in this rupture of style and form of the tree motif as it had occurred previously in the Vietnamese context. The only factor left in Riegl's defence in this case is *Kunstwollen*, as it would appear that the spirit of the post-modern age has affected the way in which Quân has sculpted these trees.

### Lotus motif

The relevance of considering more than just an evolutionary approach to a motif when discussing contemporary Vietnamese art is evident in the following case. Lotus flowers have been used as a motif in Vietnamese art over many centuries, being primarily associated with Buddhism. The Buddhist religion was introduced to Vietnam around the beginning of the

common era.[70] The religion gained official support and increased popularity during the Lý and Trần dynasties of the 11th to 14th centuries, largely due to the fact that the Lý, (the first Vietnamese dynasty following independence from China in the 10th century), gained their power through the support of the Buddhist clergy. Lý kings took Buddhist bonzes as their advisers.[71] During these centuries Buddhist motifs, such as the lotus, became particularly popular in ceramic decoration, such as that shown in some thirteenth century tiles (fig. 1.12 a & b).

The contemporary ceramist, Nguyễn Trọng Đoan, explores the lotus motif as an appropriation from the art of the Lý/Trần period. Đoan's large form, (fig.1.13) has a bud or seedpod shape, which is then deeply sculpted with lotus flowers, buds and seed pods. Instead of painting the design in under glaze cobalt blue on a white surface, a style of decoration that many would associate with 'Asian' ceramics, Đoan uses natural, earthy glazes of earlier Vietnamese pottery or of the earthenwares that continue to be made for every day use.

Đoan's lotus motif involves a totally different concept to the lotus decoration painted in under glaze blue and white that was made in vast quantities in Vietnam during the 15th and 16th centuries (fig. 1.14). The scrolling lotus decoration on the export ceramics of the 15th and 16th centuries followed a formula which was similar to that used on Chinese blue and white ceramics. During that period, Vietnamese wares deliberately resembled those produced in China, as they were catering to the same foreign markets, particularly the Islamic markets of Indonesia and West Asia. The appearance of cobalt for use in the kilns of China and Vietnam occurred as a result of trade with West Asia. Once the Chinese and Vietnamese potters had mastered the technique of painting with cobalt under the glaze, one of the aesthetic preferences in ceramics of the Islamic markets, blue and white ceramics, became absorbed into the repertoire of both Chinese and Vietnamese wares from the fourteenth century. [72] The

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[70] Minh Chi, Hà Văn Tần, Nguyễn Tài Thư, *Buddhism in Vietnam,* 1999, p.8. These authors make a case for the introduction of Buddhism to Vietnam by Indian traders using the southern route as well as from the north via China.

[71] Nguyễn Khắc Viện, *Vietnam a Long History,* 1999, p.45. The Chinese were defeated in 938 by General Ngô Quyền who subsequently declared himself king. On his death in 944, 12 warlords divided the country and began fighting amongst themselves. Further threats from the Chinese and the Cham were dealt with until eventually in 1009 the northern part of the country was united under the Lý kings.

[72] See Bùi Minh Trí & Kerry Nguyễn-Long, *Gốm Hoa Lam Việt Nam:Vietnamese Blue and White Ceramics*, 2001, pp. 103-105

decorative motif of the arabesque, or leafy scrolling decoration, was suitable for use in an Islamic context: the flowers alluded to the garden of paradise and the continuous leafy scroll provided a motif whereby the faithful could reflect upon the infinite and omnipotent nature of God.[73] The arabesque derived from the rinceau or vine scroll commonly found in the late classical art in western Asia as charted by Riegl in *Stilfragen,* Chapter 4. While its specific forms may vary, it typically features naturalistic or stylized leaves and blossoms applied to winding stems that repeat and intersect, forming an abstract and rhythmic pattern. The scrolling vine became at the one time the quintessential form of Islamic art and a major decorative motif in ceramics decorated with underglaze cobalt designs made in Vietnam and China.

Đoan's avoidance of the use of underglaze blue and white decoration places his work within a Vietnamese rather than Chinese context and underscores the Buddhist links rather than the Vietnamese/Chinese style lotus decoration made for Islamic tastes.

In Đoan's work, the original Buddhist meaning of purity for the lotus has been overlaid with associations with the Lý/Trần period of Vietnamese history, viewed by the Vietnamese today as a 'golden age'. Perhaps adoption of a semiotic model would be more appropriate in discussing contemporary Vietnamese ceramics. Barthes' theory would interpret the shape of the pot as its denoted meaning, in view of the immediate visual recognition of a flower form.[74] Barthes' connoted meaning is accessed through knowledge of the significance of the lotus motifs at particular times in Vietnamese history. However, in this case, some understanding of historical chronology is necessary before one can arrive at a connoted meaning.

Chronologies of design motifs on Vietnamese ceramics have been compiled by:

i. Hà Văn Tấn for prehistoric pottery; [75]

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[73] Barbara Brend, *Islamic Art*, 1991, p 12

[74] Alex Potts in R.S. Nelson & R. Schiff, *Critical Terms for Art History*, 1992, p. 28

[75] Hà Văn Tấn, 'Prehistoric Pottery in Vietnam,' *Asian Perspectives,* vol. XXVI, no. 1, 1983, pp. 137-144. Jochen May in *Die Nachbản im Süden*, 1998, pp.116-121, also provides a chronology of styles and motifs on early Vietnamese pottery

ii. Le Trung for ceramics from the 11th to 20th centuries in The National Museum of Vietnamese History, Ho Chi Minh City;[76]
iii. Roxanna Brown for Vietnamese wares of the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries;[77]
iv. Bùi Minh Trí and Kerry Nguyễn-Long for Vietnamese blue and white wares;[78]
v. Phan Huy Lê et. al, for Bát Tràng ceramics from the 14th-19th centuries; [79]and
vi. L. Cadiere for the art of the Nguyễn Dynasty 19th and 20th centuries at Huế.[80]

An examination of Le Trung's chronological study of design motifs shows that in the 11-12th centuries, the lotus could be depicted as a three dimensional, sculptural motif on ceramics, and executed in scrafitto design (fig.1.15). In the 14th century, the lotus design frequently occurred as incised decoration under the glaze, a completely different depiction. In the 15th and 16th centuries, designs painted in underglaze blue and on polychrome wares showed completely different orientations of the lotus motif (fig.1.16).

Đoan's ceramic sculpture of a lotus is a distinctly late 20th century reading of this motif in a Vietnamese context, as seen in the detail in fig.1.17. It is a non functional ceramic: an example of ceramic sculpture. Non-utilitarian ceramics have been rare in Vietnam, although many ceramic sculptures of deities have been made that were functional, in the sense that they were designed to be used as an aid in worship.

Besides the twentieth century form that Đoan's work takes, which aligns with its denoted meaning, there are many other connoted meanings. This complexity of meanings is perhaps best approached by using a tripartite model, such as Kubler's, that proposes a relay of interactions between sender, signal and receiver.[81] A constant interaction occurs between a sender – in this case the lotus motif, the signal – the contextual associations, and the receiver

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[76] Le Trung (ed.) Vietnamese Ceramics in the Museum of Vietnamese History Ho Chi Minh City, 1998, pp.149-180

[77] Roxanna Brown, The Ceramics of Southeast Asia Their Dating and Identification, 1989, pp.24 -.26

[78] Búi Minh Trí & Kerry Nguyễn-Long, Gốm Hoa Lam Việt Nam: Vietnamese Blue and White Ceramics, 2001, pp. 451-520

[79] Phan Huy Lê, Nguyễn Đình Chiên & Nguyễn Quang Ngọc, *Bát Tràng Ceramics 14th-19th Centuries*, 2004, pp.152-183

[80] L. Cadière, *L'Art à Huế,* 1919, pp.73-82

[81] G. Kubler ,*The Shape of Time,* 1962, p.21

– the viewer or artist who re-interprets the motif and provides another sender. A tripartite model such as proposed by Kubler or Pierce would appear to be a useful way to analyze the various meanings involved in the re-interpretation of this motif.[82]

Đoan's use of the technique of an unglazed, tooled surface, links his work to pre-14th century Vietnamese ceramics, the technique therefore operates as a signal,or a type of sign, indicating this period. The lotus motif acts as a sign or signal linked to the Lý and Trần dynasties, which, in a relay of meanings is associated with a golden age of Buddhist art and with the independence of Vietnam at that time, which in turn, links the piece to the present situation in Vietnam.

Had we followed Riegl's opinion and avoided the role that meaning takes in the selection of both motif and style, we would have missed the significance of the use of the lotus motif and the particular form that it takes in Đoan's art. Nor would Riegl's model have worked in this case, as the design of the lotus in Vietnamese art does not follow an uninterrupted evolution. There are ruptures in the pattern of development, most evident in the way in which it has been used as a motif in the late twentieth century. All that would have been gained by an adherence to Riegl's model is an understanding of the transformation of the lotus motif across various types of media. However, an historical knowledge of the forms the motif can take, in addition to a knowledge of the changing historical contexts, enables a more complex reading of the lotus motif. Initially recognized as an identifiable form taken from nature, it also gains a number of connoted meanings, depending upon the form that it takes or does not take.

## Calligraphy and the Arabesque

The third and final example taken in this discussion of a motif traced by Riegl, is his extensive examination of the use of scrolling vegetation in Islamic art. Riegl avoids any discussion of the cultural reasons for its pre-eminence as a decorative motif. All his comments relate either to aspects of verisimilitude to, or abstraction from, natural forms or the 'genetic' relationship with earlier scrolling decoration. He does not consider its relationship to calligraphy or to the role of script in the arts of the Islamic world, where calligraphy holds a pre-eminent position. One of the main reasons for this pre-eminence is the fact that it is the

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[82] A. Potts in R.S. Nelson & R.S. Schiff eds. *Critical Terms for Art History,*1992, p.18

word of God that is represented in script. Riegl overlooks the similarity between script and style of ornament, even when using illustrations of caskets in which these parallels can be easily observed.[83] The two caskets illustrated use two different styles of calligraphy (fig.1.18 a &b ). In both cases, the style of calligraphy relates directly to the style of the vegetal scroll. In the arts of the Islamic world, calligraphy is central to decoration and inscriptions are often disguised within the overall pattern. Letters are frequently embellished with and enmeshed in vegetal motifs, as in the case of one of Riegl's examples. Even animal and human heads are used when the decoration is to be used in a secular context. Failure to recognize the importance of calligraphy and its influence on the calligraphic styles used in Islamic decoration has lead Riegl to make inaccurate assumptions about the development of ornament in the art of the Islamic world.

Calligraphy also holds great importance for the Vietnamese. Confucian examinations that were held in Vietnam from 1075 to 1919, placed great importance upon calligraphy.[84] These examinations were conducted in the Chinese language and script. The Lý and Trần period also saw the development of a script for the Vietnamese language, known as *nôm*: a script that was derived from Chinese characters. The precise date of its introduction is not known, however, the first works in *nôm* appeared in the 14th century.[85] The development of the demotic *nôm* script during the 11th to 14th centuries is another reason why the Vietnamese have such a particular regard for the Lý and Trần Dynasties as a period during which their Vietnamese identity came to the fore.

A further change in written script occurred in the 17th century, when the Vietnamese language was transcribed into Latin script called *quốc ngữ*.[86] Romanization of the Vietnamese language was a collective effort but it is closely associated with the work of Alexandre de Rhodes who published an Annamese-Latin-Portuguese Dictionary in 1651. Although

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[83] Alőis Riegl, *Stilfragen,*( *Problems of Style*) 1992, Moorish ivory casket from Spain, p. 281, fig. 175 and Moorish Ivory casket from Spain, dated AD 965, p. 280, fig. 174

[84] Nguyễn Khắc Viện, *Vietnam: A Long History,* 1999, p. 48 Prior to the establishment of mandarin competitions in Vietnam, Vietnamese scholars travelled to Chinese to compete at Changan, the Tang capital. Khoung Cong Phu, who lived in the 8th century, was the first Vietnamese to achieve the top academic title in China. See also, Pham Thi Ung, 'A Revered Academic', *Vietnam Cultural Window,* July, 1999, no.16, p. 8

[85] Nguyễn Khắc Viện, *Vietnam: A Long History*, 1999, p.51

[86] P. Huard & M. Durand, *Vietnam, Civilization and Culture,* n.d. p. 323

introduced in the 17th century, the Romanized script did not overtake the importance placed upon Chinese characters and *nôm* script until after 1919, when the French colonial government discontinued the triennial literary examinations.[87]

Calligraphy, or the art of writing, remains an important form of expression in Vietnam, possibly of greater importance than the regard for handwriting in western societies. Even on practical grounds, one needs to have clear writing, otherwise the numerous diacritical marks of *quốc ngữ*, essential for pronunciation and meaning, cannot be deciphered. Calligraphy, therefore, takes an important place within Vietnamese culture and decoration. Inscriptions are carved into wood and stone and are found on all public buildings, Buddhist temples, Communal houses and Confucian temples. Calligraphy is also found on ceramics, such as a bowl in the collection of the Art Gallery of South Australia, which shows a combination of script and decoration (fig. 1.19).

The bowl, thought to be Vietnamese of the 15th or 16th century, is moulded in six panels, giving it the form of a flower.[88] On the interior surface of the bowl, each panel contains a design of a pearl supported by a fungus (or cloud) design. Each pearl contains a Chinese character. When read together the characters convey the message – 'This is (a) priceless treasure'.[89] A complex interaction of signs and meanings takes place. The green glaze of the bowl connotes jade, a treasured stone for both the Vietnamese and Chinese. The fungus connotes wishes for longevity, a well-established iconographic reading of this motif in both Chinese and Vietnamese art. The calligraphy therefore refers both to the bowl itself and to the pearls represented on the bowl. Beyond this, the Chinese characters, being pictographic symbols, have an additional level of meaning. Numerous meanings are possible due to the interpretations that can be placed on the signs by the viewer, in what Potts – in discussing Pierce's model of the way in which objects work as signs – calls 'unlimited semiosis'.[90] A continuous generation of signs between the object, sign and interpretant, is set up in this bowl. Kubler's previously mentioned model would also apply in this case.

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[87] P. Huard & M. Durand, n.d. p.78

[88] Personal communication with Dick Richards, Curator of Asian Art, Art Gallery of South Australia, 26 November 1999

[89] Dick Richards, South-East Asian Ceramics: Thai, Vietnamese, and Khmer, 1995, p. 142

[90] Alex Potts in Nelson & Schiff eds. *Critical Terms for Art History,*1996, p.19

In Vietnamese, the word to see, *xem*, has the double meaning of to 'look at' and to 'read'. The Chinese word *kan* has a similar double meaning and it has been argued that the Chinese approach art objects by reading them.[91] Works of art, including ceramics, not only conveyed their literal meaning to the educated elite for whom they were designed but those patrons also delighted in discovering the layers of meaning imbedded as rebuses, homophonous messages or through literary associations in the objects they contemplated. It may not be far-fetched to extend this way of viewing works of art to the Vietnamese. The parallel meanings in the word used to denote reading and seeing and the use of the Chinese language amongst the ruling classes for long periods of Vietnamese history, would tend to favour such an assumption. Balaban emphasized the Vietnamese love of word play in poetry when he stated, 'across the centuries, whether the poems come from peasant children or court dignitaries, two things stand out: the sense of a common culture and the love of clever verbal play.' [92]

It may be fruitful in this study of Vietnamese art to explore both a theoretical approach that focuses on the way objects, as signs, convey meaning, in order to take into account various ways of reading the art forms and their decoration, in addition to a chronological view. Had Riegl's formalist theoretical approach been the only approach taken, the interpretations available in considering the various meanings would have been obscured and a culturally relevant way of approaching the art been overlooked.

## Riegl and *Kunstwollen*

A further problem with Riegl's approach is his reliance on the notion of *Kunstwollen* in discussing the style of art of a particular culture. For Riegl, the continuity of style within a society is not constituted externally but by an intrinsic phenomenon that he calls *Kunstwollen*. With the development of this 'collective will to form' within a society, the society itself becomes the bearer of style. In Riegl's view, artistic possibilities are provided by the unfolding of a particular internal structure, which by its nature, closes out other artistic options. Riegl describes *Kunstwollen* as:

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[91] Louise Allison Cort & Jan Stuart (eds) Joined Colors: Decoration and Meaning in Chinese Porcelain, 1993, p.33

[92] John Balaban, 'The Poetry of Vietnam' *Asian Art and Culture*, Winter, 1994, p.28

> …a teleological view according to which I saw in the work of art the result of a specific and purposeful artistic will that comes through in battle against function, raw material and technique.[93]

Riegl's notion of *Kunstwollen* was one of the reasons his work was neglected for quite some time. Gombrich was critical of this view in *Art And Illusion*, 1960, where he attacked Riegl's opinion that the style was the result of a societal factor, as such a stance smacked of totalitarian tendencies.[94]

One problem involved in adopting the notion of *Kunstwollen* as the theoretical construct underpinning formalist aspects of a motif or style is discussed by Brendel, who points out that, at any particular time, a number of stylistic modes may be operating within the same culture. In writing about the problem of a 'Roman style', a case in which a number of styles operate within the same culture, Brendel considers that style can never entirely be 'a wholly impersonal performance of a collective will'.[95] The diversity of modes of representation within what is called Roman art, for example, calls for other than an empirical description of changes. Different styles of representation were used for different purposes.

Within the current Vietnamese context, this is also evident, as different styles of art are used for different purposes. For instance, there is a certain style of art associated with different types of public buildings: Buddhist pagodas, Confucian temples and communal halls. Even within building such as the *đình* or communal hall, different styles and motifs operate within different parts of the building. The central section containing the altar is decorated with formal motifs, whereas outer bays used for secular activities are decorated in a freer manner. Traditional crafts villages all have their particular styles, including those where paintings are made for annual festivals and are reproduced as folk art prints.[96] For instance, prints from Đông Hồ village have scenes or motifs that are set against the blank background of the paper, whereas Hàng Trống prints generally feature more densely decorated compositions. Within

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[93] Alőis Riegl, Late Roman Art Industry, 1901, p 9 cited in Margaret Olin, *Forms of Representation in Alőis Riegl's Theory of Art*, 1992, p.148

[94] E.H. Gombrich, Art and Illusion: A study in the psychology of pictorial representation, 1983, p.17

[95] Otto J. Brendel, *Prolegomena to the Study of Roman Art,* New Haven, 1979, p.125

[96] The National Museum of Fine Arts in Hà Nội distinguishes five folk art schools.

the media of painting, one finds a plethora of styles: influences of French art, Socialist Realism, folk art and many recent trends from the international art world can all be seen at the one time at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty first centuries.

Thus far, this discussion has involved an examination of Riegl's approach to the continuity of motifs in art and has found that, by itself, it is an inadequate tool for an assessment of the work of contemporary Vietnamese ceramic sculptors. A formal analysis across time is a necessary part of the whole picture but not sufficient for an understanding of the reasons why particular styles and motifs are used. Nor can a chronological study be applied in isolation in order to make connections between societies that are separated from each other either geographically or in time. Something more is needed beyond a similarity in motifs if an understanding of the dynamics between the societies is to be understood. It has been shown that an exploration of the meanings of various motifs and their contexts is needed in order to understand the dynamics of the art. An approach such as that proposed by Kubler – who proposes a relay effect in meanings as they operate over time – may be a fruitful way to analyze the compound layers of meaning imbued in the contemporary works. In order to elaborate the meanings of the selected styles, two periods of history have been discussed: the art of the Lý and Trần period and the proto-historical Đông sơn culture. The final section of this chapter will examine a further source of inspiration for these artists namely the role that the communal hall or *đình* plays in these artists' conceptions of what constitutes the essence of Vietnameseness.

## The *Đình* as a site of Vietnamese tradition

*Đình* are found throughout the modern nation of Vietnam, but have existed for a longer period in the northern section of the country, only appearing in central and southern Vietnam from the 17$^{th}$ century onwards, after the Vietnamese colonized those regions formerly dominated by Cham and Khmer peoples. Almost every village has its own *đình* and these communal halls are seen as the basic unit of Vietnamese society; being the centre of the religious, political and social life of the village. As distinct from the Buddhist pagoda, or *chùa*, and the Confucian temple, or *đền*, the *đình* contains shrines to the village tutelary genii and famous historical figures or to the deities of the rivers and mountains of the village. They are also the places where village business is conducted and where village festivals, plays, operas and

games are held thus they are sites that combine the opposite but complementary functions of formal sacred ritual and secular revelry.

The building is thought to have its roots in the great houses, or *nhà rông*,[97] of the mountain societies or in rest houses for travelers, as attested by inscriptions dating to the Trần dynasty.[98] Hà Văn Tấn and Nguyễn Văn Kự detail the history of the *đình* in Vietnam and note that the earliest extant *đình* for which an accurate date can be established are those from the 16th century or Mạc (1527-1592) dynasty.

There is a Vietnamese saying that the ruler's authority ended at the perimeter of the village. During the period of Chinese rule, the governor's jurisdiction extended from national to provincial and district level. The kings of Vietnam also made regulations that affected the same domains. Villages were more or less autonomous when it came to local affairs. Villagers did have to pay national taxes and provide tributary goods and corvée labour, however, as far as the life of the village was concerned, they were basically self-governing. Perceived as being impervious to the vicissitudes of national rulers and as sites of indigenous cultural activity, the *đình* has come to symbolize the true essence of Vietnamese life for contemporary Vietnamese. Paradoxically, until 1945, the right to build a *đình* was granted by an imperial decree and many villages continue to proudly display these decrees, which also bestowed honorific titles on the deities.

In 1954, with the introduction of a communist government and a concentration on things that were in the national interest and based on scientific fact, anything that smacked of superstition was outlawed. Some communal houses were destroyed as part of this process of ridding the country of superstition and religious practices. Village festivals were banned in 1954 and not re-instated until the 1990s, post *đôi mới* or liberal reform, when the country became more open to outside influence. General Võ Nguyễn Giáp was one of the officials, in his position as deputy prime minister, to encourage the re-establishment of the village festival. Festivals and the village communal house or *đình*, were promoted by historians such as Hà Văn Tấn

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[97] The boat shaped roofs of the *nhà rông* have been likened to those depicted on buildings on Đông sơn drums.

[98] Hà Văn Tấn & Nguyễn Văn Kự, *Đình Việt Nam,* 1998, p. 74 These authors discuss the appearance of *đình*. The earliest extant in their current form date to the 16th century, however, there is epigraphic evidence of earlier *đình*. Lê Thanh Đức, *Đình Láng Miền Bắc: The Village Dinh in Northern Vietnam*, 2001, p.11, cites a 12th century edict by the Lý stipulating that each village should have a *đình*.

and Nguyễn Đỗ Cung as the site of indigenous Vietnamese culture. Many of these ancient *đình* have been placed on a national register of important historical vestiges. This reversal of the policies of the most stringent years of the communist regime has been interpreted as a move by the government to forge a cohesive society and to counter foreign cultural pollution that was likely to happen with greater access to and knowledge of other cultures.[99]

In what could have been interpreted as a subversive project, during the 1960s, some Vietnamese scholars began a detailed examination of the architecture and sculpture of *đình*.[100] This occurred during the time that the Government strongly discouraged religious practices and had destroyed some of the *đình*.[101] Nguyễn Đỗ Cung (1912-1977), who was the founder of the Institute for Art Historical Research undertook a major study of the sculpture in *đình* in 1962. This has led to the listing, since 1980, of many *đình* as 'Historical Cultural Vestiges' by the Ministry of Culture and Information.[102] There are differences in construction and style of *đình* in the various regions of Vietnam. However, as the present discussion concerns artists working in Hà Nội and the existence of *đình* in the north has a longer history, the following remarks will concern the *đình* and villages in the north of Vietnam.

Older northern Vietnamese *đình* consist of a large building with a thatched or tiled roof. (figs.1.20 & 1.21). There are no load bearing walls in the older *đình* but the roof is supported by a large number of wooden columns and rafters. These, and the intricate system of interlocking beams, together provide many square meters of space for carving. These spaces are generally rectangular, columnar or the ends of beams, so that the carved designs and figures are created to fit sympathetically into these somewhat constricted dimensions. Most

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[99] From conversations with many Vietnamese, including artists, in Hà Nội.

[100] Prior to this the French scholar, Louis Besacier argued that the *đình* was the most uniquely Vietnamese of all the public architecture in Vietnam. Louis Bezacier, *L'Art Viêtnamien*, 1954, p.59

[101] The debate about what was to become of the old village in the face of the development of large-scale socialist production that was introduced with the Fourth Party Congress, was discussed by researchers in Hà Nội. Nguyen Tu Chi noted 'We must understand the old village in all its components, the manner in which they are all put together, how the whole unit operates, and the psychological relations between the individuals who have lived in this unit for centuries.' Nguyen Tu Chi 'The Traditional Village in Bac Bo: Its organizational structure and problems' in *The Traditional Vietnamese Village*, Part 1, Vietnamese Studies n.d., vol. 61, p.15 (ca. 1980). In a 1993 revision of his research, Nguyen Tu Chi commented on the gaps in Vietnamese history that posed great difficulties for the researcher. Nguyen Tu Chi 'The Traditional Village in Bac Bo: Its organizational structure and problems' in Phan Huy Lê et al. *The Traditional Vietnamese Village*, 1993, pp.44-142

[102] Hà Văn Tấn & Nguyễn Văn Kự, *Đình Việt Nam,*1998, pp. 415-435

of the decoration is carved in high relief. In the central bay of the *đình*, where the ancestral altar is located, the carved motifs are of a formal nature such as dragons, nymphs, inscriptions and auspicious animals. Beyond that formal space, in the side bays and recesses of the rafters, one finds many secular scenes of every day village life as well as dancing and games associated with the village festival, such as rowing, drinking, wrestling and buffalo fighting. The scene of a successful graduate returning home is another frequently encountered motif. The contemporaneous creation of two styles of decoration within the one building is further evidence of different styles operating within a particular culture at the one time.

As the secular sculptures depict village life, they are viewed as coming directly from the heart of the Vietnamese people. Carved without the iconographic programs that constrain much religious sculpture, they are executed with directness and freedom from artifice, qualities appreciated by the Vietnamese as invoking the true nature of their society. It is no surprise, therefore, that when contemporary artists are searching for an inspiration to give a truly Vietnamese aspect to their work, they should turn to the decoration in the *đình* for inspiration. Furthermore, the fact that this sculpture was created for the village, rather than a wealthy or royal patron, makes it a particularly attractive source of inspiration in the current political climate of Vietnam.

In this regard, it should be mentioned that amongst those *đình* on the National register listed as important historical cultural vestiges, is that of *Đình Tân Trào* in Tuyên Quang province. This was the place where, in 1945, the National Congress met to order a general uprising and where Hồ Chí Minh read his vow to win back the independence of Vietnam.[103] Thus, the political significance of the *đình* as a symbol of the Vietnamese people is clearly evident.

As with their privileged position with regard to knowledge of the Đông sơn culture, the ceramists under discussion are in an ideal situation to gain access to the recent foregrounding of the place of the *đình* in Vietnamese history. Their work in the conservation workshop of the National Fine Arts Museum in Hà Nội means that they are closely associated with current research, as well as having regular access to the examples of đình sculpture within National

[103] Há Văn Tấn & Nguyễn Văn Kự, *Đình Việt Nam,* 1998, p.279

collections. They are all well aware of the cultural and political significance of the sculptures that they have seen and worked with.

Nguyễn Khắc Quân is the ceramist who perhaps has been influenced most by these sculptures and in a very interesting way. Many of his works are overtly erotic and from conversations with Quân it is evident that the sculptures from the *đình* have been a direct influence on this choice of subject matter.[104]

Some of the village festivals are associated with fertility rituals to ensure abundant harvest and many children or are related to taboos. In some villages these rituals involve the worship of symbolic reproductive organs and the mimicry of sexual intercourse in dance. Hà Văn Tấn and Nguyễn Văn Kự describe some of these festival games and dances in their study.[105] Similar activities are represented in the sculpture of the recesses of some of the *đình*, scenes such as cavorting couples, naked girls bathing and drinking scenes (figs.1.22 & 1 23).

Quân was born in 1962 and comes from a traditional potting family, having grown up in the village of Bát Tràng, just outside Hà Nội. In 1980, he was selected to work in the conservation research team associated with the National Fine Arts Museum in Hà Nội. He also studied sculpture at the Fine Arts College between 1988-1994. Like the other potters, he is concerned to imbue his work with Vietnamese qualities. Like Đoan and Toàn, influences of earlier ceramic styles can be seen in many of his works. However, he is also concerned to find his own voice, a notion of individuality that marks a rift with the role of the potter in traditional ceramic villages.

One of the ways in which Quân's work takes on an individuality is the way he brings the subject matter of scenes previously confined to the recesses of the *đình* or associated with particular festive occasions, to his pottery. For instance, his 1999 work of two giant teacups is decorated with nude figures. The size of these cups attests to Quân's great skill in ceramics. These teacups take the place of tea drinkers, as they are displayed on rattan stools usually occupied by the tea drinkers themselves. The two cups are each decorated with a frieze-like

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[104] From conversations with the artist between 1999-2005

[105] Há Văn Tấn & Nguyễn Văn Kự, 1998, pp. 116-120

procession of nudes: one cup with pregnant females and the other with males (fig.1.24). Whilst these pieces resonate with ideas from contemporary art, it is proposed that they are also linked to the secular sculpture of the *đình*. Quân's work may also be linked with the fertility aspects of Đông sơn art, although, in the case of the teacups, the link with *đình* carvings is stronger.

Prior to the twentieth century, the *đình* would have been the only place in which one could have seen nude figures in Vietnamese public art. The angles of the heads and the humorous, crude outlines of the figures on Quân's teacups recall sculpture in the *đình*. Many of the relief figures in these buildings have their heads set at curious angles, giving them a certain expression, while at the same time accommodating the figures within the restricted dimension of the sculpted spaces. Some of Quân's other works take the form of phalluses and female genitalia, again a link with the scenes depicted in the *đình* and with the fertility dances performed at some village festivals.

## Conclusion

Through this examination of the notion of tradition in the work of Vietnamese contemporary sculptural ceramists, it has been seen that the theoretical model proposed by Riegl has both positive and negative aspects. The shortcomings are most evident when a discussion of the meanings of the motifs selected by contemporary artists is required. However, a most positive aspect of his theoretical procedure is the importance of the establishment of formal analytical series or histories of motifs, particularly in art forms that have been largely perpetrated by anonymous artisans. In this way, motifs can be identified as being linked with a certain period. A subsidiary, but important benefit of Riegl's research is the even handed consideration of motifs from architecture and craft as appropriate subject matter in the history of style. This is particularly relevant in a country like Vietnam where prior to the twentieth century, painting, which has so often been taken as the basis for a theoretical analysis of art, had assumed role of lesser importance in comparison to various other media.

Given that the artists under consideration wish to make a statement in their works about their Vietnameseness, an appropriate question is to ask why particular motifs are used and what meanings these motifs have. What aspect of Vietnameseness do they exhibit? To answer these questions it is necessary to explore what is known of the history and cultural context

associated with these motifs at the time they were originally used or, more accurately, how they are perceived to have operated at a particular time.

These contextual meanings add to the complex of meanings of a work of art when it is viewed in the early twentieth first century in Vietnam. It is not so much that the individual pieces made by these ceramic sculptures have a particular Vietnamese style, in fact, they all exhibit quite different personal styles. However, they all have the same concern to mark their work with a distinctive national character and to achieve this they have looked to previous golden eras of Vietnamese history, in particular the Đong sơn culture, the art of the Lý and Trần Dynasties and secular art of the *đình*.

An investigation of meaning and context may provide answers as to why appropriations or connections are made. Nevertheless, in discussing the importance of the meanings of certain motifs in Vietnamese art from the position of someone outside that culture, there is still a possibility of misunderstanding or misinterpretation.

# Chapter 2: Pottery or Sculpture

*We are in the presence of a work of art only when it has no preponderant instrumental use and when its technical and rational foundations are not pre-eminent.*[1]

## Introduction

This chapter, although a digression from the central topic of sculptural ceramics in Vietnam, attempts to give an international perspective for the development of this particular art practice.

In providing an historical background for sculptural ceramics in the Euro-American sphere, the position of sculptural ceramics in Vietnam at the beginning of the twenty first century will be placed in a context of international developments. Concepts developed by artists in France and to a lesser extent, the United States, have impacted on the art world of Vietnam. Vietnamese potters have followed a similar trajectory to those in the west in terms of the way in which pottery enterprises have been organized. During the French colonial period in Vietnam, (1859-1954), as elsewhere, there were changes in the facilities for education in ceramics. In addition, during that time the place of ceramics in the field of art practices was influenced by the Euro-American views discussed in this chapter. Rather than being viewed as one of the art practices, in Vietnam under the colonial regime, ceramics were relegated to a craft practice.

There are two major precursors to contemporary sculptural ceramics: one lies in the practice of contemporary art, with the liberalization of what is perceived as legitimate artists' media, especially within the practices of conceptual and installation art. The other antecedent of sculptural ceramics lies in the history of pottery itself. Most societies that produce ceramics, such as Vietnam, have a history of making sculptural pieces for architectural adornment, religious and ritual purposes or for pleasure. It will be argued that contemporary art practices and the shift in some aspects of ceramics practice have intersected at a point where the potter is theoretically the same as the artist. The shift in perception of what constitutes an art practice in global terms has had the effect of returning the practice of ceramics in Vietnam to its pre-colonial status as an important artistic endeavour.

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[1] George Kubler, The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things, 1962, p.16

## The debate: Ceramics – art or craft?

In the West, the 18th century academic definition of and distinction between the fine arts and practical arts has produced a continuing discussion as to whether ceramics should be regarded as an art or a craft practice.[2] However, this debate does not have the same relevance in Vietnam, at least it did not until the introduction of the *École des Beaux-arts* in Hà Nội in 1925, an institution with a curriculum based on its namesake in Paris. Prior to the French colonial era in Vietnam there was a different hierarchy of artistic practice. Huard and Durand state that the court at Huế during the Nguyễn Dynasty (1802-1945) did not distinguish between artists and craftsmen.[3]

Current Vietnamese perceptions of the position of ceramics are illustrated by the following excerpt from a brochure accompanying an exhibition of Bát Tràng ceramics held in Hà Nội in 2003, in which it was noted:

> In Vietnam, ceramics not only serves purely people's life, but also is considered as a field in which Vietnamese people fully express their thoughts about graphic arts in a peaceful and delicate manner.[4]

In contrast to Vietnamese perceptions of art practice, the Euro-American discussion has generally been concerned with the relative usefulness of an object, contrasting beauty and uniqueness with usefulness and replicability. The distinction is expressed in the definition proposed by Kubler:

> We are in the presence of a work of art only when it has no preponderant instrumental use and when its technical and rational foundations are not pre-eminent. When the

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[2] See I. Frank (ed.) *The Theory of Decorative Art*, 2000, pp. 1-15 for a discussion of the history of this distinction.

[3] P. Huard and M. Durand, *Vietnam Civilization and Culture*, n.d., p.187. Nguyễn Khắc Viện and Lê Huy Văn in their book *Arts and Handcrafts of Vietnam*, 1992, p.3, note that before the 20th century there was no clear cut distinction between art and craft.

[4] Exhibition brochure produced by the Club Office of the Bát Tràng traditional ceramics village, October 4th – 10th, 2003. Further discussion and elaboration of pre and post-colonial art and craft practices in Vietnam will be taken up in Chapter 3.

> technical organization or the rational order of a thing overwhelms our attention, it is an object of use.[5]

There have been many words written on the distinction between art and craft, in particular in defence of whether ceramics can properly be regarded as an art form. For the most part, it is agreed that craft traditions are based in earlier technologies, concerned with replication of items, and generally designed for some specific use. The perpetuation of these technologies is, in many instances, viewed as anti-modern. On the other hand, art involves non-reproducible creations, made by individuals that are generally of no specific use.

While the debate concerning the distinction between art and craft was particularly active in the nineteenth century, in the course of the twentieth century this distinction has become blurred. Duchamp's appropriation of urinals and bicycle wheels, Pop Art's engagement with the everyday and notions of conceptual, installation and performance art have all challenged the position of oil painting and sculpture in metal or stone as being the highest art forms. The challenges have come from many directions. In the field of design, the distinction between useful and non-useful arts was broken down by Bauhaus theories that proposed that aesthetics and functionality should go hand in hand. Vietnam was profoundly influenced in the twentieth century by French educational practices and the establishment of institutions such as national collections of art.

In regard to ceramics, however, the debate continues. Outwardly it is patently obvious whether an article is capable of functional use, but it can be argued that it is the context in which the ceramic is placed and the intention with which it is created that determines whether it is art or craft – if that distinction is actually relevant. In a 2003 exhibition of ceramics produced by the Japanese-American sculptor Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988), the authors considered that arguing for a dichotomy between art and craft was misleading and that a more important aspect of discussing Noguchi's ceramic oeuvre was the question of whether or not the works engaged with issues of concern to an international art world.[6] This same criterion,

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[5] George Kubler,1962, p.16

[6] Louise Allison Cort & Bert Winther-Tamaki, Isamu Noguchi and Modern Japanese Ceramics: a close embrace of the earth, 2003, pp. x-xi

'do the works engage with issues of concern to an (international) art world' seems wholly appropriate when discussing the works of contemporary Vietnamese ceramicists.

Some of the issues involved in the shift from a craft to an art practice in ceramic production, particularly as it has precipitated the appearance of what is loosely termed 'ceramic sculpture' are discussed in this chapter. Paul Rice, in his history of British studio ceramics, states that there is no clear distinction between studio ceramics and ceramic sculpture and that, as of 1989, there had not been an adequate study of sculptural ceramics.[7] Even within ceramic sculpture as it is practiced today, there are substantial differences in practice. For instance, in Vietnam, there is a great difference between the way the three studio ceramicists previously mentioned in Chapter 1 practice their art and that of village workshop production, where sculptural ceramics are made for devotional or decorative purposes.

## The studio crafts movement: Studio Potter/ Artist Craftsman

In the Western context, sculptural ceramics has a precursor in the studio pottery movement, which is a little over one hundred years old. Studio pottery, in turn, developed from ideas of the arts and crafts movement of the nineteenth century. Based on an analysis of a number of surveys of ceramics in Europe,[8] it would appear that the major impetus for the development of the artist craftsman and the studio potter comes from the following circumstances:

i. the reaction to industrialization;
ii. an attempt to retrieve lost national traditions;
iii. changes in knowledge and artistic taste brought about by the International exhibitions of the mid to late 1800s; and

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[7] Paul Rice, *British Studio Ceramics in the 20th Century*, 1989, p.8. This has been somewhat rectified for the twentieth century by Susan Peterson's *Contemporary Ceramics,* 2000, which presents a visual feast of sculptural ceramics surveyed in a thematic manner according to material, objects and non-objects etc. While mention is made of Asian traditions, the claim for the driving force behind the practice of sculptural ceramics in her work sits squarely in the United States with the work of Peter Voulkos and with technical advances in ceramics. Mark Del Vecchio in *Postmodern Ceramics*, 2001, also presents a book of sculptural works, but neither this nor Peterson's book deals specifically with sculptural ceramics in a historically contiguous manner.

[8] Garth Clark, The Potter's Art, 1995; Peter Dormer, The New Ceramics,1994; Bevis Hillier, The Social History of the Studio Arts: Pottery and Porcelain 1700-1914, 1968; Errol Manners, Ceramics Source Book, 1990; Paul Rice, British Studio Ceramics in the 20th Century, 1989; Muriel Rose, Artist Potters in England, 1970

iv. by the appearance in Europe of newly excavated ceramics from China and Korea (especially Song dynasty ceramics from China) that provided new canons of artistic taste.

All these conditions, though in different manifestations, have contributed to the changes in ceramic practice in Vietnam.

## 19th and early 20th Century Pottery in France

The first advances in studio ceramics in Europe occurred in France in the second half of the nineteenth century through such potters as Théodore Deck (1823-91), Ernest Chaplet (1835-1909), Jean-Charles Cazin (1841-1901), Jean Carries (1856-1894) and Auguste Delaherche (1857-1940). From the 1880s, one hundred years before the present resurgence in interest for sculptural ceramics, the fashion for Art Nouveau style resulted in a proliferation of sculptural forms rendered in ceramics. Initially avant-garde French ceramicists took up this style, however they were soon followed by potters throughout Europe and the rest of the world.[9] A perceived necessity to produce a new art appropriate for the age – an art consistent with a more 'democratic' or perhaps ancient view of the arts – was one of the driving forces behind the Art Nouveau movement. Potters such as Chaplet, Carries and Delaherche rejected the hierarchy of fine arts contrasted with the lesser, minor, decorative or industrial arts and viewed artistic practice as an aesthetic whole. Riegl's theoretical writings, especially *Stilfragen* published in 1893, encompassed this change in viewpoint, as he argued that style was a product of the aesthetics of each particular age.[10] Written in *fin de siècle* Vienna, he was surrounded by the art and architecture of the Secession, or Viennese version of Art Nouveau. Riegl, as previously noted, also eschewed the preconceived hierarchy of the arts.

One of the early French artist potters, Jean-Charles Cazin, was initially a landscape artist who was subsequently appointed as chief designer of Fulham pottery in the U.K. He was one of a number of practising painters who became employed in the pottery industry. In a survey of

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[9] Jennifer Hawkins Opie in Greenhalgh P. *Art Nouveau 1880-1910,* exh.cat., 2000, p.193

[10] Paul Greenhalgh, *Art Nouveau: 1890-1910,* exh.cat., 2000, p.19 discusses other writers who considered that the segregation between fine art and decorative art was counterproductive and not in keeping with the spirit of the age – Gottfried Semper (like Riegl, part of the Vienna School) Eugene Emmanuel, Violet-le-Duc in France and John Ruskin in England.

modern French ceramics, Marcel Valotaire comments on the work of twenty-two studio ceramicists. The majority of these men received formal art training in areas other than ceramics, primarily that of painting or sculpture. In their ceramics work, they were nearly all inspired by exotic wares from other cultures – mainly those from Asia – or by a nostalgia for French faiences. One of these men, Georges Serré (1889-1956), is of particular interest for this study, as he was employed as the first instructor of ceramics at the Biên Hòa college of art in the south of Vietnam.

Théodore Deck, who was initially apprenticed to a master earthenware maker and later became the art director of the Sèvres factory, is credited with being the first potter in France to see the need for a fresh collaboration between art and craft.[11] In 1930, Valotaire wrote that he and most ceramic specialists whom he consulted when writing his survey, *La Céramique Française Moderne*, considered that Deck was the father of modern pottery in France.[12] Deck's position in the history of French ceramics has some parallels with that of Nguyễn Văn Y (1919-1993) in Vietnam.

Théodore Deck and Ernest Chaplet both experimented with glazes in order to recreate the exotic glazes of the Orient: Chinese monochromes and flamée glazes in the case of Chaplet (fig. 2.1) and the Iznik glazes from Persian ceramics in the case of Deck.[13]

Jean Carries, despite his brief life, was particularly influential in precipitating a change of taste in ceramics from porcelain to stoneware. Japanese Seto and Bizen stonewares and Meiji bronzes exhibited at the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris in 1878 were the inspiration for Carries to turn to stonewares and put his training as a sculptor into practice in the creation of ceramic sculptures.[14] (fig.2.2)

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[11] Muriel Rose, *Artist Potters in England*, 1970, p.16

[12] Marcel Valotaire, La Céramique Française Moderne, (Modern French Ceramics), 1930, p.7

[13] Ernest Chaplet, (1835-1909) *vase*, (1884-88), porcelain, 28 cms, Musée Nationale de Céramique, Sèvres illustrated in Greenhalgh, P. ed. *Art Nouveau: 1890-1910*, exh.cat.,2000 pl. 12.5

[14] Jennifer Hawkins Opie in Greenhalgh, P. (ed.). *Art Nouveau: 1890-1910*, exh.cat.,2000, p.194 . Jean ( Joseph-Marie) Carries, (1856-1894), *Le Faune endormi*, 1885, Stoneware, salt glazed, French, private collection, illustrated in Greenhalgh, P. *Art Nouveau: 1890-1910,* exh.cat., 2000, pl.12.2

The way in which Japanese ceramicists approach the decoration of their pots – in thinking of the vessel or form as a whole, rather than separate surfaces which need to be decorated – may also have had an impact on these French potters. As can be seen in Japanese pots sent to the international exhibition of 1879 in Sydney, now in the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the forms are treated as sculptural wholes rather than vessels with separate sections such as lid, cavetto, base and rim. (fig.2.3) This is particularly evident in the central jar, where the various sea creatures painted around it's body are about to be caught in the net which extends over both the cover and body of the piece. The incense burner in the form of an ancient Chinese bronze vessel (on the right) is decorated with a vine painted onto the surface of the pot with an applied decoration of sculpted cucurbits with a preying mantis and other insects.[15] While these pots were made for a perceived western taste, they nevertheless still demonstrate something of the Japanese tendency to view the vessel as a whole rather than a series of blank surfaces to which decoration could be applied.

The prime emphasis in the work of these French ceramicists appears to be with formal rather than functional concerns. They strove to replicate the aesthetic effects of particular ancient and exotic glazes. These aesthetic effects could only be achieved through experimentation with the technical aspects of ceramic production. A fillip to the pursuit of formulas for Asian glazes was undoubtedly increased access to Asian ceramics through antique dealers and design houses, such as those owned by Siegfried Bing (1838-1905) in Paris and Christopher Dresser (1834-1904) in London. International exhibitions, especially the Paris exhibition of 1867 and the 1851 exhibition in London, also played a role in exposing Europeans to Asian art objects. In addition, collections of Asian antiquities were brought back by people returning from working in the European colonies and trade depots of Asia. Some of these found their way into public collections, for example, at the South Kensington Museum.[16]

Interestingly, the most significant collection of Vietnamese ceramics to enter a European collection was not sent back to France, even though Vietnam was part of French Indo-China,

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[15] This piece is discussed by Clare Pollard who suggests that it was possibly made by Miyagawa Kozan (1842-1916) in ' Marvels or Aberrations? Early Products of the Kōzan Studio' *TAASA Review,* vol. 14, no. 4, 2005, pp.10-12

[16] Part of the South Kensington Museum became the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1909. Objects from the 1851 Great Exhibition in London formed the basis of the art collection.

but to Belgium. Clément Huet, who worked as a businessman in Vietnam from 1912-1938, sent many antiques to his brother Léon Huet, who, in 1930, opened an antique shop in the Rue de Rosière, Genval, near Brussels. Ultimately, the bulk of this collection, nearly 3,000 pieces, was placed in the Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, Brussels, following Clément Huet's death in 1951.[17]

## British Arts and Crafts movement

Following the lead of the French ceramicists, who as individuals experimented with glazes and methods of decoration, the next significant change towards an art rather than a craft practice took place in Britain. British potters, and those from continental Europe who settled in Britain, produced work which reflected issues addressed in the Arts and Crafts movement which itself was a reaction to mass production in the first half of the nineteenth century. While a few painters, such as Whistler and Turner sought the poetic in the industrial, others involved in the arts turned away from the de-humanizing aspects of the factory, where men were seen as slaves to the machine, and sought to revive old craft traditions.

William Morris (1834-96), the founder of the Arts and Crafts movement, responded to the socialist causes in the writings of John Ruskin (1819-1900) and Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), both of whom expressed their concern for the plight of the common people suffering from the effects of industrialization. Morris was interested in medieval society and he also believed that all creative works should be artistic in essence. Morris's friend, William De Morgan (1839-1917), was one of the early potters who espoused the principles of the Arts and Crafts movement. These principles included a concern for the hand made, truth to materials or an exploration of the uniqueness of the medium, the dignity of the craftsperson and a certain amount of art for art's sake. De Morgan, who built a series of kilns in his various places of residence in London, gained fame from his reproduction of old Syrian lusterwares.[18]

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[17] Janine Schotsmans, 'Clément Huet and the Origin of the Vietnamese Collections of the Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histiore, Brussels', *Southeast Asian Archaeology*, 1986, pp.241-250

[18] De Morgan believed that the lack of a relationship between the technical and aesthetic aspects of ceramic work often resulted in hard lifeless products. This view was expressed in the conclusion of his 'Lecture on Lusterware' delivered on 31 May 1892 to the Society of Arts which was published in their Journal on 24 June 1892. The text of this lecture is re-printed in Gaunt, W. and Clayton-Stamm, M.D.E., *William De Morgan: pre-Raphaelite Ceramics*, 1973

De Morgan and other artist potters in the England at the time, such as the Martin brothers[19] (fig.2.4) and Sir Edward Elton,[20] differed in their ceramic practice from either industrial or peasant ceramic enterprises in the following aspects:

i. there was a certain independence in the way these people worked: they were driven by artistic rather than commercial concerns;
ii. inspiration for the works was sought in the old and exotic: a type of romanticism which, at the same time, required great technical experimentation as well as artistic innovation;
iii. the pottery was marketed in a different way from commercially produced wares: they were made on commission or sold in a gallery; and
iv. the pieces were generally signed rather than using factory or workshop marks.

The reaction to the industrialization of ceramic workshops, nostalgia for the hand-made and increasing opportunities for instruction in ceramics at art schools, rather than through apprenticeships at pottery enterprises, combined to produce a shift from craft to art in some quarters of ceramic practice.

Since the early 1900s, one of the major differences that has brought about changes in pottery practice has been changes in the educational opportunities for potters. From this period pottery was taught as a subject at the Royal Academy of Arts, the Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts and the Central School for Arts and Crafts. Previously pottery skills could only be learnt on the job in one of the pottery factories, where training was gained through an apprenticeship. A similar change has occurred in ceramics education in Vietnam where, since the early 1900s, pottery has been taught at schools of decorative art. However, despite the availability of formal ceramics training, the majority of practising potters in Vietnam still learn their skills through the family workshop. This aspect will be more fully discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

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[19] Robert Martin did the modelling, Walter Martin was the glaze chemist, Edwin was the decorator and Charles the businessman. Garth Clark, *The Potter's Art,*1995, p. 122. The Martin brothers trained at the Lambeth School of Art, London and set up their own pottery in 1877

[20] Sir Edward Elton experimented with ceramics from 1879

After World War 1, ceramics in the United Kingdom were increasingly made by potters working as individuals in their own studios. Clark distinguishes between artist, studio, peasant, and industrial potters.[21] Artist potters, such as those allied with the Arts and Crafts movement, were concerned with aesthetics, and in particular, in the decoration of pottery. They were generally well to do and often worked in the design or decoration departments of large ceramics enterprises. Studio potters, on the other hand, were those who studied at art school and who generally worked independently. Clark points out that although artist potters, for the most part, preceded the appearance of studio potters, there is no strict dividing line between the two different types of ceramic practice. Nor, for that matter, is there a strict dividing line between peasant and industrial pottery enterprises, although the peasant enterprises predate the industrial in their emergence.

Another condition that sets the studio potter apart from the artist potter was the fact that some early studio potters maintained a position that the work did not have to be sold – this is also an aspect of the work of the some of the studio potters in Vietnam, although there with a different twist. Some studio potters in Vietnam are often supported by part time salaries or retirement benefits from State institutions. Peasant potteries as they exist in Vietnam and Southeast Asia today are enterprises in which the methods of production and the types of wares produced have not changed for many hundreds of years. These enterprises are generally operated by people who are associated with an artisan class and produce wares that are sold on the local market. In the Asian context, these wares consist of items such as water storage jars, cooking pots and secondary burial jars. In some cases these potters only make their pots during the slack periods of agricultural work.

Industrialization occurs when there is more specialization of the work in the pottery and when large commissioned orders are fulfilled that often are placed from societies far away from the site of production. Another aspect of industrialization is the utilization of new, more efficient techniques of production. In Vietnam today all four of these forms of pottery enterprise exist concurrently and are discussed in greater detail in chapter four.

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[21] Garth Clark, *The Potter's Art*, 1995

The increasing level of interest in individual ceramics in Europe and America following World War 1 was largely due to the influence and teachings of Bernard Leach, Hamada Shoji and William Staite Murray. Amongst the shared concerns of these potters was their interest in Asian ceramics and the Buddhist faith.[22]

Probably the most influential potter of the 20th century, Bernard Leach (1887-1979), embodied a fusion of the spirit and experience of both Asia and Europe. After spending his childhood in Asia, he was sent to England for his education. He studied at the Slade School of Fine Art and the London School of Art and, in 1909 returned to Asia to teach etching in Tokyo.[23] Having been introduced to pottery making at a Raku party, he began a lifelong pursuit of ceramics, studying under the Japanese master potter, Shighichi Urano, known as Kenzan the sixth. Leach was instrumental in the formation of the Mingei group in 1925, that sought to revive Japanese craft traditions at a time when such things were being neglected in preference to the pursuit of Western technology. On his return to England, Leach established a pottery in St Ives in the 1920's, where he built the first climbing kiln in the West.

Through his ceramic practice and, in particular, in his lectures and writings, Leach has had a profound effect on potters all over the world. However, while many educated potters in Vietnam are aware of Bernard Leach, his works are not available in Vietnamese translation and there are no examples of his ceramics in the country.[24] For Leach, as for the Japanese, pottery was regarded as an art form: a vehicle in which the highest aesthetic taste and spiritual values could be expressed. While never loosing sight of the functional nature of the work, Leach nevertheless viewed each piece of pottery as a work of art, expressive of an individual ideal and in which the clay was even more fundamental to the aesthetics of the work than the decoration. This last point represents a shift in attitude from the then prevailing European view, as there was a fundamental difference between the ways in which ceramics were regarded in the Asian context and in the West. In Japan (and also in Vietnam) ceramics are considered first from the aspect of the clay and then from the subsequent processes that are

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[22] Leach, who became associated with the Baha'i faith, notes in his book *Beyond East and West*, 1978, p. 128-9, the influence of Buddhism, especially Zen Buddhism, on the pottery of Japan and the way in which it is perceived.

[23] See John Clark, *Japanese Exchanges in Art 1850's-1930's: with Britain, Continental Europe and the USA*, 2001, pp. 245-246, for a summary of Leach's interactions with Japan.

[24] Personal communication with various people in Vietnam.

performed on this raw material.[25] Prior to Bernard Leach and his teachings, pottery in Europe was generally viewed from the decoration down.

Leach felt that there should be no division of labour and that potters should be capable of carrying out all the tasks within the workshop. The artist-craftsman was viewed by Leach as the 'chief means of defence against the materialism of industry and its insensibility to beauty.'[26] His ideal was to produce enough utilitarian pots by which to live, so that he could then produce 'special pieces'.

Amongst the reactions to Leach's legacy is the criticism that he was too focussed on the ideas and aesthetic taste of a small group within Japan, Mingei. However, for the revival of the notion of the studio potter in Japan and the subsequent development of this position in Europe, this was an extremely important group. Some commentators have viewed Leach's presence as being too dominant, maintaining that his influence had become 'claustrophobic and regressive'[27], certainly not adjectives that would usually be applied to anything associated with modernism at the time he was working. Paradoxically, his views about ceramics, such as truth to materials, simplicity of decoration and the importance of function in the determination of form, were in line with some of the tenets of modernism.[28] Leach was also of the view that pottery should be in tune with the culture in which it was made, a view that would accord with Riegl's view on the appearance of particular styles. As Castriota remarks in the introduction to Riegl's *Stilfragen*,

> Stilfragen bears eloquent witness to the cultural forces that engender disruption and innovation even as they stimulate the borrowing and preservation of existing artistic concepts and norms.[29]

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[25] *Nhất xương, nhì da, thứ ba dạc lò*, is a Vietnamese saying which states that although all the phases in the production are equally important, the clay is fundamental. Phan Huy Lê, Nguyễn Đình Chiến and Nguyễn Quang Ngọc, *Bát Tràng Ceramics 14th-19th Centuries,* 1995, p. 19

[26] Bernard Leach, *A Potter's Book*, 1955, p.1

[27] Garth Clark, *The Potter's Art*, 1995, p.153

[28] Emmanuel Cooper, *Concept and Form: Bernard Leach*, exh. cat. nd. p.10

[29] David Castriota in Alőis Riegl, 1992, p. xxxii

Innovation and tradition are not mutually exclusive notions but complementary, for the progression of styles which develop within a certain cultural context inevitably reflect the aesthetic concerns of the culture in which they were created. For Riegl, the concept of style gathers the combined force of individual and cultural desires, both of which may be read in and through form.

When Leach returned to the United Kingdom in 1920, he was joined by a young Japanese potter, a graduate from the Tokyo Higher Technical School, Hamada Shoji (1894-1979). Hamada helped Leach to build the climbing kiln at St Ives and participated in a number of exhibitions in England before returning to Japan in 1924. On his return to Japan, Hamada worked in Mashiko, a village of traditional potters who supplied Tokyo with domestic wares. He adopted the values of anonymity (Hamada reportedly didn't sign his works after 1923), honesty, usefulness and humility, values that accorded with those applicable to '*wabi cha*'(poverty tea) in Japan. He became a 'Living National Treasure' in 1955 and, like Leach, gave lectures tours of the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, influencing a subsequent generation of studio potters.

William Staite Murray, (1881-1962) studied at the Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts in London between 1909-1912, in its newly created ceramics department. He was one of the first people in the UK who believed that ceramics was an art form that should be shown in galleries. From early in his career his pottery was influenced by Asian ceramics, particularly Song Dynasty (960-1279) Chinese ceramics, which had become available in England in the early 1900s. He became a Buddhist and this belief undoubtedly influenced his attitude towards his art and his teaching. [30] Staite Murray is remembered for his idiosyncratic style of instruction and as having said about teaching: ' A Zen master teaches by not teaching…it is only when the pupil has learnt by not doing… then the pupil will hear the silence of the master.'[31]

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[30] Malcolm Haslam, *William Staite Murray*, 1984, p.12

[31] Paul Rice, *British Studio Ceramics*, 1989, p.78

Appointed as head of the pottery department at the Royal College of Art, Staite-Murray held that position between 1926 and 1939, thereby influencing a generation of ceramists.[32] Staite Murray's early work was similar to that of Leach, however, there were a number of divergences, including the fact that he priced his works in guineas while Leach priced his in pounds – the difference reflecting the norms for the artist or professional and the artisan or worker.[33] Both men charged a considerable amount for their pottery, a sum that was beyond the pocket of the average Briton at the time.[34] Staite Murray's attitude to his position can be seen in photographs that depict him dressed in a dapper bow tie and sweater, rather than the overalls and rolled up sleeves of earlier artist potters. (fig.2.6)

Staite Murray stressed the abstract and sculptural aspects of ceramics and played down the functional aspect of his wares. This view was challenged in Leach's writings, particularly in Leach's popular manifesto, *A Potter's Outlook* of 1928, which, according to Garth Clark, precipitated a conservative shift in taste that favoured functional pottery. A glimpse of the public attitude towards non-functional pottery and abstract art is available in an obituary for Staite Murray which reads: 'It was, indeed, a sort of fusion of abstract sculpture in painting and the absorption of the concrete material in the function of the piece as a container that saved it from the general discrepancy of abstract art in general'.[35] The writer was patently not enthusiastic about abstraction, reflecting public opinion during the 1960s. As a result of the popularity of Leach's work and writings, which favoured functional ceramics (and lead to the assessment that his work became claustrophobic and regressive), Staite Murray became overshadowed by the fashion for Leach and his ceramics. Nevertheless, the emphasis on functionalism became a position that Leach subsequently came to rue. In a letter to Staite

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[32] The manner in which the appointment was made is believed to have precipitated animosity between Staite Murray and Leach. Garth Clark, *The Potter's Art*, 1995, p.141

[33] Professionals were paid in guineas whereas artisans were paid in shillings. The difference was immortalized in a Whistler mural painting 'L'art et L'argent', 1877, in the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. where Whistler, who had been paid in pounds rather than guineas for the decoration of a room (subsequently known as 'The Peacock Room'), caricatured his patron as a greedy peacock with the missing shillings strewn at his feet.

[34] Garth Clark, *The Potter's Art*, 1995, p.150

[35] 'Mr. Staite Murray Revival of English Pottery', *The Times*, Issue 55321, Feb 21, 1962, p.15,col A

Murray in 1931, he wrote: 'We seem to be in an exaggerated phase of functionalism, so called, which is pushing live handicrafts out with the dead.'[36]

During the 1920s, Staite Murray exhibited his pottery at a number of fashionable galleries and received favourable reviews for these exhibitions.[37] A reviewer in *The Times* discussed his ceramics in the same terms as that of abstract art : for example 'By universal consent first place (in a survey of English potters) must be given to Mr. Staite Murray ….he conceives of the art as a combination of the abstract possibilities of both painting and sculpture.'[38] It was during these years that he began giving each of his ceramics a poetic name. He continued to exhibit in solo exhibitions in the 1920s and 30s and in group shows with modernist artists such as Ben Nicholson, Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth.

Staite Murray considered that pottery was a purely formal art that connected the arts of painting and sculpture.[39] His concerns were focussed on matters of the complementary relationships between the parts: the glaze, timbre, surface and shape. In his view, the functional aspect of ceramics was totally subservient to the aesthetics. He was also a writer and expressed his feelings about his work in prose:

> The clay spirals up in the hands of the potters, this spiral formation allows the clay to expand and unfold, for a pot grows from within, much as the whorled rose unfurls her petals, and all forms of organic life unfold their spiral construction in growing. The potter's wheel establishes the fact that the spinning earth is a vast potter's wheel, moulding organic forms out of earth and water.[40]

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[36] Malcolm Haslam, *William Staite Murray*, 1984, p.40

[37] Staite Murray exhibited at Patterson's Gallery, 5 Bond Street, Leicester Galleries and Lefèvre Galleries, 1A King Street, Saint James and at the Victoria and Albert Museum. For reviews of his exhibitions see *The Times* between 1927-1935 especially July 6, 1928 p.14, Nov 23, 1929, p.10 Feb 17, 1932, p.10, Nov 15, 1935 p.14, Feb. 21 1962, obituary and p.15 *The Listener*, 1957, vol. XLVI, July- Dec. p.428

[38] *The Times*, Nov. 23, 1929; pg 10; Issue 45368; col D

[39] Malcolm Haslam, *William Staite Murray*, 1984, p.27

[40] Garth Clark, *The Potter's Art*, 1995, p.141

The passage reflects Staite Murray's concurrence with the belief that the pot should be considered from the clay up, whilst the metaphor of the earth as the potter's wheel is found in many Asian societies.[41]

The exhibition of Leach, Hamada and Staite Murray's pottery in fashionable galleries and the reviews of these shows by art critics such as Charles Marriott in *The Times* are further indications of the move of studio pottery from a craft world to that of an art world. This was the first time in England that there had been a serious discussion of the aesthetic and technological aspects of pottery in the press.[42] Millar Robbins, in an article 'Clay that Sings' in the *Glasgow Evening News*, said that Murray demonstrated that the pot … 'the most ancient of forms should be elastic enough to hold Modernism'.[43] Thus, what had been previously discussed by an enthusiastic group of artists, potters and their supporters moved into a more public realm through exhibition and discussion in the press by an art critic. The voice of the art critic and the agency of the gallery are features that mark a change in the position of pottery from a craft to an art practice. As Becker notes, when artist-craftsmen change a craft practice, they "develop an 'apparatus' around their practice" which includes exhibitions, prizes, literature, sales and teaching positions.[44] The new educational opportunities for ceramics, the exhibition and sale of ceramic articles through galleries and the critical assessment of the work in the press are all indications of a change in ceramic practice in which studio pottery became a separate category of ceramics.

Changes in pottery practice were taken up in the USA by potters who followed the ideas of Leach and Hamada and by other ceramicists who taught there, some of whom had been trained in England. Sam Haile (1909-48) was amongst those of Murray's students at the Royal College of Art who went to the United States after World War II, taking their particular formalist/modern approach to ceramics with them. Haile was influenced, as so many artists were at the time, by the ideas of Surrealism, (he was a member of the Surrealist group) and by

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[41] For example, see Stephen P. Huyler, *Gifts of Earth: Terracottas & Clay Sculptures of India,* 1996, p.57, who quotes from an Indian potter ' Our religious belief is that the wheel's pivot is Lord Brahma, the wheel is Lord Vishnu and the lump of clay is Lord Shivalinga.'

[42] Muriel Rose, *Artist Potters in England*, 1970, p.29

[43] Garth Clark, *The Potter's Art*, 1995, p.147

[44] Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds*, 1984, p.279

the art of Picasso. Writing about his work in reviewing a memorial exhibition held in London in 1951, Patrick Heron of *The Listener* wrote, that Haile's were 'the first modern pots which bore any resemblance to modern painting.[45] While this is not entirely accurate, as there was a significant group of European artists working in ceramics which incorporated modernist ideas, it nevertheless underlines the fact that critics were prepared to discuss ceramics in the same terms as modern art, acknowledging that potters were engaged with the underlying concerns of modernism. Haile taught at a number of tertiary institutions in the United States before returning to Britain for war service.

## European Studio Pottery

Before concluding this section with a discussion of the 'Craft Movement' and ceramic sculpture as it is practiced in the United States, a summary will follow of the path of modern ceramics in Europe. While, as was mentioned, the ideas of Bernard Leach were dominant, there were other potters in England who were studio potters, but whose path followed different aesthetic principles. Most prominent among the émigré potters in England were Lucy Rie, (1902-1995) and Hans Coper, (1920-1981). Rather than looking to past ceramic traditions, their work engaged with notions of modernism. Lucy Rie was born in Austria and studied in Vienna at the *Kunstgewerbeschule.* In Vienna, a movement to abandon the clichés of the porcelain factories and look at clay again with fresh eyes, inspired in part by the discovery of Chinese grave goods, lead to the emergence of modern ceramic sculpture there in the late 1920s.[46]

Edmund de Waal discusses the potters associated with the *Wiener Werkstätte*, established in Vienna in 1903.[47] He considers that their philosophy, although somewhat similar to Ruskin's ideas and that of the Craft movement in the UK, was nevertheless not as ambitious in terms of their audience. Their concern with the total aesthetic experience and inclusion of the whole created environment resonates both with Riegl's notion of *Kunstwollen* and with his belief that all aspects of the arts should be treated equally. In Czechoslovakia, a group was formed

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[45] Patrick Heron, 'Round The London Art Galleries', *The Listener*, vol. XLVI, no. 1176, September 13, 1951, p.428

[46] T.H. Winter, The Art and Craft of Ceramic Sculpture, 1973, p.xxi.

[47] Edmund de Waal, *20th Century Ceramics*, 2003, p.52

along similar lines. The Artěl Co-operative formed in Prague in 1908. While the ceramics produced by this group were more sculptural and less functional than those produced by the *Wiener Werkstätte*, de Waal considers that they prefigured Malevich's Suprematist vessels of 1923 and beyond that, the ideas of ceramic installation that appeared in the 1970s and 80s.[48] Whilst some Vietnamese artists studied in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s, there does not appear to be any connection between the ideas of contemporary ceramicists in Czechoslovakia and Vietnam; as a result, perhaps, of lack of facility in the language or through being directed in particular areas, such as printing.[49]

Whilst Rie and Coper brought the ideas of modernism to their ceramic practice, other artists, better known for their modernist works on canvas, had already worked in the opposite direction, using ceramics as part of their expressive repertoire. Gauguin's (1848-1903) escape to the South Seas and his quest for inspiration in the 'primitive' could be interpreted as a reaction to industrialization and an attempt to revive lost traditions, the first two conditions mentioned earlier as conditions pertaining to the development of the artist potter. Gauguin was acquainted with the potter Ernest Chaplet – who collaborated in exhibiting many of Gauguin's ceramics in Europe between 1896 and 1906 – as Gauguin worked extensively in ceramics before leaving for Tahiti.[50] He produced many ceramic sculptures without the use of the wheel: his unique and some what subversive style of work can be seen in the expressive form of the stoneware jug.[51] (fig.2.7) The jug is clearly not thrown but sculpted by 'intelligent hands….to give the art of ceramics a new élan for the making of new forms through hand building'.[52] Gauguin led the way for a number of artists to turn to ceramics,[53] and for clay to become a medium in which the artist could extend the notions of what was constituted by art.

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[48] Edmund de Waal, 2003, p.56

[49] From various discussions with ceramic artists in Vietnam. Some Vietnamese have studied the production techniques of commercial ceramic sanitary ware in Czechoslovakia. There is at least one Vietnamese critical writer in the arts who graduated from Karlova University in Prague with a degree in Art History- Thái Bá Vân (1934-1999).

[50] Herschel B. Chipp *Theories of Modern Art,* 1968, p. 65

[51] Paul Gauguin, (1848-1903) *Jug*, Stoneware, Danish Museum of Decorative Art, Greenhalgh, P,. *Art Nouveau 1880-1910,* exh.cat. 2000, pl.12.4

[52] Edmund de Waal, 2003, p. 37

[53] Edmund de Waal, 2003, gives a succinct history of Gauguin and the artists he influenced such as the Die Brűcke artists including Nolde, Barlach etc.

In various studios in France, such as the Vallauris studio established in 1938 by Georges and Suzanne Ramie, Picasso and other artists engaged with clay. They used it as a canvas, as sculpture, for its texture and for an exploration of the interior and exterior as a container. Artists such as Vlaminck, Miro, Chagall, Leger, Luca Fontana and Dufy experimented with clay as a new medium. Cobra artists (including Arpel, Cornielle and Asger Jorn) also experimented with clay between 1948-1951, following their belief that matter, in the form of four elements, was the source of inspiration.[54] Each came to clay as artists rather than from a craft background. Nevertheless, the studios in which they worked – and where they gained the technical knowledge in order to be able to produce their works in ceramics – were run by people who had either gained this knowledge in ceramic factories or through ceramic education at such places as the École des Beaux Arts in Lyon or the School of Decorative Arts at Limoges. It was at this latter school that the wife of the French Director of the Đòng Nai College of Decorative Art, outside Saigon, Vietnam, was trained. Mariette Balick taught ceramics at this art school during the period that her husband, Robert, was the director (1923-1944 & 1948-1950). The college established an agency in Paris and entered international exhibitions in Paris (1925 and 1933), Indonesia (1937), Nagoya (1937), Saint Denis (1938) and Bangkok (1955).[55]

Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) had a significant influence on the popular perception of ceramics. Georgies Ramie, who worked with Picasso at the Vallauris studio, stated that Picasso's involvement with ceramics, between 1946-1953, at a time when he was already an influential figure in the art world, changed the view of many people who had previously considered ceramics as a minor art, to seeing it as a legitimate form of artistic expression.[56] Picasso's influence on the artists of South Vietnam can be seen in a plate (fig.2.8) by Nguyễn Khai which bears many similarities to plates produced by Picasso at Vallauris, particularly those of the Bull fighter series. [57]

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[54] Yvonne G. J. M. Joris, (ed.) The Unexpected: Artists' Ceramics of the 20th Century, 1998

[55] Information provided in an undated publicity brochure from the Đòng Nai College of Industrial Art.

[56] Georges Ramie, *Picasso's Ceramics*, 1974, p.17. Ramie, while acknowledging the effect that Picasso's involvement had on the popular perception of ceramics, also confidently dispels the idea that Picasso started a new style of ceramics, p.99

[57] Nguyễn Khai or Buu Khai, born in 1940.

While some potters in the West have worked with the expressive qualities of clay or used it as an extension of an art practice, there has been a continuing interest in the revival of ancient European pottery traditions. For example, the Englishman Michael Cardew (1901-1983), whose philosophy was influenced by Leach and Hamada, turned back to an earlier slip-ware tradition. In France, the indigenous ceramic traditions that have been revived latterly are those of Bernard Palissy who worked near Agen in the early 16th century. Picasso and other European artists' adoption of the medium of ceramics, the use of Mediterranean forms and subjects and the use of tin glazes, has been interpreted as a reaction against the Orientalist taste and influence in ceramics which had been so dominant in Europe. This is the obverse of what is happening in Vietnam today as ceramicists there work to revive their own artistic heritage and use those references in a way to way to mark their own Vietnameseness.

Not all writers on ceramics hold the view that ceramic artists engaged in the principles of modernism. However, despite Clark's argument that the relationship between ceramics and modernism was 'unconsummated, antagonistic and demoralizing',[58] it can be concluded from the work of the artists in the preceding paragraphs that ceramic artists did, in fact, engage with the precepts of modernism and, in so doing, foreshadowed post-modernism's expansion of the field of art. Nevertheless, Clark's view that the acceptance of ceramics in the domain of modern art was hampered by its association with 'low art', figuration and decoration, held true in the West.

## The United States – The Craft Movement

During the 1950s and 1960s in Europe, and particularly on the West Coast of the USA, a phenomenon labelled the 'Craft Movement' involved a heterogeneous group of craft persons who were primarily concerned with producing well crafted objects expressive of everyday life. The renewed interest in crafts also had the effect of reviving an interest in craft ceramics. Studio pottery flourished, with potters producing a range of wares, startling in technique and varied in form. It was the work of Peter Voulkos, however, that reinvigorated the debate about what could be considered pottery and what was sculptural ceramics.

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[58] Garth Clark in the introduction to Mark Del Vecchio, *Postmodern Ceramics*, 2001, p.8

Peter Voulkos' (1924-2002) early ceramics were clearly vessels, for which he was awarded prizes and, on the basis of this reputation, in 1953, he was offered an appointment as a ceramics instructor at the Los Angeles County Art Institute. However, by 1956, with a work called *Rocking Pot* (fig.2.9) he was blurring the boundaries between pottery and sculpture.

Rose Slivka has interpreted Voulkos' work in terms of the spirit of Abstract Expressionism.[59] His works were seen as physical and muscular, they violated the precedents of pottery and thus allowed Voulkos to achieve the freedom to express his own personality. Works such as *Gallas Rock* of 1960, (fig.2.10) in particular, ignored previous traditions and broke new ground.[60] These ceramics were emphatically no longer vessels: although they were begun on the wheel, the clay was then combined in stacks of cantilevered slabs or with clay built up around cylindrical substructures, such as in the case of *Gallas Rock.*. Furthermore, Voulkos frequently decorated his sculptures with epoxy resins or automotive paints rather than glazes.

Voulkos gained an almost mythical reputation for his method of working and his Herculean strength in being able to handle enormous weights of clay. He is quoted as saying 'I became more and more intrigued with the tactile and emotional potentialities of working in clay which took me beyond the limits of pottery into ceramic sculpture'.[61] Slivka attests that, in his hands, clay moved from being the medium for functional products to being a new creative medium.[62] While this is so in relation to Voulkos, he was by no means the first person to regard clay as being 'a new creative medium'. However, Voulkos did initiate a new attitude to working with clay.

The environment within which his works were received was a United States that saw its role as the leader of the Democratic world and, as part of that role, as the leader in Modern Art in the post World War II years. American art emphasized abstraction, the cult of the individual, monumentality and the new. Abstraction was the art form encouraged by the United States Government in Southern Vietnam during the years of the American war, both in visiting

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[59] Rose Slivka, 'The New Ceramic Presence', *Craft Horizons,* 30, 1961, pp. 30-37

[60] *Gallas Rock*, 1960, h. 7 feet, illustrated in Rose Slivka and Karen Tsujimoto, *The Art of Peter Voulkos*, 1995, p. 71, plate 26. The piece took two years to construct, further differentiating it from what is regarded as pottery.

[61] Rose Slivka and Karen Tsujimoto, *The Art of Peter Voulkos*, 1995, p. 103

[62] Rose Slivka and Karen Tsujimoto, 1995, p. 44

exhibitions and in publications. The United States assumption of the role as the leader of Modern Art is detailed by Serge Guilbault in *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*,[63] and is illustrated in Slivka's article 'The New Ceramic Presence', in which she states:

> American ceramics- exuberant, bold, irreverent- has excited admiration and controversy amongst craftsmen in every field both here and abroad. The most populated, aggressively experimental and mutable area of craft expression, it is symptomatic of the vitality of the U.S. crafts with its serious, personal and evocative purposes.
>
> As in the other arts, ceramics, also, has broken new ground and challenged past traditions, suggested new meanings and possibilities to old functions and habits of seeing, and has won the startled attention of a world unprepared for the unexpected….[64]

While Slivka has insisted on calling the work ceramic sculpture, there are other writers, such as Peter Dormer, who have taken exception to this interpretation and others again, such as Garth Clark, who have chosen to discuss contemporary ceramics in terms of the major preoccupations of the artist.

In conclusion, throughout the 19th and 20th centuries in Europe and America, new areas of ceramic practice developed in the work of artists and studio potters through the movement from craft to an art practice. These changes were initially driven by reactions to the industrialization of pottery enterprises and the perceived loss of ancient techniques. Access to Asian ceramics and ideas stimulated an interest in a different aesthetic and a different way of viewing pottery. Changes in educational opportunities for potters at art schools, rather than through apprenticeships, also helped to change the perception of ceramics practice. Finally, studio potters appropriated the 'artists' way of exhibiting, selling and assessing their work.

A great stimulus to the importance attached to the uniqueness of ceramics artists' work was given by artists such as Picasso, Miro and Gauguin who incorporated ceramics practice into their artistic repertoire. The cult of the individual, expressing his or her own emotions

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[63] Serge Guilbault, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, trans Arthur Goldhammer, 1983

[64] Rose Slivka, 'The New Ceramic Presence', *Craft Horizons,* 30, 1961, p 31

through work in clay, came to the fore with the work of Peter Voulkos in the United States of America. All these changes have combined to reposition studio craft practice within the discourse of contemporary art and this conceptual shift has been underpinned by an examination of 'craft' practices in the terms of current critical inquiry and debate.[65] The changes that enabled a shift from an arts practice to a crafts practice in some areas of ceramics in western societies has direct parallels with what has occurred in Vietnam. This is particularly so in the area of changes in educational opportunities for ceramicists as will be discussed in the following chapter.

[65] Robert Bell, Transformations: The Language of Craft, 2005, p. vi

# Chapter 3: The History of Sculptural Ceramics in Vietnam

*Pottery is both an art and a technique, the artistic badinage with fire*[1]

This first section of this chapter recapitulates the definition of ceramic sculpture first given in the introduction to this thesis and gives a longitudinal survey of the development of sculptural ceramics practice in Vietnam. This survey is a preliminary work and is by no means complete. It aims to give an historical overview and analysis of what is currently known of ceramic sculpture in Vietnam. The second part of the chapter examines some of the particular conditions within Vietnam that have caused a paradigm shift in ceramics practice and the emergence of potters who work as individual artists in the field of sculptural ceramics in Hà Nội. It is proposed that there are three main areas in which significant changes have occurred that have contributed to this shift in ceramics practice, namely, the fields of education, economics and institutional structures.

Vietnam asserts its Southeast Asian affiliations, yet owes much to centuries of Chinese domination, especially in the fields of administration, education and religion. A result of the French colonial period from 1859 to 1954 is an overlay of French educational and aesthetic influence. This is particularly evident in art education. While there was a period of American influence in the South, particularly between 1954 to 1975 and, to some extent, beyond 1975, the input to the North from Russia and the Eastern Bloc countries during the American war and up until the 1980's was also significant, not only in the production of art but also in the approach to writing about the arts. There was also an influence from North Korea in the 1970's in the field of kiln technology. Contemporary influences from all over the world are now evident in Vietnamese art practice, as the country is increasingly engaged with the globalization of information.

[1] Trần Khánh Chương, *Gốm Việt Nam:Vietnamese Ceramics*, 2001, p.146

## Ceramic Sculpture and its History in Vietnam

### What is ceramic sculpture?

As proposed in the introduction, sculptural ceramics can be defined as: ceramic material, terracotta, stoneware or porcelain, that has been worked in a sculptural manner, whereby the functional nature of the object, if there is any, is of secondary purpose. Sculptural ceramics have either been created with a purely sculptural intent from the outset- the artist/sculptor has worked in clay rather than wood, stucco or metal – or they are those in which the sculptural impact of the ceramic work predominates over the functional. This can apply to ceramics which are either architectural or purely sculptural and sometimes includes those that are functional. For contemporary artists working in the medium of clay, the medium is part of their artistic repertoire, rather than their output being limited by the use of clay as a medium.

### History of ceramic sculpture in Vietnam

From the extant evidence it appears that sculptural ceramics have formed a small percentage of the Vietnamese ceramic repertoire, especially when compared to the vast numbers of utilitarian ceramics that have been produced over the centuries. However, even within the repertoire of utilitarian ceramics there is an evident tendency to think of these vessels or embellish them in a sculptural manner. It has been observed, on the basis of extant examples, that 'the Vietnamese were more inclined to sculpture than to painting'.[2] Certainly, little remains of Vietnamese painting prior to the twentieth century, while there are abundant examples of sculpture in all media: wood, bronze, stucco and clay. As a frequently used medium, clay and ceramic sculpture form part of a heritage which foregrounds work in three dimensions. The prominent role taken on by painting since the establishment of the *École des Beaux-arts* in Hà Nội in 1925, has been an aberration in the overall history of artistic production in Vietnam. This situation has caused a prominent Vietnamese writer on the arts to comment that the twentieth century saw a flowering of painted works that caused sculpture

[2] Vũ Giáng Hương etal.(eds), Đieu Khắc Hiện Đại Việt Nam: Vietnamese Contemporary Sculpture, 1997, p.17

in all media, which had been the 'backbone' of Vietnam's artistic heritage, to be assigned to a state of 'orphan hood'.[3]

There is evidence to suggest that pottery has been produced within the geographical area which now forms Vietnam since the 10th millennium B.C.E.[4] In the Red River Delta, near Hà Nội, pottery has been associated with radio carbon dates of nearly 7,000 years before the present.[5] Little or nothing is known of the social organization of these early potters, however, the extant examples indicate that the pots were largely utilitarian in nature. Early burials excavated from the Bronze Age, Đông Sơn period in Thanh Hóa province suggest that pots were also used as ritual vessels. Some of these very early pieces include works that are sculptural; for example, May illustrates the earthenware bust of a woman dated to 200 B.C.E.[6] (fig 3.1) There are also pieces that were possibly made as toys. In these respects, the earliest potters in Vietnam do not differ from Neolithic potters in other societies.

Recently, a large number of terracotta sculptural forms have come to light in Bắc Ninh Province to the Northeast of Hà Nội. These pieces have yet to be dated, but were recovered between 1998 and 2003, during a period of extensive construction of provincial buildings, housing and roads in the city of Bắc Ninh.[7] Most of these small (approximately 10 to 20 cms in height) sculptures are of human figures, both male and female, with pronounced eyes and wide mouths. (fig. 3.2) Some are obviously pregnant and some are emaciated. They are roughly made and are not broken, as is frequently the case with ceramic figures that have been used as propitiatory offerings.[8] There are also many turtles, similar to those excavated in Phú

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[3] Nguyễn Quân in 'Message from Inanimate Objects', in Nguyễn Sỹ Bạch et. al. (eds.), *Không Gian Mới Điêu Khắc Đương Đại Việt Nam,* (*"New Space" Vietnamese Contemporary Sculpture*), 1999, ex. cat. No page numbers.

[4] Jochen May, *Hidden Treasures*, 2000, p. 15, Trần Khánh Chương, *Gốm Việt Nam: Vietnamese Ceramics*, 2001, p.147. The latter gives a succinct history of the various periods and types of early pottery in Vietnam.

[5] Hà Văn Tấn, 'Prehistoric Pottery in Vietnam and its Relationship with Southeast Asia', *Asian Perspectives*, vol. XXV1, no. 1, 1983, p.135

[6] Jochen May, *Hidden Treasures*, 2000, p.28, plate 6 "Female Bust" found in Thanh Hóa Province. Figurative *Đông sơn* ceramics have been published by May in *Die Nachbarn im Süden: Frühe Keramik und Bronze aus Vietnam*, 1998, illustrations 44-49

[7] Discussion with the owner of a collection of these pieces, retired teacher and Herbal Doctor, Nguyễn Khắc Bảo, Bắc Ninh.

[8] For example, William Willetts mentions this practice in relation to Thai figurines in *Ceramic Art of Southeast Asia,* ex. cat., 1971, p.70,

Thọ Province to the Northwest of Hà Nội, an area in which some of the earliest vestiges of human habitation have been found in Vietnam.[9] The terracotta Phú Thọ turtles have been assigned to Lý Dynasty or later, that is, to the period of Vietnamese independence after the period of Chinese control of the area.

What distinguishes the potters of Vietnam from their Southeast Asian neighbours is their early mastery of the technology to produce high-fired ceramics most probably through the transfer of technology from China. These wares were produced from the Han-Viet period (111BCE to the late second century of the common era) onwards, giving the people of the Red River delta the status of having the oldest continuous production of high-fired ceramics in Southeast Asia. Some early sites in the region of Thanh Hóa were excavated by Olov Janse, working under the auspices of French museums and the *École Française d'Extrême-Orient* between 1934 and 1939.[10] Many of the ceramic items excavated by Janse are now in the collection of the National History Museum, Hà Nội.

As with other Asian societies, potters have made sculptural ceramics to be used as architectural decoration and for ritual purposes, especially those used in Buddhist and Daoist temples and in the distinctly Vietnamese communal hall or *đình*. Buddhism entered Vietnam over several centuries in the first centuries of the common era.[11] The introduction of Daoism dates from early on in the first period of Chinese occupation of Vietnam – from the first century BCE to the 10th century of the common era.[12] Both of these introduced philosophies have been thoroughly integrated into the religious life, language and imagery of the Vietnamese. The communal hall or *đình* is the administrative and cultural centre of the village, in which the local tutelary deities are honoured. In the past many special ceramic works were commissioned for the altars of the village *đình.*

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[9] Illustrated in Lan Hương & Lê Thanh Phúc, *Cổ Vật Phú Thọ, Phu Tho's Antiques*, 2005, p.127.

[10] Olov R.T. Janse, *Archaeological Research in Indo-China*, vol. 111, 1958, p. 12

[11] Minh Chi, Hà Văn Tần, Nguyễn Tài Thư, *Buddhism in Vietnam*, 1999, Chapter 1.

[12] Nguyễn Vinh Phúc, *Historical and Cultural Sites around Hà Nội*, 2000, p.58, notes that the Linh Tiên Quán, a Daoist site, is believed to date back over two thousand years. Daoism has evolved within Vietnam, melding with Buddhist and Confucian practices as well as indigenous belief systems.

Much of the funerary pottery and some utilitarian ceramics from the Han-Viet period of Chinese occupation show distinct sculptural qualities. The National Museum of History in Hà Nội and the Museum of Vietnamese History in Ho Chi Minh City contain many examples of architectural models from the 1st to the 3rd century. When recovered in archaeological excavations, these models were retrieved from graves, which, according to their method of brick construction, were classified as Chinese. Interestingly, as yet there is no evidence of the use of human figures amongst ceramic grave goods in Vietnam that parallels the use of the human figure in Chinese *minqi*, or grave goods, indicating a possible difference in funerary beliefs and practices when Chinese and Vietnamese cultures intermingled at this early period. [13]

During the first millennium of the common era, the Vietnamese repertoire of ceramics included some engaging utilitarian forms with distinctly sculptural qualities. An example of this tendency is that of a duck shaped ewer from the National Museum of History in Hà Nội. (fig.3.3) The ewer is dated to the sixth or seventh century and represents a well observed duck sitting on a more stylized, upturned lotus flower. The whole piece is covered in an ivory-yellow glaze. The handle of the ewer resembles a rope which, while adding to the air of rustic reality, contributes to the functionality of the piece in providing a non-slip grip.[14] This early piece is an example of a trend in Vietnamese ceramics in which the forms of the utilitarian piece playfully echo the natural forms with which it is associated. In this case, the ewer, used for pouring liquids- possibly water but ultimately linked with water is composed of a duck and lotus flower in a sculptural essay on the duck pond.

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[13] Bronze sculptures of human figures do occur amongst the early bronzes associated with graves. May, J. *Die Nachbarn im Süden: Frühe Keramik und Bronze aus Vietnam*, 1998, p. 88, illustration 68, shows a pot bellied, seated man from the Han Viet culture. However, it is not clear whether it was recovered from a grave. Stevenson notes that the Vietnamese architectural models are more thinly slabbed and more highly fired than their Chinese counterparts and that the models are based on the vernacular Vietnamese architecture. Stevenson, J. and Guy, J., *Vietnamese Ceramics: A Separate Tradition*, 1997, p. 28. It may be that the Chinese, thicker walled models reflect the thicker walls of Chinese dwellings that had to support a heavy tiled roof, whereas the thatched roofs of Vietnamese architecture were not supported by such thick walls.

[14] 'Ewer', 6th-7th century, h. 20.5 cm, National Museum of Vietnamese History, Hà Nội, plate 17, p.190, Lưu Trần Tiêu et al. (eds) *Cổ Vật Việt Nam: Vietnamese Antiquities*, 2003

Similar imaginative use of natural forms is found in examples of the lime pot associated with the betel ceremony.[15] Lime pots are frequently made in the shape of the areca nut, with the handle representing the betel vine. Thus the lime pot, that provides one of the three essential ingredients of the betel quid, is composed of the shapes of two of the other main ingredients: the areca nut and the betel leaf.

A tendency to use elements in an associative way to create a functional vessel of a predominantly sculptural form is a recurrent theme throughout the history of Vietnamese ceramics. These early potters seem to have had conceptual concerns in making their ceramic forms as well as practical concerns about functionality. This is a more dominant tendency than that of using ceramics to replicate a form originally made in another material, usually a more expensive metal, although works of the latter kind are not entirely absent from the Vietnamese repertoire.[16] Some of the more flamboyant incense burners from the Mạc dynasty (1527-1593) appear to have parallels with metal prototypes. Guy illustrates close resemblances between ceramic items from the Red and Ma River valleys and gold pieces from the Cham kingdom in what is now central Vietnam.[17] Of course, the direction of the imitation is not always secure: were the items first made in ceramic or the more precious material? Nevertheless, it is proposed that the creative use of natural elements in utilitarian pieces is evidence of a more sculptural attitude towards ceramics rather than the more straightforward replication of a form from a prototype in another material. This could be argued to be one of the contributing elements that particularize the style of Vietnamese ceramics in the manner in which Riegl would term the *Kunstwollen* of a particular community.

As well as correspondences in forms between Cham gold wares and Vietnamese ceramic wares, Cham influences are also found in some sculptural motifs used in northern ceramics. These reflect their Buddhist and Hindu origins. For example, the use of the Kinnari motif is found appropriately in ewers where the water would be dispensed for lustration purposes through a spout held by this heavenly being. Makara and Garuda figures were also used as

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[15] The betel ceremony is one of the social customs that Vietnam shares with other Southeast Asian nations, whereas it is not practiced in China.

[16] For instance, May describes some Đông sơn ceramic pieces as imitative of Bronze wares. Jochen May, *Hidden Treasures*, 2000, p.30

[17] John Guy, in Stevenson, J. and Guy, J., *Vietnamese Ceramics: A Separate Tradition*, 1997, p. 19. These resemblances occur from at least the 10th century up to the 15th century.

spouts on pouring vessels.[18] A Cham influence is also found in the use of dancing figures and the so called 'Cham Slave' motif, both used as a type of miniature telamon support on ceramic dishes and jars. In addition the stylized breast motif of the Cham Goddess, Po Nagar, was also appropriated by northern ceramicists.[19] Such motifs were more commonly found during the Lý and Trần dynasties.

A creative freedom, in both form and in painted designs, is noted in many texts about Vietnamese ceramics. In comparison to Chinese ceramics, often sited as the source of much of Vietnamese technical knowledge, Vietnamese ceramics have been described as tending towards 'happy anarchy' or that 'no two pieces are exactly the same'.[20] Although the Chinese held sway over Vietnam for large parts of its history, the Chinese language never replaced the Vietnamese language. Chinese became the language of governance and of the elite but was not adopted throughout the society.

Ledderose makes a convincing case for the use of the Chinese language as a unifying factor in Chinese civilization, that made possible, amongst other things, the mass production of items such as ceramics.[21] Chinese ceramics, especially imperial wares, generally give the impression of a concentration on technical perfection, of an identical replication of effects and on the association of certain forms with certain glazes or types of decoration. Indeed, there were terrible punishments meted out to anyone who transgressed the controls governing the production of porcelain at the Imperial and private kilns in Jingdezhen.[22] Jenyns reports that during the 16th century at Jingdezhen, painters using cobalt on pots were required to work with their hands in stocks in order to curb the pilfering of this precious commodity, a

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[18] Ceramics in the form of a Kinnara are illustrated in Nguyễn Đinh Chiến et al. (eds) *Cỏ Vật Việt Nam: Vietnamese Antiquities*, 2003, p. 235, figs 128 & 129. The Makara and Garuda motifs are discussed by Stevenson in Stevenson, J. and Guy, J., *Vietnamese Ceramics: A Separate Tradition*, 1997, pp.120-122

[19] The Cham slave or *nô lệ Chàm* motif and stylized breast motif is discussed by Stevenson in Stevenson, J. and Guy, J., *Vietnamese Ceramics: A Separate Tradition*, 1997, pp. 118-119. Dancing figures are illustrated in Lưu Trần Tiêu et al. (eds.) *Cỏ Vật Việt Nam: Vietnamese Antiquities*, 2003, p.203, figs 46 & 47.

[20] John Stevenson in Stevenson, J. and Guy, J., *Vietnamese Ceramics: A Separate Tradition*, 1997, p. 28

[21] Lothar Ledderose, Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art, 2000

[22] Ouyang Shibin, in '15th Century Jingdezhen Ceramics made at Private Kilns', a paper presented at the Asian Ceramics Conference, *Resolving the Enigmas of the 15th Century*, Chicago, 1998, referred to various punishments for those potters who violated court regulations during the 15th century.

constraint that could hardly have fostered artistic freedom.[23] In contrast, the Vietnamese repertoire does indeed seem anarchistic. The kilns in Vietnam never reached the size nor were they subject to the same degree of central control as those in China, where impressive items were produced in vast numbers, such as the terracotta warriors of Qin Shi Huangdi in the third century BCE or the court porcelains of the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1912) dynasties.[24]

If we take Trần Khánh Chương's quote at the beginning of this chapter, 'pottery is both an art and a technique, the artistic badinage with fire' we can see that he poses a separation as well as a conjunction between technique and art and captures something of the Vietnamese attitude towards the creation of ceramic pieces by distinguishing the artistic aspect as being that of 'badinage' or 'free play'. This aspect, whether the artistic freedom of the potter or the experimentation with the effects of the kiln, appears to be a leitmotif throughout the production of Vietnamese ceramics - seen particularly in those forms that go beyond the strictly utilitarian bowl or cup. This attitude of artistic pleasure in the process of the creation of ceramic pieces is echoed in the inscription of a Vietnamese vase dated to 1450 from the Topkapi Palace collection, in which the potter stated that it was 'painted for pleasure'.[25] In contrast, the inscriptions written on Chinese ceramics generally relate to a reign date or are stylized forms of the characters for auspicious wishes. Jamieson, in discussing 'How the Vietnamese See the World', proposes a Daoist model of flux and complementarities. He notes a number of important concepts of which *Tình* and *Nhân*, representing spontaneity and feeling, are components.[26] *Tình*, the spontaneous, subjective and intuitive is contrasted with *Nghĩa* representing ethics morality and duty. Perhaps the potters working in Vietnamese villages were unconstrained and so able to express *Tình* and *Nhân* in their works.

Interpreted in Riegl's terms, this evidence of spontaneity, unconstrained expression and associative referencing within an object, could be said to be a specific artistic volition or *Kunstwollen*, operating to create the distinct Vietnamese aesthetic evident in the evolution of

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[23] Soame Jenyns, *Ming Pottery and Porcelain*, 1988, p.158-159

[24] Qin Shi Huangdi conquered the Northern part of Vietnam in 214 and 208 BCE.

[25] R.L. Hobson, 'Chinese Porcelain at Constantinople', *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramics Society*, no. 11, 1933/34, pp. 9-21

[26] Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 1995, pp. 20-21

their ceramic forms and their decoration. Riegl also made an opposition between idealism or 'harmonism' and realism or 'organism'.[27] His theory of perception proposed this opposition between the real (organism) and the ideal (harmonism), which he early on viewed as a distinction between that of the optical and the tactile. Vision is associated with the mind and in some situations is seen as superior to that of touch, which is signified by the body. In the case of sculptural forms in ceramics there is a vacillation between the optical and the tactile in which neither takes precedence. The three dimensional form and the tactile surface invite touch, as in most forms of sculpture, while the appearance of the piece, with its associative meanings, exercises the mind.

Much of what can be regarded as sculptural ceramics directly replicates a natural or visualized form. Imagined forms are those figures of Buddhist and Daoist deities and auspicious mythical beings such as dragons, *nghê*, and guardian deities. There have been a number of portraits made in ceramics in Vietnam, such as the figure of a lady donor from Chùa Bút Tháp (fig. 3.4) and that of a plump reclining Royal son-in-law of the Lê King from the 15th century (fig.3.5) [28] and numerous miniature human heads excavated from the Thăng Long citadel site, dating to the Lý Dynasty, between the 11th-13th centuries. There are examples of the latter in the collection of the National Museum of Vietnamese History, Hà Nội.

There are also many zoomorphic forms found in Vietnamese ceramics, some of which have parallels in the ceramics of Cambodia and Thailand. Zoomorphic forms, especially elephants and horses (both animals associated with royalty), as well as birds and sea creatures are particularly evident in ewers and items for the scholar's desk, such as water droppers and brush washers. One particularly engaging Vietnamese example is in the collection of the Art Gallery of South Australia and takes the form of a crab.[29] (fig. 3.6) This realistically shaped crab, encrusted with a painted piece of seaweed, has a removable carapace which reveals an

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[27] Margaret Olin, Forms of Representation in Alois Riegl's Theory of Art, 1992, p.133. Alois Riegl, Late Roman Art Industry, 1901, p.132

[28] 'Statue of a Royal son-in-law of King Lê', unglazed 15th century, private collection, 9 x 17 cms, pl. 75, illustrated p. 213, Lưu Trần Tiêu et al. (eds) *Cổ Vật Việt Nam: Vietnamese Antiquities*, 2003. The identity of the man is established by an inscription.

[29] D. Richards, *South-East Asian Ceramics: Thai, Vietnamese, and Khmer*, 1995, pl. 107. Similar crab shaped boxes were found in the 'Hoi An hoard' and they can be dated to the fifteenth century, these are illustrated in the Butterfields catalogue, *Treasures from the Hoi An Hoard,* 2000, pp. 233-234 of vol. 2

inkstone. The sculpture of the crab, a creature that is part of everyday life in Vietnam, contrasts cleverly with the interior, in which the inkstone is shaped like a formalized collar, posing a possible reading as the transition from the peasant to the scholar, enabled by study and success in the examination system. Or, perhaps, the transformation exists in performance – the grinding of crabs in a mortar and pestle in preparation for cooking in everyday meals, as described so evocatively by Dương Thu Hương, contrasted with the grinding of the ink stick on the inkstone of the scholar?[30]

Clay has also been the medium for some large sculptures in religious venues such as Chùa Bút Tháp in Hà Bác Province, thought to date from the 13th century[31] and Chùa Thây in Hà Tây Province dating to the 12th century.[32] In these Buddhist temples the guardian deities, donors and the arhats are sculpted in clay. The donor figures, such as that illustrated in fig.3.4 are portraits of a particular individuals. Sculptures of deities, guardians (fig. 3.7) and arhats, that are found in Buddhist and Daoist temples throughout Vietnam, are also portraits that are clearly made with the intention of figural representation, however, they also follow certain iconographic and iconometric guides lines, in contrast to the 'badinage' associated with forms produced for a secular environment. [33]

Ewers, incense burners and lamp stands in the Vietnamese repertoire have frequently been treated in a figural or metaphorical manner, for example, a toad shaped lid of an incense burner dated to between the 13th and 14th century [34] (fig. 3.8) or that of an aristocratic lady from the 15th century in the collection of the Museum of National History, Hà Nội,[35] (fig.3.9) and a dragon shaped ewer, also dated to the 15th century, in the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales.[36] Amongst the associated meanings of the dragon, balanced on its tail,

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[30] Dương Thu Hương, *Paradise of the Blind*, 1988, p.20

[31] Chùa Bút Tháp: The Pagoda But Thap, 1993, p.18

[32] Hà Văn Tấn, *Chùa Việt Nam*, 1993, p.188

[33] Large sculptures in clay are formed around a wooden armature which is then coated in layers of clay.

[34] May, J, Top of an Incense Burner, 13th/14th century, h. 17.1 cm, plate 43 in *Hidden Treasures: 2000 Years of Vietnamese Ceramics*, 2000, p.93

[35] 'Statue of an Aristocratic Lady', cobalt blue pattern and gold overglaze, h. 38.5 cm, illustrated plate 189, Nguyễn Đinh Chiến et al. (eds) *Cổ Vật Việt Nam: Vietnamese Antiquities*, 2003

[36] 'Dragon Ewer', porcelain moulded with underglaze blue decoration, illustrated p. 302, *The Asian Collections of the Art Gallery of New South Wales*, 2003

is that it reflects a former name of the Vietnamese capital, *Thăng Long* or 'Rising Dragon' (fig.3.10). All these small forms are made in high fired, glazed ceramics and the majority of them appear to be luxury items made for ceremonial occasions. Many are unique pieces fashioned with an eye for distinguishing detail. Nguyễn-Long discusses a group of 15th century ewer figurines made for export and notes the individualized body types and accoutrements depicted by the potters, such as the Malay Kris held by one figure and the distinctive moustache and goatee of another. (fig 3.11)[37]

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there was a distinct change in aesthetics which saw the introduction of ritual vessels of flamboyant form and extravagant decoration. Was it changes in ritual, technological advances or simply a fashion for the extravagant that caused such a shift in style? Riegl, one feels sure, would argue a combination of these factors. Many of these pieces, destined for the altars of Buddhist temples, *chùa* or Communal Halls, *đình*, are composed of a combination of basic forms, including the use of upturned Đông sơn drums and columns, which are then decorated with an eclectic combination of applied, heavily sculpted decoration. An example (fig. 3.12) from the National Museum of Vietnamese History, Hà Nội, is composed of a form that rather resembles a *fang ding* from the repertoire of ancient Chinese bronze vessels. The applied decoration includes Buddhist motifs in the lotus, but the predominant motifs are auspicious animals used in ritual regalia, such as the dragons found in the cartouches, as well as *nghê* and flamingo. Such vessels designed for use in rituals are distinctly sculptural in their form, but the impetus for this comes from an elaboration of the vessel.[38]

In the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sculptural ceramics were somewhat less flamboyant than those from the Mặc and later Lê (1428 - and nominally to 1788). Rather than polychrome decoration embellished with applied sections of laterite clay, the potters seemed absorbed with the effects of crackled ivory glazes, such as seen in the Buddhist figure of Maitreya (fig.3.13) or the fantastic animal the *nghê* (fig.3.14), both from Bát Tràng in the 18th century. While there was also a return to the gentle transformation of

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[37] Kerry Nguyễn-Long in Le Trung (ed.), Vietnamese Ceramics in the Museum of Vietnamese History Ho Chi Minh City, 1998, pp.71-73

[38] There is an similarity in the aesthetics of these pieces and those of the 19th century export wares from Japan as discussed in Chapter 2, pp. 7-8.

realistic shapes into functional pieces, seen earlier in the Lý and Trần Dynasties, such as a planter from Thở Hà in the shape of a water buffalo from the 19th century (fig.3.15).

Sculptural ceramics were also made, and continue to be made, for architectural embellishment. A large and comlex repertoire of these pieces includes some recently excavated from the citadel in Hà Nội. There are some dramatic examples made in terracotta, such as some of the dragon heads in the National Museum of History Hà Nội.(fig.3.16)

In addition, there is a repertory of Chinese Cantonese style Shiwan-type ceramics, especially in southern Vietnam, where immigrant Ming loyalists established themselves on an island in the Đồng Nai River from 1679.[39] Glazed ceramic figures can be seen embellishing the roof ridges on numerous Chinese meeting halls and temples throughout the central and southern parts of the country and on some of the buildings in the citadel in Huế. Vietnamese writers regard these Chinese influenced ceramics produced in the south of Vietnam as being assimilated into Vietnamese taste.[40]

As this brief summary of the history of sculptural ceramics in Vietnam has shown, the repertoire includes a remarkable use of naturalistic forms. These demonstrate a keen observation of the natural world in their realization which is combined with a play on a variety of concepts associated with the utilitarian aspect for which the work is intended. There has also been an influence from other cultures - from the Chinese and the Cham in particular, while trade requirements have influenced form and subject matter in ceramics intended for the overseas market. Some of these external influences, such as the meander decoration in underglaze blue and white wares made for the Islamic markets of west Asia and Indonesia (as noted in Chapter 1) has had an influence on domestic forms of decoration as well as ceramic technique. In addition, there are some congruities in form and decoration with Thai and Khmer ceramics, particularly in the use of zoomorphic forms, such as elephants, for vessels. In the words of a Vietnamese collector and patron, the influences are like tributaries of a river that are slowly absorbed as currents in the flow of the main river.[41]

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[39] Kerry Nguyễn-Long, 'Ceramics of Bien Hoa' *Arts of Asia* vol. 33, no. 4, 2003, p.68. In the 1940's the kilns within Saigon moved to Sông Bé Province.

[40] Tần Khánh Chương, *Gốm Việt Nam: Vietnam Ceramics*, 2001, p. 156

[41] Conversation with Nguyễn Mạnh Đức, Hà Nội, 15 September, 1999

Indeed, this metaphor of intersecting influences and interactions seems more appropriate when discussing Vietnamese ceramics than that of an onion, used by essentialists, whereby the outer, foreign influenced layers may be peeled away to reveal a pure, indigenous core.

While the form and decoration of many trade ceramics are to some extent dictated by the market, ceramics produced in Vietnam have tended to exhibit a unique freedom of expression, especially when compared to large and strictly controlled workshop environments, such as that of the imperial kilns at Jingdezhen in China. This relative freedom has allowed Vietnamese potters to explore a range of styles in form and decoration. In the sculptural pieces reviewed here, artists have exercised their imagination as well as their powers of observation of the natural forms that surrounded them. Most of the works that have survived over the centuries are those that were created for luxury markets or were made as ritual objects. In sum, the sculptural forms of Vietnamese ceramics in the past are remarkable achievements in clay.

## The History of Pottery Education and Educational Institutions in Vietnam

Prior to the arrival of the French colonists in the 19th century, the arts in Vietnam were thoroughly integrated into religious and communal life. Painters adorned the pillars and ceilings of pagodas and communal houses, printmakers produced colourful prints for special festivals and embroiderers applied their skill to banners and hangings. Potters produced elaborate lamp stands, incense burners and other paraphernalia for ritual, as well as architectural, adornments. It appears that there was no distinction between art and craft, or, more precisely, if a distinction was made, it was not along the same lines as that which had developed in Europe, where the evolution of the distinction between fine arts and manual arts was based on a perceived intellectual aspect of the fine arts and ultimately the fine arts' aesthetic concern with the concept of beauty.[42]

While painting and some sculpture may have been viewed by a number of Vietnamese as 'art' following the introduction of the French education system and the opening of the *École des Beaux-arts de l'Indochine*, even as late as 1980, Vietnamese writers have distinguished

[42] see Isabelle Frank, *The Theory of Decorative Art*, 2000, pp. 3-5

between 'craft' as something handmade and 'industrial' as something made by mechanical technologies. 'Art' would seem to be associated with oil painting and sculpture as taught by the tertiary art institutions. Within craft products, there were distinctions such as the artistic crafts and those skills that were applied to products made for everyday use such as weaving, basket making and hat or fan making. Within the artistic crafts, there were those destined for export (and for international exhibitions in colonial times), the temple crafts and those produced for royalty.[43] Knowledge of craft practices, including pottery, was passed down through families by way of sons and daughters-in-law. Daughters were supposedly not included, as when they married they would move to live with their husband's family, to whom their loyalties would then be directed.

## Confucian Education

In pre-colonial times, formal education in Vietnam was conducted along Confucian lines. The Confucian philosophy was introduced to the Viet people during the period of Chinese domination from the first century to the tenth century C.E. Some Vietnamese intellectuals even travelled to China to sit the Confucian examinations there.[44] After independence from China was achieved, the Vietnamese continued to follow the Chinese Confucian model of education from 1076 until 1919.[45] Under this system calligraphy was regarded as the highest art form, with other practices, such as painting, poetry and music, equally positioned as required 'perfections'. For those educated in the Confucian system, mastery of calligraphy and poetry produced outward signs of the moral rectitude of the scholar. Painting and music, so important in the literati tradition in China, were not as evident in what has come down to us

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[43]Nguyen Xuan Lai, 'The Craft Industries in the Present Period', *Handicrafts*, *Vietnamese Studies*, no. 62, p. 23 n.d. This book also refers to crafts as being items produced for secular use (Viet Tam, 'Handcrafts in the Past', p. 64) The writings were compiled in the late 1970s and early 1980s, during the period when there was less tolerance for religious activities.

[44] K. W. Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*, 1983, p. 174, notes that during the seventh century ambitious families sent their sons to China for education.

[45] Prior to 1076, Confucian examinations were restricted to a level that qualified scholars to work in low ranking civil service positions. Those wishing to progress to higher levels had to travel to China to sit higher examinations. See *The Confucian Scholars in Vietnamese History*, Vietnamese Studies, no. 56, 1979. J. Whitmore, 'Foreign Influences and the Vietnamese Core', in *Borrowings and Adaptations in Vietnamese Culture,* 1987, p. 9, notes that the Chinese model of government adopted by the Vietnamese from the fourteenth century until French colonial times, initially drew on Confucian classics rather than Neo-Confucian texts. After the late 1430's a Neo-Confucian model was adopted. The Tang administration in China offered special civil service examinations for foreign nationals. Judith G. Smith, (ed.), *Arts of Korea*, 1998, p. 28

in historical documents or extant paintings from Vietnam.[46] This was especially so from the 18th and 19th centuries, when scholars were described as being almost exclusively belletrists, as the aim of the examination system was to produce morally upright men who would serve the country as bureaucrats and diplomats.[47]

Pottery, which included painting on pots as well as the production of sculptural forms, evolved, as it did in most societies, within an artisanal practice. Prominent amongst hand made goods are those associated with the decoration and adornment of Buddhist, Confucian and Daoist Temples. These 'artistic crafts' are principally pottery, sculpture and embroidery. The three occupations for the makers of these goods were defined by the prefix *thợ* designating a skilled worker: *thợ thêu* embroiderer, *thợ chạm* sculptor and *thợ gốm* potter. In Vietnam, until the 20th century, pottery and sculpture were regarded as part of the temple crafts. Pasquier, in 1929, observed that pottery in Vietnam was similar to pottery in France, but that in Vietnam it was 'said to be the first of all crafts'.[48] Potters and sculptors produced items that were (and continue to be) used to decorate places of religion and ritual. As these are sites of power and political significance, considerable status is conferred upon these particular craft products, despite the fact that in only a relatively few instances the works were signed by the maker. The difference between the artistic practices of the scholar educated through the Confucian system, and the artisan, could be argued to be a difference between a practice directed towards individual expression of moral rectitude as opposed to a practice directed towards public expressions of religious potency or political power. The difference is not necessarily one of a hierarchy of artistic expression in the Western sense. In the Vietnamese context a distinction resides in the social or educational status of the person producing the work.

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[46] Prof. Le Van Lam noted that painting, along with music, poetry and chess were the favourite pastimes of a Vietnamese student, but gives no historical references. Le Van Lam, 'Introduction to Contemporary Vietnamese Art', *Seminar on Fine Arts of Southeast Asia*, 1963, p.78

[47] Nguyễn Quân, 'Traditions and Acculturation' in Hantover, Jeffrey, *Uncorked Soul,* 1991, p.13 makes the statement about scholars being 'belletrists'. Huynh Khac Dung, in three articles on ancient education in Vietnam, discusses the texts that were studied and the examination system that was followed. All of the examinations mentioned involved historical, literary and philosophical texts. Huynh Khac Dung, 'L'Enseignement dans l'ancien Viêt-Nam', *France- Asie*, vol. 75, p. 516-525, vol. 76, pp. 683-691 & vol. 77, pp. 762-769

[48] Pierre Pasquier from *L'Annam d'autrefois*, in Triare, M., *Indochina through Texts*, 2000, p.62

Following independence from the Chinese, Vietnamese rulers, to varying degrees, continued to support Confucian ideas and the education system based on three levels of examinations: local, regional and state or imperial. Children were educated in the village school, often located in the *đình,* although there is no exact knowledge of this early education program.[49] Teachers were frequently scholars who had failed in the examinations at higher levels. Primary education was carried out at the local village level until 1906.[50] Successful scholars progressed beyond the local level to regional examinations and subsequently to the final levels of exam at the capital.[51] Theoretically these examinations were open to all, however, in reality the scholars or intelligentsia, by and large, came from certain families or particular parts of the country – the so called 'learning lands'.[52] A disproportionately large number of scholars came from Bắc Ninh province, north-east of the capital. The pottery village of Bát Tràng boasts of a number of successful candidates whose names are engraved on stellae at the Temple of Literature in Hà Nôi.[53] These men were members of families that made pottery, but who devoted themselves to Confucian study and service of the king and country. [54]

Accounts of the Confucian education system emphasize the need for scholars to have mastered Confucian and literary classics. Passing the national examination, opened the opportunity for a career in administration or the military, serving the court.[55] Painting and music, so important in the literati tradition in China (which nevertheless applied to only a

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[49] Nguyễn Đanh Nhiệt, 'Education in Vietnamese Villages and Communes in Recent Times' in Phan Huy Lê et al, *The Traditional Village in Vietnam,* 1993, p.376

[50] Nguyễn Đanh Nhiệt, 'Education in Vietnamese Villages and Communes in Recent Times' in Phan Huy Lê et al, *The Traditional Village in Vietnam,* 1993, p.379

[51] For a discussion of the examination system, including the numbers of successful scholars and the introduction of two levels at the Metropolitan level see Nola Cooke, 'Nineteenth-century Vietnamese Confucianization in Historical Perspective: Evidence from the Palace Examinations (1463-1883)', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 25, 2 September 1994, pp. 270-312

[52] Nguyễn Đanh Nhiệt, 'Education in Vietnamese Villages and Communes in Recent Times' in Phan Huy Lê et al, *The Traditional Village in Vietnam,* 1993, p.378

[53] Giáp Hai, 1507, Vương Thì Trung, 1537, Trấn Thiên Thuật, 1659, Nguyễn Đăng Liên, 1676, Lê Hòan Viên, 1689, Nguyễn Cấm, 1678, Lê Hòan Hao, 1699, Lê Danh Hiến, 1757, Vũ Văn Tuấn, 1805. These names were given to the author by village officials at the Bát Tràng festival 1998. Their names are honoured at the village *đình*.

[54]Do Thị Hao in Vũ Ncọc Khánh et.al. *Quê Gốm Bát Tràng* (*The Home of Ceramics Bat Trang*), 1989, lists the accomplishments of these men.

[55] Nguyễn Quang Khải,'Bác Ninh, the land of laureates of Court examinations' lists the names of the degrees, the types of positions taken up by laureates and gives an indication of the background of successful candidates in Bắc Ninh province. *Vietnamese Studies*, no.3, 2001 pp.56-59

small section of the scholar class) do not appear to have been as emphasized in Vietnam as they were in China. Vietnamese scholars who felt morally constrained to seek retirement from imperial service due to conflicts with the moral or ethical precepts of the regime, often pursued a life devoted to teaching, medicine, astrology or geomancy.[56] There does not appear to have been a tradition of reclusion from official duties to pursue literati pastimes, such as painting, which occurred in China. One of the more famous Vietnamese scholar 'recluses' of the 18th century was the author Nguyễn Dữ, (1765-1790), whose realist novel, *The Tale of Kieu*, 'denounced the greed of oppressive and corrupt feudalism'.[57]

In China, painting was elevated from the status of a craft to that of art during the Song dynasty.[58] The Emperor Huizong (1082-1135) formally established a painting academy in 1104, which ensured that painters were well educated in the classics and poetry and that they had a precise status within the court hierarchy: thus institutional, educational and social changes enabled some painters to negotiate a shift from a craft practice to an art practice.[59] However, it would appear that potters and those who painted on pots in China were, until the 20th century, regarded as artisans. Unlike Vietnam, there are no recorded names of decorators of pots until the early twentieth century.[60]

By the time the painting academy at the court in China was established, Vietnam had already gained independence from its more powerful neighbour and had embarked upon a period of nationalistic, independent expression in the arts. Although the first centuries following the 939 defeat of the Chinese saw a great flowering of Buddhism in Vietnam, Confucianism, and in particular Confucian education, remained important.[61] The *Quốc Tử Giám,* Royal College or National University, was established in *Thăng Long* (i.e. Hà Nội) in 1076, adjacent to the

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[56] The Hung, 'An Eventful Century' in The Confucian Scholars in Vietnamese History, *Vietnamese Studies*, no.56, 1979, p.86

[57] Nguyễn Khăc Viện & Hữu Ngọc, Vietnamese Literature: Historical background and Texts, p.80

[58] Susan Bush and Hsio-Yen Shih, *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*, 1985, p.89

[59] James Cahill, 'The Imperial Painting Academy' in Wen C. Fong and James C. Y. Watt eds, *Possessing the Past: Treasures from the National Palace Museum Taipei*, 1996. The aim being to elevate the subject matter of painting beyond physical resemblance to a more abstract level associated with philosophical and metaphysical concepts, references to poetry and the classics of Chinese literature.

[60] Personal communication with Professor Craig Clunas, 18.4.2005. Yixing pottery is the exception in the corpus of Chinese wares, Louise Cort, personal communication June, 2006.

[61] Buddhism was adopted as the State religion.

temple of literature, *Văn Miếu*, which honoured Confucius and his disciples. The *Quốc Tử Giám* trained potential imperial officials and their training consisted of studying the Confucian classics, histories and literature. Students from this institution became candidates at the triennial national level examinations.[62] In 1805, during the Nguyễn dynasty (1802-1945), when the capital was moved to Huế, a Temple of Literature, *Van Thánh*, was established in that city, again, to honour the founders of Confucianism and to record successful candidates at the Confucian examinations there.[63] The Confucian system of education was banned by the French and the last national examination was held in 1919.[64]

In an ironic twist of history, following the ousting of the brief Ming occupation of Vietnam between 1407 and 1427, the Vietnamese statesman, Nguyễn Trãi, (1380-1442) advocated a Confucian model of government based on that of the Song neo-Confucianist, Fan Zhongyan. During the Lê dynasty (1428-1524), the Vietnamese chose to continue the education system of the Chinese, albeit by adopting an earlier model, from the time that a separate painting academy was established in China. However, no such painting academy was established in Vietnam. During the fifteenth century, Emperor Lê Thành Tông (1406-1497) established a literary circle at the court, an institution that again is evidence of a Vietnamese focus on literary pursuits.[65]

From the fifteenth century onwards, Vietnam became increasingly influenced by neo-Confucianism. The last Vietnamese dynasty, that of the Nguyễn, was outwardly distinctly sinophile in the particular forms taken in its artistic and architectural legacy. However, as

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[62] From 1434 though to the Nguyễn dynasty examinations were held approximately every three years. In previous times the period was longer and more variable. See Ham Chau, 'The learning tradition revisited', *Vietnamese Cultural Window*, no. 28, July, 2000, p.4. The names of successful candidates at the National examinations are engraved on stone stellae within the precincts of the *Văn Miếu* in Hà Nội.

[63] Stellae at the Temple of Literature in Huế record the names of 297 laureates who passed the examinations between 1822-1919.

[64] S.H. Mc Hale, *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism, and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam*, 2004, p.74. Nguyễn Đanh Nhiệt, 'Education in Vietnamese Villages and Communes in Recent Times' in Phan Huy Lê et.al, *The Traditional Village in Vietnam,* 1993, p. 380 states that the last examination was held in Tonkin in 1914 and in Annam in 1918. In June 1919 in an Imperial decree, the King abolished teaching in Chinese characters.

[65] Kim Chi in 'Towards the foundation of a Vietnamese Academy,' *France Asie* Vol. 8, 1953, pp. 649-652, puts forward a case for the establishment of a Vietnamese Academy based on the French Academy, noting the fact that in the fifteenth century there was a literary circle at the court of the Emperor Lê Thành Tông (1460-1497) but that the function of the literary circle was taken over by the Hàn Lâm Academy when it absorbed the literati. Chi claims that the literati were not creative.

various commentators have noted, this type of bureaucratic model does not necessarily mean that the Chinese model was followed in its entirety. Giebel notes that the Vietnamese had adapted, but not wholly adopted early Song Confucianism.[66] Cooke argues that the structural resemblances of a Confucian bureaucracy in the Nguyễn dynasty was not underpinned by corresponding numbers undertaking, or being successful in, the Confucian examination system at this time.[67] Giebel and many others have noted that the Vietnamese focussed on the practical and ethical aspects rather than political orthodoxy and self cultivation. The lesser emphasis on self cultivation by the scholars in Vietnam may be part of the reason why painting there was not elevated to the same status that it enjoyed in China. To date there has been a lack of investigation into this matter, with many writers on the subject of painting in Vietnam repeating the inaccurate opinion that there was no painting in Vietnam prior to the arrival of the French. There remains an unexplained, curious difference in attitude towards painting between China and Vietnam during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, when the court at Huế was distinctly sinophile in outlook.

The scholar Đặng Xuân Bắng (1827-1910) is reported as having said on numerous occasions

> In our country only mandarins and the rich possess articles of value. Very few things are made for the people's use. Moreover those who keep trades secrets have many defects. 'The tailor steals material, the artist steals glue,' 'the painter does shoddy work, the jeweller cheats his customers.' Those who succeeded in doing something useful jealously kept it secret for fear that it could be imitated. Handicrafts were reserved for the common people. The gentry and middle class did not take the slightest interest in them. As the Court attached great importance to literary competitions, gifted people embarked on this road and were of no use to the people.[68]

From this passage we can deduce that there were painters working in Vietnam prior to the 20th century and that their output was classified as one of the handicrafts. It also confirms the

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[66] Christop Giebel, in Hue Tam Ho Tai (ed.) The Country of Memory: Remaking the past in Late Socialist Vietnam, 2001, p. 92

[67] Nola Cooke, 'Nineteenth-century Vietnamese Confucianization in Historical Perspective: Evidence from the Palace Examinations (1463-1883)', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 25, 2 September, 1994, pp. 270-312

[68] Phan Dai Doan, The Humanist Scholars, *The Confucian Scholars in Vietnamese History*, *Vietnamese Studies*, no. 56, 1979, p.116

preference given to literary pursuits amongst the intelligentsia. S.Baron, commenting on Taverniere's account of his voyages to 'Tonqueen' in the late 1700's notes the prevalence and prominence given to literary pursuits in Vietnam but mentions that there were painters. Despite the fact that Baron is described as being as 'native of Tonqueen',[69] and it is not immediately obvious what sections of the writing are in Baron's or Taverniere's voice, the description of the history and customs of the Vietnamese are written very much as the history of the Other. It is noted that 'There are few painters in Tonquin (sic), who are employed to decorate the temples and distinguished houses, but their art is still uncouth; yet several of them show marks of genius, which under able masters might shine and lustre.'[70]

As for sculpture, the opinion is as follows: 'Sculpture is confined to carving a few rude statues of idols, most of which are merely religious figures of invention, and intended to represent Genii, under frightful forms, it seems that the greatest perfection seems in making them as horrible and fantastic as possible'[71] From other parts of the text it is clear that the writer was not conversant with all the deities depicted, and it is interesting that the focus is solely on what appear to be fearsome guardian deities. In the totality of Vietnamese sculpture there are far more depictions of benign Buddhist deities than of ferocious guardian figures; furthermore, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw a flowering of remarkable, realistic sculptures in communal halls and pagodas such as that shown in fig. 3.17, of an attendant on an immortal at Chùa Dâu, Hà Bắc, dating to the late 18th or early 19th century. From a Vietnamese perspective we get a very different account, as, writing specifically about Buddhist scultpture, Nguyên Quân considers that between the 16th to the 19th centuries 'there were between two or three million statues on a scale and density that was rarely found any where in the world' and that, in the period from the 16th to the 18th centuries, Buddhist sculpture developed to its full

[69] S. Baron in Pinkerton, John , A General Collection of the best and most interesting voyages and travels in all parts of the world: many of which are now first translated into English, 1808-1814, vol.9, p.656

[70] S. Baron in Pinkerton, John, 1808-1814, vol.9, 1814, p.736

[71] S. Baron in Pinkerton, John, 1808-1814, vol.9, 1814, p.736

classical capacity.[72] In Baron's account there is little mention of pottery, except for the statement that 'there are potteries everywhere'.[73]

In summary, the Confucian education system within Vietnam seems to have distinctly favoured literary pursuits and analytical writings. On the existing evidence, it appears that there were no educational institutions for instruction in pottery until the 20th century and that potters gained knowledge of their practice through working within a family unit. There were, however, a small number of potters who were successful within the official examination system.

## Institutionalization of Art Education under the French Administration

During their period of colonization of Vietnam, the French established a number of institutions that both changed the educational opportunities for artists and artisans while at the same time placing historical and archaeological knowledge in the public sphere. In some instances the colonial bodies replicated similar institutions already existent in France. Contemporary artists in Vietnam have been influenced by, and have benefited from, the formal training made available in current educational institutions, which has evolved from the preceding colonial establishments. Rather than gaining art education on the job as an apprentice, through the art schools that were established in the early twentieth century with curricula based on French prototypes, artists have been able to gain a formal education and tertiary qualifications. As Clark says, 'Art schools are institutions that radically change what art skills are and how they are acquired within the Asian context'.[74] Contemporary Vietnamese artists have also benefited from research, initially undertaken by the *École Française d'Extrême Orient* and from the museum collections that were initiated during the colonial period. What follows is a summary of the history of the relevant institutions and a discussion of the salient features that have had some bearing on the sculptural ceramicists of today.

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[72] Nguyên Quân, 'Lược Trinh Điêu Khắc Phật Giáo ở Việt Nam' (Summary Account of Vietnamese Buddhist Sculpture) in *Mỹ Thuật*, 4, (35) 1988, p.16

[73] S. Baron in Pinkerton, John, 1808-1814, vol.9, 1814, p.736

[74] John Clark, *Modern Asian Art,* 1998, p.163

A number of cultural societies and painting classes were established early on in the French colonial era (1859-1954). Amongst the former, the *Société des Etudes Indochinoise* was established in 1883 in Saigon and the *Les Amis du Vieux Hué* in 1914.[75] Both systematized cultural knowledge and produced regular publications of their research. Gustave Emile Dumoutier, chief of education in Tonkin from 1886, established various educational institutes including a 'drawing school'.[76]

Although a number of foreign amateur archaeologists such as Clément Huet (1874-1951) and Louis Pajot (dates unknown) operated in Vietnam, an official body was established in 1898 – the *École Française d'Extrême Orient*. This organization was based on the model of similar French establishments at Athens and Rome, where the aim was for the scholars to study ancient civilizations whose cultural underpinnings were vital to subsequent civilizations. In following this centre-periphery model for the dissemination of culture, scholars of the *École Française d' Extrême Orient* turned their attention to India and China as the two formative sources of cultural significance for the area of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. Generally, the view was to link, or value, cultural vestiges in the Indochinese region in terms of their relationships, links or debt to the civilizations of India and China, rather than looking at the culture from within the region and how it adapted to and accommodated outside influences. While the output of the institution was principally related to the Indianization of art in Southeast Asia, in Hà Nội there was an obvious emphasis on China in the writings of scholars. The Chinese collection in the library in Hà Nội was regarded as one of the best in the world.[77] On the five kilometres of shelves that were in the library of the *École Française d'Extrême Orient* in the 1950's there were 27,000 volumes on Chinese works whereas 6,000 were classed as 'Annamite' (i.e. Vietnamese) documents and decrees, while 2,000 related to

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[75] Louis Malleret, 'L'Action de la France sur La pensêe en Indochine', *France–Asie*, Revue Mensuelle De Culture Franco-Asiatique, No.13, 15 April 1947

[76] Andreas Augustin, *Sofitel Metropole Hanoi*, 1998, p.21. Jeffrey Hantover in *Uncorked Soul Contemporary Art from Vietnam*, 1991, p. 20, refers to the establishment of what seems to be the same school.

[77] Catherine Clementin-Ojha, and Pierre-Yves Manguin, *Un Siècle pour L'Asie: L'École Française d'Extrême-Orient 1898-2000*, 2000, p.224

Cambodia and Laos.[78] In 1945 the French had listed 1,200 historic monuments that were under their protection of which over half, 700, were in Cambodia.[79]

Dumoutier mentions a school of design that was established in Hà Nội in 1897 under the patronage of the Chamber of Commerce. The subjects involved were embroidery, metalwork, sculpture, inlay work, lacquer and silk and the aim was to 'improve' the quality of the work in order to export these items to Europe and America.[80]

A number of educational institutions were created in Cochin, or the southern third of Vietnam. In 1901 the *Thủ Dầu Một* painting school was established near Saigon.[81] This was followed in 1903 by the *École d'Art de Biên Hòa*, now known as the Đồng Nai College of Decorative Arts, which was set up as part of the French educational program to improve local handcrafts.[82] Some years after the latter school was established, a ceramics course was introduced by Georges Serré (1889-1956), one of the early headmasters. Serré was a ceramic artist who had previously worked at the Sèvres factory. Some of his work shows the influence of his time in Indochina, such as the seven headed naga motif on the ceramic pot in fig. 3.18. This motif is found on sculpture from the Cham kingdom in Vietnam, as well as that of the Khmers, both linked by the common cultural heritage of Buddhism and Hinduism.

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[78] Paul Levy, 'L'École Française d'Extrême-Orient', *France-Asie* 15, 15 June 1947, p.521. Many of the books from this library are now kept at the Viện Thông Tin Khoa Học Xã Hội (Institute for Communications, technology and Sociology, in Hà Nội. Catherine Clementin-Ojha, and Manguin, Pierre-Yves,*Un Siècle pour L'Asie: L'École Française d'Extrême-Orient 1898-2000,* 2000

[79] Cochin was the name that the French gave to the Southern part of Vietnam, the central area, with Huế as the capital was known as Annam, and the north as was known as Tonkin. The people were called 'Annamese' by the French, based on the Tang Chinese name for Vietnam, Annam which meant 'pacified south'. Until the 1980's Vietnamese ceramics were generally referred to as Annamese wares outside Vietnam. William Willetts in the catalogue essay for a 1982 exhibition of Vietnamese ceramics organized by The Southeast Asian Ceramic Society, Singapore, proposed dropping the appellation. Willets, W. in C.M. Young, et al.(eds) *Vietnamese Ceramics*,1982, p.2

[80] G. Dumoutier, *L'Enseignement Français en-Annam et au Tonkin,* ( French Instruction in Vietnam- a report for the Universal Exposition of 1900), Hà Nội, 1900

[81] C. De Ménonville, *Vietnamese Painting From Tradition to Modernity*, 2003, p.22. Nadine André- Pallios *L'Indochine: Un Lieu d'Éxchange Cultural?*, 1997, p.210. André- Pallios suggests that these early schools in the Southern part of Vietnam were set up on the principles of pre-existent artisan guilds.

[82] Kerry Nguyễn-Long, 'Ceramics of Bien Hoa' *Arts of Asia* vol. 33, no. 4, 2003, pp. 66-78, notes that due to a combination of factors, including disruptions caused by war, that it is very difficult to find records and documentation relating to the first decades of the existence of the school within Vietnam. Her article charts the development of ceramics at the Đồng Nai College of Decorative Arts on the occasion of its centenary. Nguyen Thi Nguyet in the article 'Artistic Ceramics From Bien Hoa', *Vietnam Cultural Window*, no. 24 , March 2000, pp. 16-18, discusses the establishment of pottery enterprises at Bien Hoa from 1679, by potters of Chinese origin who set up in the area that was already being used as a pottery producing site by ethnically Vietnamese potters.

Serré was replaced as headmaster in 1923 by Robert Balick, a sculptor, who, with his wife Mariette, did a great deal to raise the profile of ceramics at the *École d'Art de Biên Hòa*. Their term at the College was extended three times: 1923-34, 1935-44 and 1948-50. Mdme. Balick, who had graduated in ceramics from the School of Decorative Arts, Limoges, France, became very interested in the ceramic practice of Vietnam and of Biên Hòa in particular. It is claimed that she introduced Western ways but then became more involved in the local practice.[83] Chemicals for the glazes were initially imported from China, but eventually local materials such as rice husks, ash, ground laterite and bronze dust were used. The potters were encouraged to copy an orientalist style, then highly fashionable in Europe, as one of the aims of the school was to produce artisans who would contribute to the economic well being of the colony. An example of a Biên Hòa pot, which illustrates these tendencies is shown in fig. 3.19. An association of Potters and Founders of Biên Hòa was set up with the help of former students.[84]

An agency of the college was established in Paris and functioned there until 1945, but was not long lived due to changes in taste and the vicissitudes of war. The college also had a craft co-operative that was established in 1923. Between 1927-1938 both the college and the co-operative were awarded International Diplomas from various trade fairs in which they participated such as those at Paris, Nagoya, Hong Kong and the Philippines.[85]

In 1913 the Gia Đình school was founded near Saigon, where the initial disciplines of design, sculpture and printing were extended by the introduction of architecture in 1940.[86] This school was remarkable in that one of the early directors was Vietnamese, Hùynh Đình Tựu (1922-1925).[87]

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[83] Boi Tran Huynh, 'Vert de Bien Hoa', *Pottery in Australia*, no. 38 (3) 1999, p.32. In her PhD Thesis, *Vietnamese Aesthetics from 1925 onwards*, 2005, p. 82, Boi Tran Huynh claims that Mdme Balick also introduced firing cones for the kilns.

[84] Nadine André-Pallios, L'Indochine: Un Lieu d'Éxchange Cultural?, 1997, p.211

[85] Boi Tran Huynh, 'Vert de Bien Hoa', *Pottery in Australia,* no. 38 (3) 1999, p.32, Nguyen Thi Nguyet in the article 'Artistic Ceramics From Bien Hoa', *Vietnam Cultural Window*, no. 24 , March 2000, p. 18

[86] Nadine André-Pallios*,* 1997, p.211

[87] Nadine André-Pallios, 1997, p.211

## École des Beaux-arts de l'Indochine

In 1925 the *École des Beaux-arts de l'Indochine* was established in Hà Nội.[88] The advent of this school, with its curriculum based on that of its namesake in Paris, institutionalized a distinction that had not been (to this author's knowledge) previously discussed in Vietnam - the distinction between the artist and the artisan – art and craft. Due to the French based curriculum and a prevailing Eurocentric view of modernism, many historians regard 1925 as the time when Vietnam engaged with modern art practices. A branch of the *École des Beaux-arts de l'Indochine* was established later in Biên Hoà, Saigon, (1955). This school, and those established in Cambodia and Laos, taught specifically craft based programs, as part of the rationale for French investment in education was to increase the industrial and economic potential of their colony.[89]

In 1923 the artist Nam Sơn or Nguyễn Vạn Thọ (1890-1973), who had travelled to Paris with Tardieu and studied with Jean-Pierre Laurens, wrote a manifesto on 'Vietnamese Painting' which purportedly became the basis for the proposal for the Fine Arts College.[90] An excerpt from this manifesto was published in *Vietnam Cultural Window*.[91] The document stressed the need for parallel courses of instruction in both Western and Asian techniques. Nam Sơn was a member of the original staff of the school both as a teacher and in an organizational role, however, perhaps for reasons of his perceived collaboration with the French, his contribution has not been previously acknowledged by Vietnamese historians. Conversely, he has also been obscured from French accounts in which the impetus for the school is attributed solely to a French initiative.

A decree of 1924 set forth the philosophy behind the establishment of the school in Hà Nội. The numbers and terms of employment of those associated with the school, the method of selection of students, and an outline of the courses they would follow, including the number

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[88] The school has had various names and has been known as known as the *Trường Đại Học Mỹ Thuật Hà Nội* since 1981. Quang Việt, (ed.) *Painters of the Fine Arts College of Indochina*, 1998, pp.138-140, gives a summary of the history of the school.

[89] See I. Muan, *Citing Angkor: The 'Cambodian Arts' in the Age of Restoration 1918-2000*, PhD thesis, 2001, regarding the history of the Cambodian school

[90] Huu Ngọc & Hòai Việt, 'An Artistic Legacy Revived', *Vietnam Cultural Window*, no. 59, February, 2003, p. 2

[91] 'Nam Sơn', *Vietnam Cultural Window*, no. 59, February, 2003, p.6

of hours devoted to each subject, was set out in this document.[92] Although, as previously mentioned, a number of schools for training artisans had been set up in Indochina, the French government acknowledged the need for another establishment to train teachers and to provide guidance for those who would carry on the artistic traditions of 'the orient'.[93] Justification for spending French money on the establishment of such a school was provided in the acknowledgement that there was a growing taste in Europe for artistic products from Asia. It was also argued that there was a need to revive Indochinese artistic traditions, as these were perceived to have fallen into decadence since the beginning of the nineteenth century.[94] A report made at the Paris Colonial Exposition of 1931 stated that between the arrival of the French and the establishment of the *École des Beaux-arts de l'Indochine*, the Vietnamese had launched themselves into 'disastrous pastiches' of what they perceived to be French taste and invented a 'detestable composite style'.[95] The school was created as part of the *Université Indochinoise*, which was established in 1908. In addition to providing teachers for the decorative art academies throughout Indochina, it was also considered, from a rather paternalistic position, that the courses would help to raise the taste of the indigenous population.[96]

The intention of the government, as stated in the document, indicates that there would be an entrance exam for which the candidates had to produce a drawing from the nude model, a watercolour of a given subject and a perspective diagram. Such tasks would have been quite difficult for anyone who had no experience in these areas. The bill also proposed that there would be an annual show of the best of the student works and that there should be a museum

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[92] Direction Générale de L'Instruction Publique, Arrêté précédé d'un rapport de présentation portant création à Hanoi d'une "École des Beaux-arts de l'Indochine". 27 Octobre 1924, Gouvernment Général de L'Indochine, Hà Nội

[93] The *École des arts cambogiens* was established in Phnom Penh in 1913, B. de Hartingh, *Vietnam: Plastic and visual arts from 1925 to Our Time*, exh. cat., 1998, p.20

[94] In the introduction to the bill, Blanchard de la Brosse, Director of Public Instruction in Indochina, asserted that ' La France sera ansi fidèle à son rôle de grande éducatrice, dans toutes les domaines, des peuples don't elle contrôle ou dirige l'evolution et elle accomplira de la sorte, en Indochine, dans l'ordre intellectual comme dans l'ordre économique, une oeuvre d'une portée incontestable.'

[95] Direction Générale de L'Instruction Publique, *Trois Écoles D'Art De L'Indochine*, 1931, p.9

[96] Arrêté précédé d'un rapport de présentation portant création à Hanoi d'une "École des Beaux-arts de l'Indochine". 27 Octobre 1924, Gouvernment Général de L'Indochine, Hanoi. p.5

annexed to the school under the guidance of the school director.[97] These intentions have been carried out in that the art school now has a permanent gallery space on the campus where exhibitions of Vietnamese and visiting artists are held. (see fig. 6.6) The first exhibition of students work was held in 1929 and was followed by others, including a well received exhibition of works in the Indochinese Pavilion at the Paris International Colonial Exhibition in 1931.[98] Fig. 3.20 shows the paintings and sculpture displayed in 1929. Thus another change in art practice took place in Vietnam that altered the way in which art works were viewed and circulated. Instead of being produced for specific patrons, or commissioned for trade, the works were placed in public places and were for sale.

It was proposed that students (the school took students from Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, French nationals and other foreigners) would specialize in either painting or sculpture, according to their talents. In this proposal, lacquer painting was mentioned under the painting course, as was ceramic design; thus reflecting the intention of training future teachers. The sculpture course also included ceramic relief work. A Government report on the school mentions a person in charge of the ceramics course.[99] All students were required to spend approximately half of their time (fifty hours per month) drawing from the live model. A lesser amount of time was devoted to still life and it was acknowledged that in view of the lack of a museum or collection of old masters from which students could copy, that they should paint and draw scenes from everyday life.[100]

The largest proportion of the students' time was allocated to '*Décoration'*: sixty hours a month, or one half of each day. This also seems to reflect that the main purpose of the school

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[97] Arrêté précédé d'un rapport de présentation portant création à Hanoi d'une "École des Beaux-arts de l'Indochine". 27 Octobre 1924, Gouvernment Général de L'Indochine, Hanoi, p.5

[98] Thái Bá Vân in *Cultural Representation in Transition: New Vietnamese Painting*, exh. cat. 1996, p.30 The exhibition included the works of Lê Phổ, (1907-2002) Tô Ngọc Vân (1906-1954) and Nguyễn Phan Chánh, (1892-1984) and the sculptors Vũ Cao Đàm (1908-2000),and Georges Khánh (b.1905)

[99] *Trois Écoles D'Art De L'Indochine*, Direction Générale de L'Instruction Publique, 1931, p.17. I have been unable to determine anything further about this person. The website http://www.culturalprofiles.org.uk/Viet_Nam/Directories/Vi_ACYAIw-7879_ADs-t_Nam_Cultural_Profile/-1497.html mentions that a ceramics class was established in 1934 at the École des Beaux Arts.

[100] *Arrêté* précédé *d'un rapport de présentation portant création à Hanoi d'une "École des Beaux-arts de l'Indochine*". 27 Octobre 1924, Gouvernment Général de L'Indochine, Hanoi. , p.10 . 'Dans ce pays òu manquet les Musées, on sera conduit dans les études, à diminuer la part ordinaire de la tradition, mais celle de l'étude de la nature deviendra d'autant plus grande et les artistes tireront le plus grandes profit du pittoresque de la vie annamite: scenes de la rue, cérémonies, nus de l'atelier ou de la rizière, costumes.'

was to provide teachers for the artisanal schools. The students were taught methods and procedures for design in various media, including ceramics. In addition to the practical courses already mentioned, thirty sessions a year were devoted to aesthetics and to the history of Western and Asian art. These were lectures were open to the public. The largely vocational aspect of the school accords with Kelly's analysis of the colonial education system in Vietnam. She noted that the French institutions set up for the education of their Vietnamese subjects were largely vocational.[101] Nevertheless, tertiary institutions were established for the elite, as, apart from the proportionately small number of students, the language of education in these academies was French. Thus a paradoxical social situation was established, particularly in relation to sculpture. Sculptors, who had previously learned their art within a village or family environment, were being created from the educated elite.

The *École des Beaux-arts* opened in 1925 in a disused electrical generation plant as the *École Supérieure des Beaux-arts* in Hà Nội with a French principal, French teachers and Vietnamese assistants.(fig. 3.21) The original class took ten students and there were only between ten to fifteen students in each class up until 1945: a tiny number compared with candidates for the Confucian exams in previous centuries and when compared with the numbers of sculptors, ceramicists, bronze workers and print makers working in villages in the northern part of Vietnam. During this initial period, from 1925 until 1945, ten of the graduates were sculptors, out of a total of one hundred and twenty eight graduates.[102] One hundred and forty nine students were accepted, representing approximately 10% of applicants, although there were some free places awarded. The school closed in Hà Nội in 1945 with the Japanese coup and operated from the countryside as the Resistance School during the war years.

The initial French staff of the school included the founding director Victor Tardieu (1870-1937), who petitioned the French government to create the art school, and the painter Joseph Inguimberty (1896-1971). Both these artists had won the Prix de l'Indochine, a travelling

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[101] Gail Paradise Kelly, *Franco- Vietnamese Schools: 1918-1938*, Ph.D. Thesis, 1975, pp.15-17,

[102] Nguyễn Lương Thiểu Bạch, (ed.) *Trường Đại Học Mỹ Thuật Há Nội*: *Hanoi Fine Arts Institute*, 1998, p.139. Jean François Hubert, in 'Victor Tardieu ( 1870-1937) at l'École des Beaux arts de l'Indochine' in J-F Noppe & C. Hubert (eds.), *Arts Du Vietnam: La fleur du pêcher et l'oiseau d'azur,* 2002, exh. cat., pp. 169-170, presents tables of the numbers of pupils who applied and who were accepted between 1925-1929 and in 1932. By far the largest proportion came from Tonkin (North Vietnam).

scholarship.[103] One of Tardieu's works, a mural of 77 square metres, painted between 1921-27, was in the main lecture room of the Indochinese University. The work was destroyed, but is visible in the background of the photo.(fig. 3.22) It represented a visual metaphor of France's *mission civilatrice* with a white woman symbolizing 'the Mother Country' in the centre. There are some Mandarins from the Huế court on one side and "the people of Indochina under the protection of the 'Government of the Protectorate'"on the other.[104]

Tardieu was keen on providing a sound academic background, and was complemented by Inguimberty who encouraged his students to paint directly from nature, taking them out into the countryside. Principal of the *École Supérieure des Beaux-arts* Hà Nội between 1925 and 1937, Tardieu was an artist of the neo-classical and academic tradition, having studied in Lyon (1887-1889) and Paris (1889-1891). In 1934 he became Chairman of the *Société Annamite d'Encouragement à l'Art et à l'Industrie*, an organization which aimed to help artists and artisans. One of the ways in which this body assisted the arts was in the organization of annual exhibitions in Hà Nội. Decorative arts and sculpture were included in these exhibitions.(fig. 3.23) Tardieu is credited with aiming to help the Vietnamese artists get back in touch with the deep meaning and fundamental inspiration of their own traditions and is quoted as having said 'falling back on the past will be efficient only if it is used as a starting point for a new research, for an evolution in line with the contemporary era: to summarize, the question is to evolve as contemporaries within the extension of a tradition'.[105] In his attitude towards the Vietnamese and his philosophy about art schools in Indochina, Tardieu was at variance with Georges Groslier, an archaeologist, who was principal of the

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[103] The Prix de l'Indochine, instituted in 1901 was 'awarded to painters whose work had been displayed either at the"Salon de la Société coloniale des artistes Français", the Salon de la Société des artistes Français", the Salon de la Société nationale des Beaux –arts" or the "Salon d'automne', …selected by a jury from the academy Beaux-Arts and of the four salons. The painters received a subsidy and a two way ticket. They were to remain at least for three months in the colony and to display their work there, of which one was to remain in the colony. Bertrand de Hartingh (et. al.) *Vietnam: Plastic and visual arts from 1925 to Our Time*, exh. cat.,1998, p.48. The Prix de l'Indochine and its link with the École des Beaux-arts de l'Indochine is discussed in the Government bulletin, *Trois Écoles D'Art De L'Indochine*, Direction Générale de L'Instruction Publique, 1931

[104] Quang Phòng in Quang Việt, (ed.) *Painters of the Fine Arts College of Indochina*, 1998, p.143

[105] Lưu Yên in Bertrand de Hartingh (et al.) *Vietnam: Plastic and Visual Arts from 1925 to our time* , Brussels, 1998, p.40

school in Phnom Penh and who believed that the Cambodians should be taught to develop their artisanry.[106]

Évariste Jonchère (1892–1956), also differed from Tardieu in his views about educating artisans and artists. Teacher of sculpture from 1932-36 and principal from 1938-45, taking over on the death of Tardieu, Jonchère believed that the institution should 'train artistic workmen rather than artists.'[107] It was under Jonchère that the school went through its first name change to The School for Fine and Applied Arts. Courses on lace making, embroidery, book binding, etc were introduced.[108] The distinction between art and craft was hotly debated in the early years of the school, due partly to the belief held by some of the French staff that their Vietnamese students were only capable of producing 'craft' and not fine art. While de Ménonville asserts that the criticisms directed against Jonchière are now irrelevant, nevertheless, the attitudinal change reflected in his stance provided a basis from which a groundswell of anti-colonial feelings could develop.[109] Students, including Trần Văn Cẩn (1910-1964), (who later became director of the school between 1954-1965) and Nguyễn Đỗ Cung (1912-1977), (who became the founding director of the Museum of Fine Art) protested against Jonchière's curriculum in a paper entitled *Ngày Này* (*Today*).[110] They challenged him to 'compare his own sculpture to sculpture found in ancient pagodas and communal houses for vigour, meaning and originality.'[111] The debate was aborted in the years of war that engulfed the country.[112] Taylor discusses this rift and the groups that were formed in support of each view point. [113]

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[106] I. Muan, Citing Angkor: The 'Cambodian Arts' in the Age of Restoration 1918-2000, PhD thesis, 2001, p.24

[107] Nguyễn Lương Tiểu Bạch, Trường Đại Học Mỹ Thuật Hà Nội: Hanoi Fine Arts Institute, 1998, p.7

[108] Corinne de Ménonville, Vietnamese Painting: From Tradition to Modernity, 2003, p.27

[109] Corinne de Ménonville, 2003, p.27

[110] *Ngày Này* was published in 1934 and ceased publication after thirteen issues. Neil Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 1995, pp157-8

[111] Jeffrey Hantover, *Uncorked Soul: Contemporary Art From Vietnam*, Plum Blossoms Gallery, exh. cat. 1991, p.21

[112] See also the article by Jean Gallotti, 'The Fine Arts School of Hanoi' in Quang Việt, *Painters of the Fine Arts College of Indochina*, 1998, pp. 140-141

[113] Nora Annesley Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art*, 2004, p. 34. Taylor considers that this debate has transformed into one over the role of the artist in society.

Following the August revolution of 1945 and the proclamation of the nation's independence, the Minister for Education in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam created a new School of Fine Arts and direct French influence ended. In 1950, this new school was established in the resistance zone.(fig.3.24) Tô Ngọc Vân (1906-1954) became the leader of this school where Trần Văn Cẩn,(1910-1994), Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm (b.1922), and others served as teachers.[114] Quang Việt traces the history of the institution through the war years, noting the various venues and teachers involved.[115] The philosophical objectives of the school took on a Marxist approach and students were encouraged to produce art that was scientific, national and popular.[116] Scientific meant nothing associated with religion or mysticism; nationalistic meant serving the revolutionary cause; and popular meant producing propagandistic art or art that served the purposes of the revolution. Artists were to be totally dedicated to the needs of the Vietnamese nation and to put their art in the service of the revolutionary cause. In fact, between 1950 to1975 the role of the artist, like that of other occupations, was viewed as a dual role, as that of artist /soldier. In 1955, the school reopened at its present location, 42 Yết Kiêu Street and continues to train an educationally elite class of Vietnamese artists.

In 1957 a School of Fine Arts was established at the University in Huế, the capital under the Nguyễn dynasty, where a strong school of sculpture flourishes.

## University of Industrial Fine Arts, Hà Nội

While drawing, painting, sculpture and architecture were taught at the *École des Beaux-arts*, now the University of Fine Arts, pottery was, and still is, taught at the University of Industrial Fine Arts. The latter school was established by the French in 1949, when it was called The State School of Fine Handcrafts.[117] Initially students in the first year at the school followed the same curriculum as the University of Fine Arts. The French Indochina war caused

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[114] Other educational institutions, such as the Conservatorium of Music, operated in the relative safety of the countryside during the war years.

[115] Quang Việt, 'The Fine Arts College of Indochina: history' in *Painters of the Fine Arts College of Indochina*, 1998, pp.138-140

[116] Neil Jamieson in Cultural Representation in Transition: New Vietnamese Painting, exh. cat., 1996, p.19

[117] Ian Were,' Hanoi's college of Design…A Vision', *Object*, 2-97, 1997, pp.30-31.

disruption in both campuses, with the State School of Fine Handcrafts closing in 1954. It was re-opened in 1959 and gained its present name in 1965. The main building, shown in fig. 3.25, houses the ceramics faculty and their collection and is a building in a Soviet-Vietnamese style of architecture. On re-opening in 1959, the traditional temple crafts of sculpture, lacquer, ceramics and embroidery were the departments in the school.

The Vietnamese name, *Trường Đại Học Mỹ Thuật Công Nghiệp*, which literally translated means University of Industrial Fine Arts, points to the conundrum when imposing a distinction between art and craft in Vietnam. The faculty of ceramics was established 'sometime in the mid 1958' at the *Trường Đại Học Mỹ Thuật Công Nghiệp*.[118] Since 1965, when the school was renamed, the curriculum was broadened, as the university became more oriented to industrial rather than traditional handcrafts skills. Since the introduction of a ceramics course, specific training in this medium has been available at a university level in Hà Nội. The institution serves as both a training and a research centre.[119] Research has focussed on the restoration of old glazes as well as research into new technologies, as can be seen in figs. 3.26, 3.28 and 3.30. These show examples of various works by students and staff that are in the collection of the university and they indicate a divergent range of influence and practice. This eclecticism sometimes produces ironic combinations, such as seen in fig 3.26. The decoration on the large jar on the left fits within the approved socialist subject matter as it shows a worker engaged in an industrial process in what could be called a socialist realist style, whereas the technique is reminiscent of *Fahua* style of ceramics from the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) in China. *Fahua* wares were originally intended for architectural acroteria and for wares used in a religious context, the later being a problematic subject for the new Communist state in Vietnam. The technique of *Fahua* involves the use of clay 'fields' produced by trailing slip outlines in which the glaze pools; similar to the manner in which cloisonné enamels are made. However the piece produced in Hà Nội does not utilize the alkaline glaze characteristic of Chinese *Fahua* wares. The cloisonné technique in ceramics

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[118] Trần Nguyễn Đán, (et.al. ed.) *Tác Phẩm Mỹ Thuật: Sưu Tập của Bảo Táng Mỹ Thuật Việt Nam* , *Art Works: Vietnam Fine Art Museum's Collection*, 2002, p. 79 –this date seems somewhat improbable given that the school did not re-open until 1959, however, the faculty could have been established prior to the reopening of the school to students.

[119] Trần Khánh Chương, *Gốm Việt Nam: Vietnamese Ceramics*, 2001, p.158

was adopted in France in approximately 1860.[120] Subsequently this technique was taught at the Biên Hoà school as seen in fig. 3.19. Such transfers of technology illustrate the circular nature of influences, for the appearance of certain opaque enamels used in Chinese ceramics occurred through the introduction of these enamels from Europe in the early 18th century, having been developed there for glass wares.[121] The jar on the right of fig. 3.26, with a nude or scantily dressed figure depicted on the side of the pot, also exhibits the cloisonné technique, but it is a quotation from Trần dynasty ceramics. The Trần dynasty pots, from which the design and technique of the modern pot is derived, are decorated with warrior figures, incised on their surfaces in a sgraffito technique.(fig. 3.27) The sgraffito technique in Trần wares uses an incising around the field to contain the glaze, rather than the raised edges of the field of the *Fahua* cloisonné wares.

The display of ceramics at the university contains examples of modern ceramics that have imitated forms from the past as well as wares created for current markets. Ceramics are also used in sculptural forms. (figs 3.28 & 3.29) Fig. 3.28 shows two ewers in the form of a crab with a shrimp, based the style of 16th and 17th century wares (fig. 3.29). Both the contemporary replicas and the original display the particularly playful aesthetic found in many sculptural forms in Vietnamese ceramics discussed earlier in this chapter . The back row of the display has pieces with a more social realist style, such as the young mother with her baby, while the boy playing the flute resembles carvings from *đình* or communal houses in their planar, constricted form.

The mixed media sculpture using ceramics and steel in fig.3.30, contrasts with the classical plaster model that is a remnant from earlier days at the school. From the ceramics displayed at the University of Industrial Fine Arts it can be seen that the teachers and students have absorbed many influences in their ceramic practice over the relatively short history of the institution. The appropriation of old Vietnamese forms and techniques illustrates the contemporary ceramicists concerns to maintain their links with the Vietnamese past.

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[120] Nigel Wood, *Chinese Glazes*, 1999, p.223. Kerry Nguyễn-Long, 'Ceramics of Bien Hoa' *Arts of Asia*, vol. 33, no.4, 2003, pp.73-74, discusses the French Longwy factory and other European factories that employed the cloisonné technique.

[121] Louise Cort, in Louise Allison Cort & Jan Stuart, *Joined Colors: Decoration and Meaning in Chinese Porcelain*, 1993, p.28

The use of Soviet models in both the architecture of the building and the subject matter of the ceramics, reflects the close association between the Soviet Union and Vietnam following Hồ Chí Minh's establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1954 and the ensuing economic and technical aid from the Eastern bloc. Logan notes the parallel circumstances of both Vietnam and the USSR in the human and physical losses endured by both countries during the twentieth century and the model set by the USSR in the reconstruction of its own urban landscape.[122] The Eastern Bloc countries held exhibitions of their industrial products in Hà Nôi in the 1950's and there were also exhibitions of Vietnam's flourishing craft industries, all of which were intended to inspire the Vietnamese and bolster public morale.[123] However, any stylistic influence from earlier twentieth century Russian innovators in artistic ceramics, such as Kasimir Malevich and Wassily Kandinsky, appears to have been overlooked in the political expediency to produce an art that fitted with the Vietnamese national agenda for scientific, non-sentimental art that inspired the working masses.

The Russian example of the restoration of parts of their devastated cultural heritage, even though the buildings and luxurious excesses in art and other accoutrements represented a way of life the regime no longer condoned, may also have had an impact on the attitude to the recovery of the nation's past in Vietnam. The recovery of past ceramic techniques is a small section of the larger recovery of the nation's cultural past in which the Vietnamese Government has been actively involved.

A syllabus of the University of Industrial Fine Arts is attached in Appendix 1. The subjects are based on those from the French and Russian prototypes. In the opinion of the staff of the university, the instruction is more spontaneous and less structured than that found in Chinese ceramics schools.[124] Enquiries made in 2003 from the sub-dean of the Ceramics faculty indicated that the figures of numbers of students studying ceramics have not been kept.

Through the programs introduced by last two institutions in particular, the University of Fine Arts and the University of Industrial Fine Arts, the education of artists in general and ceramic

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[122] W. Logan, *Hanoi: Biography of a City*, 2000, pp. 185-186

[123] W. Logan, 2000, p.186

[124] From correspondence with the sub-dean, January 2003

artists in particular was significantly transformed in the middle of the twentieth century in Vietnam. Initially French aesthetics were imposed on the Indochinese students; however, in recent years the art schools throughout the region have taken on their own particular ethos, while retaining curricula that have commonalities with tertiary art intuitions of France and other regions of the world. While they were, with the exception of the École des Beaux-arts, initially established to foster the economic well being of the colony and sought to produce artisans who would cater to the European taste for orientalist wares, in the 21st century, these schools of art seek to fulfil the educational, aesthetic, as well as the industrial requirements of the Vietnamese nation. Other institutions established initially by the French which had a significant effect on the education of artists within Vietnam were the establishment of public collections that not only carried out research into the Vietnamese artistic heritage, but which also made certain works of art more accessible.

## The Establishment of Public Museums

In Saigon, the Blanchard Brosse Museum was established in 1929 and displays the arts of various Asian countries, including Vietnam.[125] Later called the National Museum of Vietnam in Saigon, and from 1975, The Museum of Vietnamese History, Ho Chi Minh City. There is also a Museum of Fine Arts in Ho Chi Minh City ( *Bảo Tàng Mỷ Thuật Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh*) that was founded in 1987 and opened its doors to the public some years later.[126] A traveling component of the National Fine Arts competition is displayed there. Earlier, in 1915, the Cham Museum was established in Đà Nẵng, reflecting the great interest taken by French academics at that time in Hindu and Buddhist art. [127] The French perceived a parallel between the 'Indianized' art of Southeast Asia and their own *mission civilatrice.*

The Louis Finot Museum was established in Hà Nôi in 1932 as the headquarters in Indochina of the *École Française d'Extrême Orient* . In 1958, the name was changed to *Bảo Tàng Lịch Sử Việt Nam* The Museum of Vietnamese History. (fig. 3.31) The building was designed by

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[125] Le Trung (ed.), Vietnamese Ceramics in the Museum of Vietnamese History Ho Chi Minh City, 1998, p.19

[126] The Museum of Fine Arts in Ho Chi Minh City ( *Bảo Tàng Mỷ Thuật Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh*) is located at 97a Phó Đứ Chính, Q1

[127] *Museum of Cham Sculpture in Da Nang*, 1987, p.4 . Nadine André-Pallois mentions that the French concentrated their attention on Khmer art and architecture to the detriment of that of the Cham and the Vietnamese 'alors que l'art vietnamien n'est finalement perçu que comme une mauvaise réplique de l'art chinois.' *Indochine: Un Lieu d'Échange cultural?*, 1997, p.59

the French architect, Ernest Hébrard, who established the Architecture course at the *École des Beaux-arts de l'Indochine*. Constructed between 1925 and 1932 of reinforced concrete, the National History Museum is considered to be one of the finest examples of Hébrard's buildings. It exhibits an eclectic combination of motifs in the style that became known as '*style indochinese'*. The building also contains many features such as verandas, window canopies and ventilation devices that were better adapted to the Vietnamese climate than directly transposed French structures. The museum collections provide an over view of the material culture of Vietnam from prehistory to independence and include many items excavated and recovered by the staff of the *École Française d'Extrême Orient*. The ceramics collection, in particular, is perhaps the finest and certainly the most extensive chronological survey of Vietnamese ceramics up to the late nineteenth century.

Recent additions to the ceramic collection include objects from maritime archaeological sites such as the so called 'Hoi An Hoard', recovered during 1997-1990. A museum of ethnology was opened in 1937 in Hà Nội. Malleret, writing ten years later, mentioned the importance of the preservation of ancient cultures and methods in Vietnam.[128]

### National Fine Arts Museum

Originally located at 38 Cao Bá Quát Street, the National Museum of Fine Arts (*Bảo Tàng Mỹ Thụat Việt Nam*) grew out of the Vietnam Institute of Fine Arts and Crafts which was created in 1962[129] to fill the vacuum left by the demise of the *École Française d'Extrême Orient* in Vietnam. The Institute was created under the Ministry of Culture and moved to present location, 66 Nguyễn Thái Học in June 1966 with the establishment of the National Museum of Fine Arts on 13 October 1972.[130] (fig 3.32) This Museum's collection consists of paintings, sculpture, ceramics, textiles and bronzes, covering the time period from Vietnamese pre-history to the present. The major part of the exhibition space, however, is given over to the

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[128] Louis Malleret, 'L'Action de la France sur La pensêe en Indochine', *France–Asie*, Revue Mensuelle De Culture Franco-Asiatique, No.13, 15 April 1947

[129] Nguyễn Tiên Canh, 'The Vietnam Institute of Fine Arts, History and Perspectives', *Vietnamese Studies*, (105) 3-1992, p.6. The writer was the director of the Institute at the time the article was written when the name had dropped the 'crafts' component.

[130] Suzanne Watzman, 'Change and Continuity' *Vietnam Cultural Window*, no 72, May/June, 2004, pp. 2-3. The building was constructed in 1930 as a Boarding convent for daughters of wealthy Vietnamese and French Officials. After the Indo China war in 1954 the building was briefly the home of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the Democratic republic of Vietnam.

arts of the twentieth century. In the section of the Museum that exhibits a chronological view of Vietnamese ceramics, one quarter of the exhibition space is given over to twentieth century ceramics.

The original name, Institute of Fine Arts and Crafts, reflects the European distinction between arts and crafts, while the name changes, to the Vietnam Institute of Fine Arts and the National Fine Arts Museum, some years after the defeat of the French during the First Indochina War, indicates a change in attitude that reflects more Vietnamese sensibilities towards the collection. Despite the fact that the collection contains painting and sculpture from the twentieth century, it also displays earlier art forms that, in a western setting, would be classified as ethnographic, decorative or applied arts. Current staff members, in describing the collection, refer to all its parts – prints, ceramics, paintings and sculpture – as art.

Copies of major pieces in the collection were made during the Second Indochina War as an insurance against loss. Fortunately the building was not bombed and the originals remained safe. These copies were used for travelling exhibitions immediately following the 1975 re-unification of the country. Travelling exhibitions of 'Vietnam Ancient Sculpture' and 'Vietnam Contemporary Fine Arts' were taken to Huế, Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh (Ho Chi Minh City) and Đà Nẵng following 1975 as a political move to establish pride in both the ancient and contemporary art of the country.[131] The museum also collects the work of artists who have won prizes in National Fine Arts Exhibitions.[132] The political nature of the Museum has again been fore-grounded by the current director, Dr. Trương Quốc Binh, who states in the introduction to a book of the Museum's collections, 'To build a Vietnamese Culture progressive and rich in national identity is both an objective and a motive force of the socio-economic development.'[133]

Two men in particular, who were both associated with the Fine Arts Museum, have bequeathed a legacy of research and writings that have been of great importance to subsequent artists in Vietnam. These scholars, Nguyễn Đỗ Cung (1912-1977) and Nguyễn

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[131] Trần Nguyễn Đán, (ed.) Tác Phẩm Mỹ Thuật: Sưu Tập của Bảo Táng Mỹ Thuật Việt Nam , Art Works: Vietnam Fine Art Museum's Collection, 2002, p.7

[132] Trần Nguyễn Đán, (ed.), 2002, p.9

[133] Trần Nguyễn Đán, (ed.) 2002, p.13

Văn Y (1919-1993) were both influential in assembling the collection of Vietnamese art now in the museum.

Nguyễn Đỗ Cung (fig.3.33) an artist and art historian, was the founding director and like many of the first staff of the museum, was a graduate of, and teacher at, the École des Beaux-arts de l'Indochine.[134] Cung was also head of the preceding Institute of Fine Arts and Handicrafts, heading both institutions between 1962 to1971. He was one of the group of students who protested against Jonchière's curriculum at the École des Beaux-arts in 1938, for which he was banned from the school.[135] He was a member of *Han Thuyen*, a group of intellectuals active in the 1940s and named after a publishing house. The group consisted of academics from various fields of study and was sometimes criticized as being Trotskyist.[136] As previously mentioned in Chapter 1 in the section on Vietnamese communal houses or *đình,* he carried out some important surveys of Vietnamese art and architecture during the difficult years of the 1960s and 70s. As a result of this research he organized some influential exhibitions at the Fine Arts Museum, including a 1968 exhibition of folk painting, one of ancient ceramics in 1971-72 and a 1972 exhibition of *đình* sculpture.[137] As well as influencing the current generation of Vietnamese artists in the persistent popularity of motifs taken from the village, his research work has been carried on by the current writers and artists Phan Cảm Thương, b.1957 and Nguyễn Quân, b.1948, with their publications, *Arts of the Vietnamese*, 1989 and *Arts of the Village*, 1991. The latter writers published their works post *dôi mới*, in a climate of relative openness and at a time when artists were trying to reflect a Vietnamese aesthetic in their art that was, at the same time, created with an increasing knowledge of the international world of contemporary art. Cung's writings on village art, however, were published at a time when the impact of social realism was dominant. His research not only reflects a reaction to the Eurocentric aesthetic promoted by the École des Beaux-arts de l'Indochine, but could perhaps also have be interpreted as being subversive in

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[134] Subsequent directors were Vương Như Chiêm, art critic and researcher and Nguyễn Văn Chung painter, Trần Nguyễn Đán, (ed.), 2002. p.13

[135] Jeffrey Hantover in *Uncorked Soul: Contemporary Art From Vietnam*, exh. cat., 1991, p.21

[136] M. Durand and Nguyen Tran Huan , (trans. D.M. Hawke) *An Introduction to Vietnamese Literature*, 1985, pp.128-9

[137] Jeffrey Hantover in *Uncorked Soul: Contemporary Art From Vietnam*, exh.cat. 1991, p.26 .

its exploration of what, at the time, was regarded as the art of a backward and superstitious era.[138]

Nguyễn Văn Y, another product of the *École des Beaux-arts*, was the director of the Fine Arts Museum from 1971 until 1984. Y was another seminal figure, as it was under him that the Museum's so called 'restoration workshop' was established in the 1970s.[139] Under this program graduates and teachers from the Industrial Fine Arts University as well as young potters from Bát Tràng, were recruited to work in the conservation laboratory of the Museum of Fine Arts. The team of the conservation laboratory investigated different ceramic types made throughout the history of the country as well as researching the varying kiln types and temperatures used to achieve various effects. They studied the failures as well as the successes in traditional glazing techniques and contributed to the revival of some historic forms and styles, as well as assisting in the conservation of pieces from the eleventh through to the eighteenth centuries. In particular, the team worked on wares from the Lý and Tràn ($11^{th}$-$12^{th}$ centuries), on the blue and white wares of the $14^{th}$ and $15^{th}$ centuries and on the lampstands of the $17^{th}$ century.[140] Nguyễn Văn Y was director of the Museum of Fine Arts between 1971-1984 and was also a teacher at the Industrial Fine Arts University. He was viewed as a traditional teacher in the sense that he used Vietnamese shapes and expression.[141]

Nguyễn Văn Y was also a prolific writer on the arts of Vietnam whose written works have been published in the book *Nguyễn Văn Y Với Mỹ Thuật Ứng Dụng* .[142] In these articles written between 1961 to 1988, amongst other things, he argues for the unique Vietnamese aspects of the ceramic tradition.

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[138] Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm in an interview with Quang Việt, '210 phút với họa sĩ Nguyễn Tư Nghiễm', (210 minutes with the artist Nguyễn Tư Nghiễm) *Tạp Chí Mỹ Thuật*, no. 96, 2004, (61), p. 37 stated that while Cung believed in a strong academic grounding he was 'against European' influence in subject matter and wished to go to study in Japan.

[139] The author believes that the workshop was established in 1971. Cao Trọng Thiềm, b. 1942 and Nguyễn Trọng Niết, b. 1925 were the other ceramicists who were involved with establishment of the workshop. Interview with Nguyễn Bảo Tòan, 10 October, 2002

[140] Personal communication with Nguyễn Khắc Quân 1999

[141] From conversations with Nguyễn Trọng Đoan and Nguyễn Khắc Quân.

[142] Vũ Nhâm (ed.) Nguyễn Văn Y Với Mỹ Thuật Ứng Dụng, (Nguyễn Văn Y on applied art) 2000

His ceramic sculpture, *Woman,* in the Fine Arts Museum, fig. 3.34, belies the statement that he was a traditional teacher. In this work he has appropriated aspects of Cham motifs in his contemporary version of the Goddess form. The Cham people, who occupied the central coast of Vietnam between the second and the eighteenth century, were traders and wet rice growers whose belief system was significantly influenced by Hinduism and Buddhism. The Cham have left an impressive legacy of Hindu and Buddhist sculpture, the largest collection of which is housed in the Cham Museum in Đà Nẵng. Amongst the other places where examples of Cham art is found are the Fine Arts Museum and the History Museum in Hà Nội.[143] During the 12th century in a period classified as the *Tháp Mâm* style, Cham sculpture showed a particular syncretism with a pre-Hindu Buddhist worship of the Goddess Uroja, symbolised in Cham art by the breast motif.(fig. 3.35 ) This pedestal or yoni that was found in Binh Đinh province has the breast motif repeated twenty three times around its circumference. Each of these motifs is surrounded by a circlet of pearl shaped beads.[144] Y has used the repeated breast motif (in his case the motif is repeated five times) on his terracotta sculpture and has also used the band of small pearl shapes around the neck of the piece. His work echoes the ancient sculptures, many of which have lost their heads, while at the same time it has a modern reading of a sculpture vessel based on the nude.

The sculptural ceramicists who worked at the Museum workshop, as well as many other artists in Vietnam today, are heirs to the work and ideas of these two men, Nguyễn Đỗ Cung and Nguyễn Văn Y, who sought to preserve and highlight distinctly Vietnamese forms of expression.

## Conclusion

Sculptural ceramics in Vietnam have a long history going back to Neolithic potters. Whether these works were made for local use or for international trade, a commonly found feature is their close observation of nature and a relative freedom in expression, resulting in the description that they involve a 'free play' or badinage. Related to this aspect of Vietnamese

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[143] Not all the sculpture was religious, for example there are sculptures of polo players and court scenes.

[144] Trần Ky Phương, former director of the Cham Museum, Đà Nẵng believes that the earliest appearance of the Uroja motif is in the Trà Kiệu altar of the 7th century, now located in the Cham Museum. Personal communication, July 2005. The motif on that particular sculpture is more like the bead of pearls around the neck of Y's sculpture.

sculptural ceramics is the apparent conceptual as well as functional preoccupation of the makers.

Prior to the advent of French educational institutions in Vietnam, potters gained knowledge of ceramic practices through working family enterprises. The twentieth century has seen greater training possibilities for ceramicists in the north of Vietnam both through the establishment of the University of Fine Arts, 1925 and the Industrial Fine Arts University, 1959. These institutions have trained ceramics teachers and professional artists, provided avenues of research and short courses for practitioners from ceramics villages. In tandem with a changed structure for education, these institutes and accompanying museums have introduced a difference in the way in which ceramics and ceramic sculpture is displayed and sold, which will be further elaborated in Chapter 5. The creation of public collections in which the cultural heritage of the nation can be seen, provides an additional avenue of knowledge for people engaged in the arts in Vietnam. Nevertheless, only a very small proportion of the potters working in Vietnam have had the possibility to gain a tertiary qualification from a University or College. Many continue to work in pre-industrial and industrial situations as will be seen in the next chapter, although some have completely broken out of this mould and now work as individual artists.

# Chapter 4: Individualism: Pottery Villages – Pottery Lineages

*The search for the experiential in clay, for a pleasure in making that extends beyond the cerebral design of form, is one of the great themes of the twentieth century.*[1]

## Pottery Villages

This chapter changes focus from theoretical and stylistic analyses to present a more ethnographic description of pottery villages and the role that certain families or individual potters have played in the history of Vietnamese ceramics. For many centuries certain sites within the country have been associated with the production of ceramics, including sculptural ceramics. The following section explores what we know about some of those villages in the area around Hà Nội. Of the places surveyed that still have active kilns, three sites produce high fired ceramics and operate year round – Bát Tràng, Chu Đậu and the Hải Dương porcelain company. However, there are also villages that produce lower fired wares. In most of the villages in this survey there are potters who not only make everyday pots, but also produce artistic wares. The survey of villages is followed by a discussion of some of the families associated with the creation of artistic ceramics and some details of individuals who are currently working as artist potters.

While on the one hand ceramics have been produced in Vietnamese agricultural villages, where pottery was made in quiet periods during the agricultural year, often in temporary bon firings of intermittent production, groups of permanent kilns emerged in Thanh Hóa, Hà Nội, Hải Dương and Ninh Bình, enabling specialization where 'concentrated and professionalized pottery' areas developed.[2] It is with these later villages that this chapter is concerned. Shippen, in his survey of pottery villages in Southeast Asia, which incidentally does not include Vietnam, notes that the number of the villages where low fired ceramics are produced is declining due to the effects of cheaper substitute materials and the lure of higher wages in the cities.[3] This phenomenon is pronounced in villages that produce terracottas and

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[1] E. de Waal, *20th century ceramics*, 2003, p.212

[2] Trần Kháh Chương, *Gốm Việt Nam, Vietnam Ceramics*, 2001, p.154

[3] Mick Shippen, The Traditional Ceramics of Southeast Asia, 2005

earthenwares, rather than high fired wares. In contrast, over the period of my observation of pottery villages in Vietnam, it appears that the productivity and prosperity of these villages, whether they produced high or low fired wares, has increased rather than decreased. One of the reasons for an improvement in circumstances since the colonial era and the war years appears to be better trading opportunities. There is also a deliberate promotion of 'craft' activities by the government. Chương mentions this fact and notes that from 1954 the government 'gave special attention to the restoration of traditional potteries in handicraft areas'[4] In addition, new enterprises using modern technologies have been established, the most prominent of which is the Hải Dương Porcelain Factory. The promotional material about craft villages in Vietnam is written in a style of text which lauds the history and artistry of past Vietnamese potters and praises the continuing work of skilled ceramicists. For example, a publication from the Vietnam Trade Promotion Agency on Ceramics has the following introductory statement:

> It is not by chance that the names of famous ceramic villages are ever present in folk-songs and have such a strong value for Vietnamese people.
>
> Through ages, motivated by the permanent desire to combine utility and refinement, and guided by a sure sense of aesthetic, Vietnamese potters have raised the craftsmanship of pottery to the level of an art. They have generated as many styles, techniques and motifs as there have been production centres, and given to Vietnamese pottery this unique charm that distinguishes it from any other styles, either from China, Japan or Europe.[5]

Similar sentiments are reflected in many publications written by the Vietnamese about their pottery tradition. The length and diversity of the tradition is stressed as well as the uniqueness of styles found within the country. One of the repeated perceptions is, as found in the above passage, that the pottery tradition is considered to be that of an art. In this respect, the

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[4] Trần Khánh Chương, *Gốm Việt Nam, Vietnam Ceramics*, 2001, p.157

[5] Vietnam Trade Promotion Agency, Vietnamese Handicrafts and Traditional Villages, Earth and Fire- Tradition and Passion – The Art of Ceramics in Vietnam, 2003, p.11

Vietnamese potters appear to differ from those surveyed in the many villages and potters covered in Shippen's book- potters from Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar and Malaysia.

Current knowledge of pottery villages comes largely from the period following independence from the Chinese in 939 C.E. Typically, a village would specialise in a particular artisanal activity, depending upon its specific geographic circumstances and resource endowments. A range of specialties developed such as printing, paper making, bronze casting and stone carving. Throughout the country there are an estimated 1,450 craft villages (*làng nghề*) employing ten million full and part time workers. In the Red River Delta area alone, there are an estimated eight hundred craft villages, of which two hundred have been established for at least a number of centuries.[6] These government statistics refer to villages that produce items in a non-industrial manner. Although many of these products are items of food, the statistics nevertheless include a considerable number of villages where the specialization is in the production of artistic products. In the course of the specialisation process, certain villages, close to abundant natural resources of clay and fuel, within the proximity of a major population centre and with access to suitable, usually riverine, forms of transportation, were able to develop specific skills in ceramic production.

As with all traditional artisanal activities, the skills and secrets of the potter's craft were passed down from one generation to the next as it was an entire family that was involved in the making of ceramics. Thus there were, and still are, lineages of potters in Vietnam. Historically famous pottery villages in northern Vietnam are those of Phù Lãng, Thổ Hà and Bát Tràng. Legends associate these particular villages with the establishment of high fired ceramics and with the development of yellow, red and white glazes respectively.[7]

Lineages of potters are still found in pottery villages such as Bát Tràng, , Phù Lãng, and Quế Quyển (Hà Nam province), although the continuity has been disrupted, especially during the 20th century, due to a loss of markets during colonial times (especially in northern pottery villages), the ravages of war and the establishment of State Owned Enterprises. The map at

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[6] Cẩm Chương, 'Craft villages as a living Tradition' in *Vietnam Cultural Window*, Oct. 2003, p.2

[7] Phan Huy Lê, Nguyễn Đình Chiến and Nguyễn Quang Ngọc, *Bát Tràng Ceramics 14th-19th Centuries*, 2004, p.12

fig 4.1 shows the villages of Bát Tràng, just south of Hà Nội, Phù Lãng, northeast of Hà Nội and Thổ Hà, to the west of Bắc Ninh.

## Thổ Hà

Ceramics are no longer made in Thổ Hà, Bắc Giang province, the ceramic enterprises there succumbing to the ravages of civil strife in the early part of the twentieth century.[8] On visiting Thổ Hà in 1996, the author found no sign of kilns, and in questioning various people about the fate of the pottery industry there, concluded that war and lack of markets had been amongst the causes of their demise.[9] A further visit in 2005 confirmed this and that the principle occupation of people in the area is rice-paper wrapper production. Gourdon, writing in 1932, mentions that pottery was still being produced in Thổ Hà at the time his book was written.[10] As Brown reports, pottery was probably produced there until at least the beginning of the twentieth century, having reputedly begun in 1465 through the efforts of a Chinese potter.[11] Dỗ Thị Hảo casts doubt upon the legendary stories of the establishment of pottery at Thổ Hà but states that the village reached its apogee of pottery production in the seventeenth century.[12]

The historical traces of Thổ Hà ceramics can be seen in the courtyards of many temples in the countryside around Hà Nội, where the finely made and delicately decorated but unglazed earthenwares are still used as planters and incense burners. Apart from the figural planters, such as that already seen in an example from the Fine Arts Museum (fig.3.14), there are those made in functional shapes but with a profusion of sculptural decoration which often predominates over the form, in a similar aesthetic expression to the high fired wares of the Mạc dynasty.(fig. 3.12) This can be seen in fig.4. 2, a planter in the courtyard at Chùa Mía (dated to 1632), Hà Tây province, where the planter is decorated with applied, writhing dragons. Another example, fig.4.3, in the Fine Arts Museum in Hà Nội, is decorated with the

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[8] The ceramics shown in the photograph of Thổ Hà market at fig 5.1 were not made in that village. They were probably made in Hương Canh, Vình Phúc province.

[9] The art historian and critic, Phan Cẩm Thượng believes that pottery has not been made in Thổ Hà for about one hundred years. Personal communication November, 2002

[10] Henri Gourdon, Les Arts Coloniaux: L'Art de L'Annam, 1932, p.61

[11] Roxanna Brown, The Ceramics of South-east Asia their dating and identification, 1989, p.32

[12] Dỗ Thị Hảo in Vũ Ncọc Khánh et al. *Quê Gốm Bát Tràng: The Home of Ceramics Bat Trang*, 1989, p.18

character for longevity superimposed upon another Chinese character and set within a diaper patterned cartouche. The upper part of the latter planter is decorated with cloud collars and the insignia of the Daoist immortals, all redolent of the taste for Chinese style in the arts that was popular during the Nguyễn dynasty. The wares are characterized by their fine clay body that is unglazed and of a reddish colour.

The main Buddhist temple in Thổ Hà village also contains many examples of Thổ Hà ceramics such as incense burners, seats and other sculptural pieces. Of these, many of the incense burners are lotus shaped and are conceived in a realistic sculptural form. Seen from the top, the seeds in the centre of the lotus flower circle the edge of the pot. (fig. 4.4)

### Bát Tràng

Bát Tràng village is located fifteen kilometres downstream from Hà Nội, on the opposite side of the Red (*Hồng*) River. Currently it is one of the most, if not the most, active site of pottery production in the northern part of Vietnam. The village was established some time after the Lý dynasty monarch Lý Thái Tổ moved his capital to Thăng Long, the site of present day Hà Nội, in 1010. According to Trần dynasty annals, Bát Tràng provided seventy sets of bowls and plates as tribute to the Yuan and Ming courts in China in 1352 and 1376.[13] Ceramic production reached a highpoint in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when Bát Tràng wares fulfilled orders for the aristocracy and the religious needs of the northern region of Vietnam. In the sixteenth century, in particular, the wares were widely exported throughout Asia and beyond.[14] As the village is situated close to the capital, it survived the downturn in the export of Vietnamese ceramics from the late seventeenth century until the late twentieth century, due to its proximity to a large domestic market. Phan Huy Lê mentions the abolition of restrictions on foreign trade by the Qing, a growing local production in ceramics in Japan (where porcelain production was established in the early seventeenth century), as well as the

[13] Nguyễn Đình Chiến,'Trung tâm gốm Bát Tràng' (The ceramic centre of Bat Trang), *Mỹ Thuật*, no. 16-17, 1996, p.53

[14] Phan Huy Lê, Nguyễn Đình Chiến and Nguyễn Quang Ngọc, *Bát Tràng Ceramics 14th-19th Centuries*, 2004, p.14 gives a list of the Royal and aristocratic patrons and the districts in which they lived.

industrial revolution in Europe as reasons for the decline in some of the northern Vietnamese pottery villages from the end of the seventeenth century.[15]

The production of parts for the electricity industry was introduced to Bát Tràng in the 1930s and 1940s and with it came the use of gypsum moulds.[16] However, the output from the village still included functional ceramics – bowls and cups – in both cheaper and finer versions, as well as hand made, art objects.[17] Thus both artist potting practices and industrial processes for mass production existed at the same time.

In 1959, the private enterprises that had existed in Bát Tràng were merged into a nominally joint state-private enterprise following the Marxist industrial-commercial reforms of that year. A co-operative was formed in 1962, which was followed by others in the 1980s.[18] A further impetus to production in the village, was the destruction by Chinese troops of the Móng Cáy kilns near the Vietnam-China border as a result of the conflict between the two countries in 1979.[19]

Bát Tràng has prospered in recent years due to the economic impetus given to pottery production through increased trading opportunities.[20] Other factors have also played a part in the renaissance of the village, following a low point during the war years of the twentieth century. An increasing national and international interest in the pottery traditions of Vietnam, the recruitment of potters from Bát Tràng to work in the conservation department of the Fine Arts Museum and the popularity of the village as a tourist destination are additional factors that have contributed to the recent prosperity of the village. The potters of Bát Tràng have also adopted a succession of new technologies. From the original, but no longer extant frog kilns (*lò ếch*), that were used for centuries, stepped chambered kilns (*lò bầu*), were adopted in

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[15] Phan Huy Lê, Nguyễn Đình Chiến and Nguyễn Quang Ngọc, 2004, p.17

[16] Hy V. Luong, 'Capitalist and Noncapitalist Ideologies in the Structure of Northern Vietnamese Ceramics Enterprises, in T. Brooks & Hy V. Luong, *Culture and Economy: The Shaping of Capitalism in East Asia*, 1997, p. 191

[17] Vu Quy Vy, ' The Bat Trang Ceramics Works,' in *Handicrafts*, Vietnamese Studies, no. 62, 1980, p.116

[18] Hy V. Luong, 1997, p. 200. A detailed discussion of Bát Tràng in the twentieth century is given in this chapter by Luong.

[19] Vu Quy Vy, ' The Bat Trang Ceramics Works,' in *Handicrafts*, Vietnamese Studies, no. 62, 1980, p.120

[20] See A. Proctor, *Bát Tràng Ceramic: production in 1998*, Masters Thesis, 1998

the 1930s, upright coal fired kilns (*lò hộp*), were introduced in the 1970's along with increasing slip ware production, and finally, gas kilns (*lò gaz*), were introduced from the late 1990s.[21] The author found only three gas kilns in use in 1998, whereas by March 2006 they numbered two hundred and eighty-one.[22]

Phan Huy Lê gives the names of the five original families who are reputed to be amongst the first potters who migrated to Bát Tràng from an earlier pottery site, Bồ Bát, nearer the previous Vietnamese capital, Hoa Lư, in Ninh Bình province.[23] Tràn Đức Công, the head of a family kiln in Bát Tràng, claims to be descended on his mother's side of the family, through fifteen generations of potters.[24] According to Do Thị Hao, the Tràn family annuals show that the Tràn family have lived there since 1443.[25] Cort mentions a Bát Tràng family that counts seventeen generations of kiln owners in the village.[26] Visiting an ancestral temple in the village in 1998, the author was told that there were nineteen ancestral lines, each with its own separate ancestral temple.[27]

Based on various family histories and national accounts, the settlement of Bát Tràng as a pottery village is dated to the fourteenth century.[28] In 2003, the population of Bát Tràng and neighbouring Giang Cao was 6,500 people with 1,300 households, or approximately 80% of

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[21] In 1998 there were also approximately 100 *Lò Tuy-nen*, that are also called *LôHấp*. This kiln is named after a Hungarian expert who worked in Bát Tràng in 1972 to 73 and was used to fuse transfers from China onto blank ceramics. By 2005 these kilns were no longer in operation, as the potters and market prefered hand painted wares.

[22] Personal communication with Nguyễn Khắc Quân, March, 2006.

[23] Phan Huy Lê, Nguyễn Đình Chiến and Nguyễn Quang Ngọc, *Bát Tràng Ceramics 14th-19th Centuries*, 2004, p.13. These families are the Trần, Lê, Vương, Pham and Nguyễn. DoThị Hao et.al. *Quê Gốm Bát Tràng: The Home of Ceramics Bat Trang*, 1989 gives more detailed genealogies, mentioning the family annals of the Trần, Lê, and Nguyễn and others.

[24] Interview with the potter, 1998.

[25] Do Thị Hao in Vũ Ncọc Khánh et.al. *Quê Gốm Bát Tràng: The Home of Ceramics Bat Trang*, 1989, p.18 The family history was recorded by the graduate, Huan Doa Tràn Lê Nhan in 1923.

[26] Louise A. Cort, 'In Search of Ceramics in Vietnam', *Asian Art & Culture*, Winter, 1994, p.53

[27] Conversation with Đố Đứ Hải, Bát Tràng, 1998

[28] Phan Huy Lê, Nguyễn Đình Chiến and Nguyễn Quang Ngọc, *Bát Tràng Ceramics 14th-19th Centuries*, 2004, p.12

the population, involved in the production of ceramics.[29] It is one of the oldest sites of continuous high fired ceramic production in Vietnam.

### Phù Lãng

In the early twenty first century, there are increasing numbers of people working in the pottery enterprises at Phù Lãng, Bắc Ninh province, a village where pottery has been made for seven hundred years. It is one of the pottery villages in the red River Delta area that is said to have its origins in the Lý Dynasty of the 13th century and was famous for an 'eel skin' glaze.[30] Phù Lãng is located approximately sixty kilometres north-east of Hà Nội on the Câu River. On first visiting the village in 1999, I found only about one hundred people were involved in ceramics making. [31] At that time ceramics production was carried out by small households. However, visiting the village in 2004, a larger proportion of families appeared to be involved in the business of making pots. According to the artist potter Vũ Hưu Nhung, there are now some companies making ceramics and the level of production is on a large scale.[32] Two of these companies are the one associated with Vũ Hưu Nhung, North Star Ceramics, and the other with Nguyễn Mạnh Thiệu who also produces sculptural ceramics and who, like Nhung, is a graduate of the Industrial Fine Arts University. The increase in production has taken place within a relatively short period of time. Official figures of 2003 state that with a population of 7,365, there were about two hundred households involved in pottery production utilizing twenty kilns.[33]

Phù Lãng potters produce earthenwares as well as stonewares with clay-ash glazes as distinct from the predominantly underglaze decorated wares produced in Bát Tràng. Whilst in the past thirty years Bát Tràng production has seen many changes, both in kiln technology, markets and the organization of the workshops, potters in the village of Phù Lãng, still utilize local clay and fire their wares in *lò bầu*, or stepped, chambered kilns constructed on a 12-15

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[29] Vietnam Trade Promotion Agency, Vietnamese Handicrafts and Traditional Villages, Earth and Fire-Tradition and Passion – The Art of Ceramics in Vietnam, 2003, p.18

[30] Eel skin glaze is described by Trần Khánh Chương as being 'made from mud mixed with ash'.. 'forming thick beautiful shrunken glaze masses', *Gốm Việt Nam,Vietnam Ceramics*, 2001, p.160

[31] Interview with Trần Văn Thuấn, a kiln owner in Phù Lãng, September, 1999

[32] Correspondence with Vũ Hưu Nhung, 29 November 2005.

[33] Vietnam Trade Promotion Agency, 2003, pp. 34-35

degree slope giving approximately one metre rise from the fire box to the chimney.(fig.4.6) The terrain on which the village is located allows for the construction of these kilns on a natural landform, in contrast to the *lò bầu* kilns that once existed in Bát Tràng, and the kilns of Quế Quyễn, as in the latter locations the kilns were/are constructed on artificial mounds to obtain a suitable slope.

Phù Lãng kilns are between 9 to 15 metres or longer, up to 3 metres wide, 2.6 metres high and are fuelled by wood. The fire box is succeeded by five to ten arched roofed chambers each capable of handling large pots such as those used for water storage.[34] The chimney is approximately five metres high. There are also some single chamber kilns as shown in fig. 4.7, belonging to Trần Văn Thuấn, where the interior of the kiln is one long, continuous space. This kiln was seventy years old at the time the photograph was taken, but had been renovated thirty years previously. It uses five tonnes of wood at each firing.

One of the main products from Phù Lãng is caskets for secondary burial. These are formed in wooden moulds as seen in fig.4.8, where the potter is using already fired caskets to support the wooden mould.[35] Other products include water and other storage vessels and pipes as can be seen in the background of fig.4.9, behind the woman who is making wide mouthed basins on a turntable. The village was renowned for clay pots for cooking rice. There is also a growing interest in sculptural ceramics in the village, which is due, in part, to the influence of the artist potters Trần Khánh Chương, Nguyễn Bảo Tòan and Nguyễn Trọng Đoan, as well as the raised profile of ceramics as an artistic medium in Hà Nội in recent years. Formerly, both Nguyễn Bảo Tòan and Nguyễn Trọng Đoan fashioned their pots in their Hà Nội studios and took them to Phù Lãng in order to fire them in the wood fired kilns of the village. The round trip was a journey of sixty kilometres, with the pots carried on the backs of their motorbikes. Recently there has been an upsurge of interest shown by young potters and by those who wish to make sculptural pieces. An exhibition of ceramics from the Hà Nội region in 2003, held to coincide with the staging of the Southeast Asian Games, included many sculptural pieces from Phù Lãng. (fig.4.10) Vũ Hưu Nhung, (b. 1975), an artist potter from Phù Lãng who is the recipient of many local awards and the artist Nguyễn Mạnh Thiệu,

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[34] Statistics from kiln owners at Phù Lãng, 1999

[35] This potter could make seventy caskets in one day which he sold for 5,000 đông each.

whose work is illustrated on the frontispiece, are artists potters working within the predominantly utilitarian potting community at Phù Lãng.

## Quê Quyển

Since the end of the colonial era, the introduction of a Communist system and the subsequent hiatus caused by the American war, there have been changes away from the feudal organization of pottery practice. Under the pre-colonial system, potters, part of the artisan class, worked in family groups and were bound to contribute a certain amount of time on public service such as dyke renovation and road maintenance. Wares made by artisans were sold in the area now known as the thirty six old streets of Hà Nội, in which certain guilds were assigned to particular streets. Pottery was sold on Bát Đàn Street, the street of bowls. Some pottery villages, notably Bát Tràng, have gone through enormous transformations, both ideologically and institutionally, whilst others, such as Quế Quyển in Hà Nam province, have seen little change in the way in which ceramics are made or production organized over at least five centuries.[36] Potters in Quế Quyển still fashion their wares on foot turned wheels, though they do now have electrically driven pug mills. The pots are fired in *lò bầu,* and many of those made in the village are characterized by a salt glaze (fig.4.12). Extended families live in the same structure that houses their workshop, adjacent to the kiln. The village population is 640 people with twenty households involved with ceramic production.[37] They produce every day pots that are staple items in Vietnamese households. These items, which sustain people from the cradle to the grave, consist of containers for water, food and liquor and the caskets used for secondary burial. Such pots are produced for a meagre profit. The village also produces some wares for export and the teapots produced here are reputed to have special qualities of retaining the heat, removing chemical residues from the water and making the tea taste better.[38]

Fig. 4.13 gives the location of Quê Quyễn which is located off highway one, about two and a half hours drive south of Hà Nội. Quê Quyễn is on the Đáy river near Quê shown in the

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[36] Interviews with potters in Quê Quyển, November, 2004

[37] Vietnam Trade Promotion Agency, 2003, p.47

[38] Vietnam Trade Promotion Agency, 2003, p.46

centre of the top portion of the map. The Đáy River can be seen in the background of fig. 4.11.

Other pottery producing villages in the northern part of Vietnam include Cậy (Hải Dương), Hương Canh (Vình Phúc),[39] Hiển Lễ (Vình Phúc) and villages near the border with China.[40] There are also the archaeological sites in the citadel of Thăng Long, and the sites excavated around Chu Đạu (Hải Dương), the latter discussed in Tăng Bá Hòanh's report on the archaeological excavations in the region, initially between 1983-1993 and then up to 1999.[41] In 2005 some of the ceramics found in the archaeological excavations of the Thăng Long citadel were exhibited within that precinct. Some impressive sculptural pieces were excavated, including terracotta phoenix and dragon heads from the 11th-12th centuries, similar to that illustrated in fig.3.16. Publications relating to these excavations indicate that there is a high probability that kilns were located at this site from the time of the Lý Dynasty.[42]

### Chu Đạu

Pottery production ceased in the seventeenth century in the kilns of Chu Đậu and surrounding villages in Hải Dương Province. The village is located to the north of Hai Dương on the map in fig. 4.14. Following the successful archaeological excavations of kilns sites in the Chu Đậu area, a small museum was established at the village of Chu Đậu. Fig. 4.15, shows the fledgling museum and its curator in 1997.

In the year 2000, after a gap of three hundred years, a new pottery enterprise was established in Chu Dậu. The re-establishment of the previous occupation of the area was stimulated by

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[39] Discussed by Louise Cort in 'In search of Ceramics in Vietnam' *Asian Art and Culture*, Winter, 1994, pp.45-59 in which she noted that the Hương Canh potters were changing from producing jars to making tiles. Visiting the village in 1997, I noted many coal fired kilns producing tiles and secondary burial caskets in coal fired kilns, some of which were box kilns and some *lò Chum*, beehive shaped kilns. Hương Canh ceramic production is also discussed in Vietnam Trade Promotion Agency, *Vietnamese Handicrafts and Traditional Villages, Earth and Fire- Tradition and Passion – The Art of Ceramics in Vietnam*, 2003, pp.48-51,where it is noted that the village has 12,983 people of which 100 people work to produce architectural, utilitarian and artistic unglazed earthen wares.

[40] These villages are discussed by Trần Kháh Chương in *Gốm Việt Nam*, 2001, pp.16-20

[41] Tăng Bá Hòanh, Gốm Chu Đậu: Chu Dau Ceramics,1999

[42] Bùi Minh Trí, 'Pottery from the Thăng Long Citadel', *Vietnam Cultural Window*, no 80, September/October 2005, p. 13

the interest aroused following the discovery of ancient shards and kiln sites in Chu Đậu and the surrounding district, and the salvage of a wreck off the coast of Vietnam which contained a cargo of Vietnamese ceramics, most of which were originally made in Chu Đậu. The so called 'Hoi An hoard' was found off the coast of central Vietnam and excavated by the Vietnamese Government in association with Oxford University and a Malaysian salvage team between 1997-1999.[43] Party officials in Hải Dương have been particularly keen to promote traditional craft villages in their province and with their encouragement, Hapro company (fig.4.16) now manufactures ceramics under the trademark Chu Đậu, including pieces that replicate the style of famous works from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, as well as fulfilling orders from overseas, particularly from Japanese clients.

The factory of 3,000 square feet, employs two hundred people, and uses modern technology and gas kilns. The decorators there work under the tutelage of Hạ Bá Đinh, who describes himself as an artist and who is a graduate of the University of Fine Arts in Hà Nội, where he majored in sculpture.[44] (fig. 4.17 & fig. 4.18) Prior to the establishment of the Chu Đậu factory, Hạ Bá Đinh spent from 1984 to 1990 working on designs from ancient Chu Đậu ceramics at the Hải Dương Porcelain Company, a project that also involved Nguyễn Văn Y from the Fine Arts Museum in Hà Nội. A collection of ancient ceramics and shards is held at the Hải Dương Porcelain Company as well as the Hải Dương Provincial Museum and the Hapro factory at Chu Đậu. Commercial companies, as well as contemporary artists, are concerned to maintain Vietnamese traditions and styles while at the same time they benefit from the use of modern technology and communications in negotiating their orders. While artist potters and researchers such as Hạ Bá Đinh and Nguyễn Văn Y take an academic and artistic interest in how the potters of five hundred years ago achieved their effects, there is no doubt that some unscrupulous dealers will sell the reproduction pieces, produced in factories such as the one at Chu Đậu, as antiques to an unsuspecting public, despite the fact that the Chu Đậu pieces are marked with the company logo.[45]

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[43] See Tăng Bá Hóanh, Gốm Chu Đậu, Chu Dau Ceramics, 1999, Trấn Khánh Chương, Gốm Việt Nam, Vietnam Ceramics, 2001,p.155 and Treasures From Hoi An Hoard, cat. 2000

[44] Interview with Hạ Bá Đinh, October 2005.

[45] See Dawn Rooney, *Folk Pottery in South-East Asia,* pp. 64-67 on the reproduction of antique ceramics and associated problems in Thailand.

## Pre -Twentieth Century Individual potters

From Vietnamese histories, we know that certain people were regarded as being especially talented in ceramic production. Talented craftsmen were regularly drafted into state service to produce luxury goods.[46] Historical records from the Department of Miscellaneous Works, established during the Lý (1009-1225) and Trần (1225-1400) dynasties, record that skilled workers were selected for the production of items for official use.[47] Furthermore, certain villages such as Bát Tràng were required to produced pottery items as tribute goods for China during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).[48] While a range of pottery products were produced, including coarse mass produced wares, tiles and thousands of pieces to supply the Southeast Asian market, there were also enterprises that produced wares of superior quality for a specialized local market, particularly tribute and donation pieces.[49] An exhibition of these specialized pieces from Bát Tràng was held in 1991 at the National History Museum in Hà Nội, some of which are illustrated and discussed in an article by Nguyễn-Long. [50]

Additional knowledge of individual master potters and their families has become available through the publication of inscriptions on various ceramics in public and private collections, both in Vietnam and abroad. One of the more historically famous individual potters came from the area around Chu Đậu, Hải Dương province. However, her present fame resides in the fact that her 1450 inscription on the previously mentioned, finely painted bottle in the Topkapi Saray Museum in Istanbul, established that the ceramic was made in Vietnam and

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[46] Huy Van Luong in Hefner, R.W. *Market Cultures: Society and Morality in the New Asian Capitalisms*, 1998, p.304. Bùi Minh Trí & Kerry Nguyễn-Long, *Vietnamese Blue and White Ceramics*, 2001, p.106, discuss the excavation of shards within the Citadel of Thăng Long that contained characters indicating that they were official wares.

[47] Bùi Minh Trí & Kerry Nguyễn-Long, 2001, p.116

[48] Phan Huy Lê, Nguyễn Đình Chiến & Nguyễn Quang Ngọc, *Gốm Bát Tràng: Bat Trang ceramics 14th-19th* Centuries, 1995, p.48

[49] Kerry Nguyễn-Long, 'Bat Trang Ceramics: A Living Vietnamese Tradition' *Arts of Asia*, vol.23, no.6, 1993, p.131

[50] Kerry Nguyễn-Long, 1993, p.128-134

not, as had been assumed for centuries, in China.(fig. 4.19) The inscription was translated in 1933 and the site of manufacture was established in 1993.[51]

Research carried out by Nguyễn Đình Chiến, curator of ceramics at the National Museum of Vietnamese History in Hà Nội has increased the knowledge of individual potters working between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries in the northern part of Vietnam. From a group of nearly 150 inscribed ceramics, Chiến was able to identity thirty one master potters who worked during this four hundred year period.[52] These master potters inscribed pieces with their own name, date, village and sometimes the patron or patrons for whom the piece was made. The majority of the inscribed ceramics published by Nguyễn Đình Chiến are lamp stands and censers – pieces intended for use in a temple or communal hall. Some of these master potters have described their occupation, for example 'village chief' or 'monk' and a few mention that they had passed the prefectural level examination (bachelor's degree). Master potters who signed their ceramics in either Chinese or Vietnamese *nôm* script, would most probably have been literate. A sixteenth century master potter, whose work has been published by Tăng Bá Hòanh, is Đặng Huyền Thông from Nam Sách district, the same district as the decorator of the Topkapi bottle.[53] Between 1578 and 1590, this master potter, Đặng, produced many signed ceramics for various patrons.(fig.4.20) On one of his pots, dated 1580, we learn that he was a Bachelor of Literature. The Đăng family were also noted for their collection of ceramics.[54] During the Mặc dynasty (1527-1592), many signed pieces were made in Bát Tràng for both the aristocracy and general populace. The inscribed pieces were made by both men and women and sometimes by husband and wife teams.[55]

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[51] Tăng Bá Hòanh, *Gốm Chu Đậu, Chu Dau Ceramics*, 1993, p.37, claims that on the basis of excavations done in the Chu Đậu area that the bottle in the Topkapi Saray could be attributed to Chu Đậu. Hobson, translated the inscription in the early twentieth century. Hobson, R.L. 'Chinese Porcelain at Constantinople', *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramics Society*, 11,1933-34, pp. 9-21

[52] Nguyễn Đình Chiến, Handbook of Vietnamese Ceramics with Inscriptions from the Fifteenth to the Nineteenth Centurie, 1999, p.26

[53] Tăng Bá Hòanh, 1993, p. 36

[54] Tăng Bá Hòanh, 1993, p.22; Phan Cẩm Thượng, 'Clay, Fire and Skilled Hands, The ceramic tradition in Vietnamese History', *Vietnam Cultural Window*, no. 44, Nov. 2001, p. 36

[55] Phan Huy Lê, Nguyễn Đình Chiến and Nguyễn Quang Ngọc, *Bát Tràng Ceramics 14$^{th}$-19$^{th}$ Centuries*, 2004, p.14

A compendium of the inscribed ceramics that were made in Bát Tràng is included in Phan Huy Lê et al's book on the ceramics of Bát Tràng.[56] These ceramics date from the late fifteenth until the nineteenth century and include such information as the name of the potter(s), donors and date. Of the thirty eight extant inscribed ceramics made between the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, twenty eight include the name(s) of the potters. Eight of those twenty eight pieces include the name of female potters, while on one piece, the name of the potter was indecipherable. Translations of the inscriptions made later than the seventeenth century do not include the names of the potters. Does this indicate a change in patronage and focus when the court moved to Huế and the king and wealthy Vietnamese families ordered their underglazed blue *bleu de Huế*, from China? Ceramics made during the Nguyễn dynasty in Bát Tràng are marked, in the Chinese fashion, with the reign date of the ruler. As noted in Chapter 3, prior to the twentieth century the names of individual potters are not found on Chinese ceramics.

These differences in practice are intriguing. What was the position of the individuals who signed these wares and were the works actually done for pleasure? Given that the signers of the works, whether they just inscribed the name of the patron or included their own, would most probably (and in some cases we know for sure) have been literate, why was the makers name included? Was it due to the prestige in commissioning a work from a scholar rather than an illiterate artisan? Did the scholars benefit from the karmic merit accrued when a donation of a splendid piece of art was donated to a temple? Current scholarship notes that prior to the twentieth century in Vietnam the position of a person in society was viewed in Confucian terms and that the modern notion of individualism did not exist, therefore we cannot assume that the painters of these ceramics signed their works for the same reason that contemporary artist sign theirs. Whatever the answers to these questions, the position of the individual, both in society generally and within the art world in particular, changed dramatically in the twentieth century.

[56] Phan Huy Lê, Nguyễn Đình Chiến and Nguyễn Quang Ngọc, 2004, pp.51-56

## Sociological aspects of craft villages

Some craft villages that were able to specialize in a particular craft, selling most of their production for profit, tended to be more prosperous than villages in which artisanal products were made as an adjunct to agricultural activities, while those who were co-opted to work for the court were reportedly the worst off. [57] Baron, writing in the late eighteenth century, found that 'handcraft men of whatever profession' were bound to spend six months of the year engaged in '*vecquun*' -a scheme of enforced labour on public projects .[58] Generally, the way in which labour was organized in craft villages entailed collaboration within the family, rather than a focus on individuality.

From the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, pottery enterprises in villages such as Bát Tràng were based on profit. The prevailing neo-Confucian ideology in some ways enabled greater involvement of women in entrepreneurial roles, due to the stigma attached to earning money or being engaging in profit-making enterprises. The desirable male stance placed emphasis on scholarship and public position. Such an influence complemented indigenous Vietnamese household mores, wherein there was an equal division of labour between males and females. Luong, in his writings, describes this as a 'bilateral' model that emphasized the unity of men and women, not their segregation and formal hierarchy as prescribed by Confucianism.[59] Thus, in Bát Tràng, as in other villages engaged in artisanal activities, women were involved in the business side of the enterprises, although both sexes were involved in the actual production of the ceramics.

## Period of Industrialization

During the French colonial period there was an increasing emphasis on entrepreneurial activities and on industrial production which generally had a negative effect on handcrafted

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[57] W. S. Logan, 2000, p.40

[58] John Pinkerton, A General collection of the best and most interesting voyages and travels in all parts of the world: many of which are now first translated into English. 1808-1814, vol. 9, p. 667. 'Vecquun' is described as a required service to the lords of the city to build roads, bridges, mend dikes, etc. Apart from the word vecquun, which is also spelt as vecquan in the account, the author has changed the quotation into contemporary spelling, rather than using 'f' for 's'.

[59] Hy Van Luong, 'Engendered Entrepreneurship', in Hefner, W.R. *Market Cultures,* 1998, p.303

goods, including ceramics. Vũ Qúy Vy noted that in Bát Tràng, ceramics reached the peak of their production at the end of the Trịnh (1539-1787) and the beginning of the Nguyễn (1802-1954). He also commented on the colonial French attitude, which he felt contributed to a decline in production. The French stated in government bulletin of 1942:

> Ceramics in Annam are quite negligible at present: from the quantitative point of view they only satisfy part of the local market: from the artistic point of view they often lack originality and elegance and are incompletely made. In fact this craft has no incentive to develop, no organization and plays a minimal role in the country's economy. [60]

Apart from the pottery enterprises around Saigon and those of Biên Hoà, where the art school engaged in international exhibitions and endeavoured to establish an agency in Paris, it would appear that most pottery villages suffered a lessening in production and in quality during the French colonial period.

## Twentieth Century Potters

With the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1954 and the institution of Communism, a system of state enterprises was introduced. Family enterprises were closed down and state owned enterprises were established that initially focused on producing ceramic items for industrial use. According to some accounts, the period of state owned enterprises saw greater sharing of knowledge about ceramic procedures than when family based units jealously guarded the secrets of their clays and glazes.[61] Under the Marxist economy, four training programs were started in Bát Tràng in 1973 in order to help the industry expand. The State Owned pottery enterprise participated in these four training programs with 150 students in each of them. Nearly all of the students who graduated were subsequently employed in the State Ceramic enterprise.[62] Phan Huy Lê states that 'Bát Tràng

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[60] Vu Quy Vy 'The Bat Trang Ceramics Works', *Vietnamese Studies: Handicrafts*, no. 62, 1980, p.113

[61] Vu Quy Vy, 1980, p. 119

[62] Hy Van Luong, 'The Political Economy of Vietnamese Reforms: A Microscopic perspective from Two Ceramics Manufacturing Centers', in William Turley, & Mark Selden, *Reinventing Vietnamese Socialism,* 1993, p.123

has also trained hundreds of young potters to work in newly opened provincial kilns.'[63] In 1979, the government officially sanctioned the creation of independent family enterprises by retired State Firm employees, legalizing an already existent practice.[64] One of the additional benefits introduced at this time was two months of paid educational leave each year for Bát Tràng worker in the State Owned Enterprise in a work study program up to University level.[65]

This change in organization of kiln ownership caused a significant rupture in lineages of potters, but also enabled people who had no previous experience in ceramics to join the field. My interviews in Bát Tràng in February 1998 elicited the following names considered by their peers to be the 'master craftsmen' working in the village at that time: Lê Văn Cẩm and his son Lê Quang Chiến, Vư Thang (the latter two both graduates of the Industrial Fine Arts University), Nguyễn Đức Dương, Trần Đô, Nguyễn Lơi and Cu Phúng Vản Am, the latter being seventy years old at the time. Also included were Lê Văn Vấn, who had mastered the formulas for ancient glazes and taught at the Industrial Fine Arts University, and Hà Lâm, grandson of Lê Văn Vần, who at the time was director of the kiln operated by the army in Bát Tràng. The first mentioned, Lê Văn Cẩm, (b.1930) after loosing one of his legs in a battle in 1950 during the French Indochinese war, was eventually able to establish himself as a master potter. He also helped to rediscover some lost glaze techniques. Despite the fact that he was born in Bát Tràng, he did not come from a Bát Tràng potters family. Lê Văn Cẩm is seen in fig.4.21 with some of his assistants who are pouring excess slip from a mould for a large jar which was then to be decorated in underglaze blue and fired in a box kiln.

### Lê Văn Cẩm

While Lê Văn Cẩm is a major twentieth century Vietnamese ceramicist, he is a precursor to the next generation of studio potters or sculptural ceramicists. Lê Văn Cẩm worked in a co-operative kiln from 1962 and then established one of the early independent kilns in Bát Tràng following the change in Government policy which liberalized the laws relating to private enterprises in 1979. He sold the family bed in order to raise sufficient capital to buy a box

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[63] Phan Huy Lê, Nguyễn Đình Chiến and Nguyễn Quang Ngọc, *Bát Tràng Ceramics 14th-19th Centuries*, 2004, p.18

[64] Hy Van Luong, op. cit., 1993, p.127

[65] Hy Van Luong, op.cit.,1993, p.135

kiln.[66] In 1987 the Government awarded him a gold medal and the title *Nghê Nhan Gốm* or master potter for the reproduction of a Mạc period (1527-92) lamp stand with a crackled ivory glaze. Recognition by the national government of an artisan who practices an age old technique at the highest level of proficiency has parallels with the Japanese award of 'Living National Treasure' to their master craftsmen and that of 'Master Craftsman' in India. The award is displayed in his house, alongside an rather faded award for shooting down an American aeroplane during the American war.[67] Cảm has an extensive collection of pots from various stages of Vietnamese history.[68] However, he himself produces pots that are an eclectic combination of shapes, glazes and decoration from different stages in the history of Vietnamese ceramics. For example, Nguyễn-Long describes a kendi with a 15th or 16th century shape to which he has applied a 19th century-style cobalt decoration under a crackle glaze.[69] Such combinations, by their disjunctions, confound the progressive trace of styles developed by Riegl, but emphasize the use of appropriation, reproduction and hybridity that is part of the *Kunstwollen* of the present age. Cảm rediscovered the method of creating the crackled glaze and it could be argued that he uses it as a mark of his individual achievement. The fact that he combines this characteristic from the 19th century with a kendi shape from the 15th-16th centuries, a shape that was successful in export wares at that period, reflects his success in the present.

As has been seen with the lotus motif as used by Nguyễn Trọng Đoan and the trees by Nguyễn Khắc Quan in Chapter 1, in addition to Lê Văn Cẩm's eclectic wares, contemporary artists have utilized their knowledge of historical forms, decorations and techniques to underline their statements of individual concern in the present day. Greater access to knowledge and greater freedom of individual expression in the late 20th and early 21st century has created an atmosphere in which artists can quote freely and create forms which not only

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[66] Kerry Nguyễn-Long, 'Portrait of a Master Potter and the Rediscovery of a Lost Glaze', *Ceramics Art and Perception*, no.23, 1996, p.44. Additional information about Lê Văn Cảm can be found in Nguyen Van Huy and L. Kendall (eds.) *Vietnam: Journey's of Mind Body and Spirit*, exh. cat., 2003, pp. 130-133, and Vietnam Promotion Agency, *Vietnamese Handicrafts and Traditional Villages, Earth and Fire- Tradition and Passion – The Art of Ceramics in Vietnam*, 2003, pp. 20-21

[67] Interview with Lê Văn Cẩm, January, 1997

[68] Interviews with Lê Văn Cẩm 1997-2001

[69] Kerry Nguyễn-Long, 'Portrait of a Master Potter and the Rediscovery of a Lost Glaze', *Ceramics Art and Perception*, no. 23, 1996, p.45

express their individuality and contemporaniety but that also speak of a Vietnamese tradition. While Riegl left his concept of *Kunstwollen* as a loosely defined term, I believe that it can be argued that greater knowledge and education, as well as a different notion of individuality than existed prior to the modern era, contribute to the current cultural climate, or spirit of the age, in Vietnam which produces such hybrid works of art.

With the introduction of the policy of *đôi mối*, in 1986, and the official sanctioning of a multi-sector economy – state, joint state-private, co-operative, private (or capitalist) and family – there has been an explosion in the number of individual pottery enterprises, some of which focus on artistic production as well as items for functional use. The number of enterprises in Bát Tràng has increased from a handful in 1962 when Lê Văn Cẩm started to work in ceramics, to 1,200 households and fifty five companies generating business of $40 million dollars per anum in 2005.[70] There has also been a major shift in technology with a dramatic increase in the numbers of the cleaner gas kilns that are gradually replacing the coal burning box kilns. At the same time, electrically driven wheels or gypsum moulds have replaced the old hand or foot turned wheels, the vestiges of which could once be seen in Lê Văn Cẩm's studio prior to updating that premises. (fig.4.22)

### Lê Quang Chiến

Through the success of his family enterprise, Cẩm has been able to provide a better life for his children. His younger son, Lê Quang Chiến, (b.1954), who graduated from the Industrial Fine Arts University in 1982, is an independent potter who manages a commercial kiln in Bát Tràng. Chiến, who styles himself as an artist potter as well as a company director, creates individual pieces, including portraits painted on platters, some of which have been given as diplomatic gifts. He also creates a wide variety of sculptural works which he enters in art exhibitions and for which he has received numerous awards.[71] *Flowers of Life* (fig. 4.23) won a prize in the 1993 sculpture exhibition organized by the Vietnam Fine Arts Association. His work has been exhibited widely in Vietnam and overseas, in the United States, 1996,

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[70] *Việt-nam Investment Review*, press release no. 719, 25 July 2005, see the web site http://www.vir.com.vn/Client/VIR/index.asp?url=content.asp&doc=5923

[71] Conversations with Lê Quang Chiến in 1998, 2001 and 2004.

Germany, 1997, and Japan 2000.[72] Chiến's individual ceramics are produced in his large workshop in Bát Tràng where a team of potters also make mass produced wares for the local and overseas market.

### Nguyễn Khắc Quân

Another ceramicist, whose works have already been mentioned in Chapter 1, is Nguyễn Khắc Quân, who was born in 1962 in the village of Bát Tràng, his family having been involved in ceramic production there for two generations.(fig.4.24) Quân grew up in a traditional potters family, working with clay in the family business from a young age: he has been making pots since the time he was ten years old. His mother is related to the master potter Lê Văn Cẩm.

In March 1980 he was selected to work in the conservation workshop that had been established by Nguyễn Văn Y in the Fine Arts Museum, Hà Nội. Quân's experience from Bát Tràng was of great assistance as the team worked to recover ancient technologies that had been lost over time and due to the interruption of the war years. As further training for his work at the Museum, he was able to study sculpture at the University of Industrial Fine Arts from 1988, graduating in 1994. Quân continues to work at the Fine Arts Museum, but his part time employment there still allows him time to work on his own ceramics in his own studio and kiln. The latter was formerly in the back courtyard of his Hà Nội home.(fig.4.25) This kiln was a smaller version of the box kilns that were introduced to Bát Tràng from North Korea in the 1970s, which are relatively cheap and simple to construct and operate and use coal as fuel. For some years Quân used the backyard kiln as well as transporting some of his pieces on the back of his motorbike to kilns in Bát Tràng. However, in 2003 he demolished the backyard kiln and took his pots in a small van to Bát Tràng to be fired in a gas kiln. In January 2006 Quân fired his first load of ceramics in a gas kiln at his house in Hà Nội, a change which reflects his growing prosperity.

The advent of a personal studio is another twentieth century innovation in terms of Vietnamese art practice. Quân, in his studio (fig.4.26) produces his ceramic sculptures from a fine white clay, *men gio,* which is then fired as stoneware. This type of clay is the same as

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[72] Lê Quang Chiến exhibited his work at Baltimore, USA in 1996, Koblenz, Germany, 1997 and in Osaka and Kyoto in 2000. For a list of exhibitions see Ngô Dõan Kinh (ed.), *Gốm Việt Nam Hiện Đại*, 2001, p70

that used in ancient Chu Đạu and Bát Tràng pieces and differs from the *men đá* used in pottery villages today.[73] Unlike the potters in working in Vietnamese pottery villages, Quân works alone, performing all the stages of the pottery production himself, even to the point, when his own coal-fired backyard kiln was operational, of making the coal patties with which the kiln was fired. In doing this – undertaking all stages in the pottery making process – Quân is aligning himself with 'studio potters' as they are called in the West. As discussed in Chapter 2, studio pottery developed in the 19th century in France and England and the ideas of these practitioners were formulated in the writings of Bernard Leach.

During the 1990s Quân was not interested in selling his pots, preferring to work at finding 'his own voice'. He did, however, engage in many conversations with other people from the arts community, local and international, sitting over wine and discussing various issues to do with art. In November 2002, Quân held his first one person show at the Fine Arts Museum which I attended.(fig.4.27 & 4.28) Not only was it his first exhibition, but it was also the first time an individual potter was accorded a solo show at the Museum. Exhibitions at the Museum had, in the past, favoured paintings over ceramics and group shows over the individual. Special exhibitions at the National Fine Arts Museum in Hà Nội are selected by a museum board from applications received by the museum. The artists themselves install the show in two rooms that are devoted to temporary exhibitions and they may sell their works. Quân was particularly successful with this exhibition and the show attracted much attention in the press, radio and television. A large number of his works were sold both to foreign collectors and galleries and to the growing group of art patrons in Vietnam. Quân was aided in the development of this exhibition by a grant from the Swedish Government.

The Vice-Director of the Museum, Nguyễn Xuân Tiệp, himself an artist and critic, who has exhibited internationally, gave the opening remarks at the exhibition. In these he declared that while it is difficult to gain acceptance as a modern artist, it is even more difficult to be recognized as a modern artist potter. Tiệp noted that working in the medium of ceramics is both technically and physically exacting. As with other areas of the arts, it is also difficult to achieve a balance between new and traditional ways. Furthermore, the general public, who

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[73] VNS, 'Going potty: Việt Nam's ceramic star', *Việt Nam News*, Thursday December 5, 2002, p.21

are reluctant to accept changes to familiar styles, are even more hesitant when it comes to the medium of ceramics. In Vietnam, where age and experience are still revered and where artists are generally not regarded as being able to achieve stature, or 'speak with an individual voice' until they are quite mature in years, it was significant that Tiệp concluded his remarks by stating that without doubt, Quân, had found his own artistic identity.

In the various press releases and reviews that were generated by the exhibition, Quân was referred to as *Họa Sĩ*, , the Vietnamese word for artist. He was also praised for 'not repeating what we already know', in other words, his ceramics are viewed as breaking new ground, rather than reiterating previous cultural forms.[74]

In 2004, Quân was selected by the government to represent Vietnam at Nexus, an ASEAN-ROK crafts exhibition at the Korean Craft Museum, Cheongju City, Korea. This biennale aimed to present 'craft artists' from ASEAN nations and Korea. The introduction to the catalogue states that 'Crafts are recognized and fostered by the governments in these nations as a core facet of their cultural industries.'[75]

From this artist's career we can observe a career path from the anonymous village potter's background to that of an individual ceramic sculptor exhibiting his work nationally and internationally. In the twentieth century various institutional and social changes have been introduced or adopted that have enabled people like Quân, who would have once faced a life time of working in the family business, to work as an independent artist who can exhibit his work in the international fora. Quân's work at the Fine Arts Museum and his tertiary qualification from the University, remove him from the class of artisan and place him in the modern Vietnamese middle class. Amongst the implications of this shift is the removal of the necessity to produce utilitarian ceramics to support his family, as his job at the Museum provides sufficient income. This has given him the freedom to pursue other objectives in his ceramic practice of which one of the foremost has been to find his 'individual voice'. The ability and freedom to express one's individuality in an art practice are modern notions.

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[74] Nguyễn Lương Hùng, 'There exists such a kind of ceramics!', Hà Nội, 2002, appendix 2

[75] *Nexus Asean –ROK*, Cheongju International Craft Biennale, Korea, 2004, p.4

## Nguyễn Trọng Đoan

Another ceramicist, who like Quân has been able to pursue an artistic practice with out the pressure of having to produce wares for sale, is Nguyễn Trọng Đoan who was also employed at the Fine Arts Museum until his retirement in 1990. Both Quân and Đoan, despite the fact that they have a background from other social strata, have a literatus' attitude to their art. The formation of and the realisation of this attitude may have been encouraged by their research and is in part made possible through a certain amount of financial security provided by their work at the Museum.

Nguyễn Trọng Đoan was born in 1942, the son of farmers. He was one of many children sent to China for safe keeping between 1951-1958 as his parents were involved in the resistance movement. Trọng Đoan was in the first intake of the University of Industrial Fine Arts in 1959, when it reopened after the First Indochina War. He majored in ceramics and was taught by Nguyễn Văn Y and Nguyễn Trọng Niết, ( b.1925), both of whom were educated at the *École des Beaux-arts*, Hà Nội and have examples of their ceramic works in the collection of the Museum of Fine Art there. Trọng Đoan worked for the Institute of Art and Craft in the Ministry of Culture and was involved with Nguyễn Đổ Cung on the *đình* project referred to in Chapter 3. He also worked in the conservation workshop of the Fine Arts Museum from 1971 until his retirement from this position in 1990. During 1981-82 he studied in Czechoslovakia on a Czechoslovakian Government sponsored scheme.[76] From my conservations with Đoan in 2002, it appears that he studied restoration in various workshops in Prague as well as graphics and etching.

Nguyễn Trọng Đoan is perhaps responsible for the most radical breaks in Vietnamese ceramics in the modern era. His first exhibition was held in 1989 as a joint exhibition with Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm (b.1922) one of the pillars of modern painting in Vietnam.[77] This Hà Nội exhibition is believed to be the first time that pottery was exhibited as an art form in a private exhibition in Vietnam. The critic and connoisseur, Thái Bá Vân (1934-1999) brought the two

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[76] The Czechoslovakian Government did sponsor students to study ceramics, but this was for the industrial production of items such as sanitary ware and tiles. Conversation with Đoan Thị Ngọc Ninh, an Industrial Chemist who worked on Ceramic glazes, October 2005, and who studied under such a program in Czechoslovakia between 1966-1970.

[77] Conversation with Nguyễn Trọng Đoan, October, 2002

artists together as he considered that they had sympathetic ideas. There was no name for the exhibition, but Vân wanted to promote the lacquer painting of Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm and the ceramics of Đoan as he felt that both were deeply rooted in the traditional culture of Vietnam. (Nghiêm had also been involved with Nguyễn Đổ Cung's research into the communal halls and temples of northern Vietnam) For this 1989 exhibition, Nghiêm painted the twelve animals of the Vietnamese zodiac, which, from 1988, was one of the constant themes in his oeuvre, whereas Đoan concentrated on pots with traditional glazes.[78] Vân considered that Nghiêm and Đoan as well as being artists of similar imaginative ideas, both expressed, in their different media, the distinct Vietnamese aesthetic of 'play of art'.[79]

Đoan first started making sculptural ceramics in the mid 1990s as a result of a commission from the Architects Association of Vietnam to make some garden lamps. Following this ground breaking venture into a new field, further commissions ensued, such as that for a monument in Nha Trang in 1996. (fig 2) Đoan's 1997 exhibition, *Lotus on Fire*, at the now defunct Tràng An gallery in Hà Nội, was one of the early installations of ceramics in Vietnam.

Up until 1998, Đoan fired his pots either in a small kiln at his Hà Nội house or at Phù Lãng. Firing his pots at Phù Lãng involved transporting them on the back of his motor bike for a round trip of 120 kilometres, sections of which were through some rather heavy and chaotic traffic. At Phù Lãng he produced glazed terracotta (*sành*) pieces, and, as has previously been observed, his presence has certainly been a stimulus to the burgeoning development of sculptural ceramics there in recent years.

Another way in which Đoan's ceramic practice has broken with the past is that in 1999, Mr Qúy, a wealthy Hanoian, became a his patron, offering him space and a gas kiln on the ground floor of his large West Lake home. In this comfortable environment Đoan has been experimenting with smaller forms made from white Bát Tràng clay. These are often made in pairs but with each piece individually decorated. An example of these works, shown in fig. 4.30, is a small jar. This jar continues the theme of the lotus (discussed in relation to Đoan's

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[78] Interview with Nguyễn Tư Nhiêm by Quang Việt in '210 Phút với họa sĩ Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm', (210 minutes with the artist Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm) *Tạp Chí Mỹ Thuật*, no. 96 (61), 2004, pp. 35-41. In this interview Nghiêm reveals that as a boy, one of his favourite occupations was sculpting in clay.

[79] Conversation with Nguyễn Trọng Đoan, Tạ Quang Bạo (sculptor) and others October 2002

work in chapter one) which in this particular piece has been rendered through delicate incisions into the clay and applied glazes. The lotus is depicted in an illusionistic manner with the seed pods holes deeply incised. These strong and direct forms are represented in a painterly style, rather than as an attempt to decorate the space. Such a depiction of the lotus motif stands in contrast to the simplified flattened patterns of many earlier blue and white renditions from the 15th and 16th centuries (fig.1.14) and to the decorative aesthetic from the Trần dynasty, with which it has more in common in terms of technique. (fig. 4.31)

Đoan's career path marks a distinct rupture with the way in which Vietnamese pottery was made in the past, both in the way in which his practice has operated and in the type of ceramics he produces. He emerged as a potter through education rather than birth right and now works in the hitherto unknown luxury for Vietnamese ceramicists of having a private patron who provides a spacious studio and a convenient kiln. Through Đoan's well informed knowledge of Vietnamese cultural history, he has been able to re-invigorate artistic ceramics and set them on a new path. He broke new ground in exhibiting his ceramics in a private exhibition and then later in collaborating on an installation. His work sometimes bears traces of surrealism, as seen in fig. 4.32, but at the core of his practice are the forms, techniques and motifs that have repeatedly been a part of the Vietnamese artistic repertoire.[80]

## Nguyễn Bảo Tòan

Another member of the research team at the Fine Arts Museum, is Nguyễn Bảo Tòan, b.1950. (fig. 4.33) Tòan also studied at the University of Industrial Fine Arts from 1973, majoring in painting. He withdrew prior to graduating, however later worked at the University with their kiln and ceramics workshop.[81] A meeting with Nguyễn Van Y was the catalyst that inspired him to return to his art and work with ceramics, both through employment at the conservation studio of the Fine Arts Museum from 1980 and in a private capacity. Of the ceramic artists in Vietnam at present, Bảo Tòan has had the highest profile in terms of international exposure. He won an ASEAN Ceramic Art award in Japan 1996.

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[80] The sculptor and teacher at the Industrial Fine Arts University, Nghiêm Xuân Hưng, b. 1953 is one of the artists in Hà Nội who has been most influenced by the work of Salvador Dali –according to my conversations with various artists.

[81] Interview with Nguyễn Bảo Tòan, 10 October 2002

In 1997 his paintings were included in the first show of Vietnamese art to tour the United States of America, a show entitled *A Winding River.* The painting on silk, *The Old Teacher,* 1995, included in that exhibition demonstrates Bảo Tòan's attachment to that pre-colonial medium and to traditional scholarship.(fig.4.34) Unlike the other potters discussed above, his family came from the former Vietnamese class of Mandarin scholars as portrayed in this painting.

In the catalogue for the show in the United States he is quoted as saying:

> Beside me stand things made of simple material, yet I find beauty within them. Hence, I'd like my art to be laconic and capable of arousing feelings among the viewers.[82]

This sentiment has been a constant for Bảo Tòan as he appropriates every day objects into his art practice, imbuing them through their relocation or particular placement with the ability to arouse a range of sentiments in his audience.

As a young adolescent in 1963, Bảo Tòan was sent by his family to Sơn La province in the north-west of Vietnam where he spent the next ten years, a large portion of the years of the Second Indochina War. During these formative years Bảo Tòan came to know the ethnic minority groups such as the Hmông, Dao, Black Thai, and Hà Nhì. Their ways of life, beliefs and cultural practices have had a lasting effect on Bảo Tòan and his art.[83] His class background and some of the subject matter portrayed in his works has caused him problems with the authorities in Vietnam from time to time, for which he has been jailed. As he is best known now for his installation works that frequently include ceramics, a wider discussion of his work will be included in the discussion of installation art in Vietnam in Chapter 6.

### Trần Khánh Chương

Trần Khánh Chương, (b.1943), a graduate of the University of Industrial Fine Arts in ceramics in 1963, is truly a Renaissance man- a writer, historian and ceramic artist as well as

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[82] *A Winding River: the Journey of Contemporary Art in Vietnam*, exh. cat., 1997, p.54. The exhibition was held at Meridian International Center between November 6, 1997 and March 15, 1998 and then went on to other venues in the United States.

[83] From numerous interviews with the artist

being a member of the Vietnamese National Assembly. At the time of writing he is also the President of the Vietnam Fine Arts Association, a fact which reinforces the prominent position in which ceramics are held in Vietnam. One of his publications is a book on Vietnamese ceramics which was published in 2001.[84] Due to the workload of his administrative duties he does not produce ceramics at present, however his ceramics have been exhibited in Hà Nội since 1986 and are included in the collection of the Fine Arts Museum of Hà Nội. His works have also been exhibited internationally: Paris in 1988, Canada in 1990 and are held in numerous overseas collections.[85] Works such as fig. 4.35, which is a piece for the garden, shows the influence of Nguyễn Trọng Đoan's garden lamps in conception and in material.

### Đo Qươc Vy

Đo Qươc Vy works part time as one of the ceramics teachers at the University of Industrial Fine Arts. He lives in Hải Dương province, the location of a great deal of historic and current ceramics production. During Tết 1998, the National History Museum, Hà Nội had an exhibition of his terracotta sculptures which were surrealistic/totemic in nature. (fig.4.36) Đo Qươc Vy has also collaborated on many projects with Lê Quang Chiến, the master craftsman from Bát Tràng, including an exhibition of ceramics in 1992.

### Vũ Hữu Nhung

Vũ Hữu Nhung was born in the village of Phù Lãng in 1975 into a family who were 'not much involved with ceramic' (sic).[86] He graduated from the sculpture department of the University of Industrial Fine Arts in 1999, the same course taken by Nguyễn Khắc Quân. Part of his initial training and research involved a period working in the pottery enterprises of Bát Tràng. Since his graduation, he has received numerous awards, including a Golden Hands award from the British Council in Hà Nội in 2001. Although he lives and works in the village of Phù Lãng, his artistic success has enabled him to open a number of outlets in Hà Nội,

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[84] Trần Khánh Chương, Gốm Việt Nam Vietnam Ceramics, 2001

[85] Ngô Doãn Kinh (ed.) *Gốm Việt nam Hiện Đại*, 2001, p.42

[86] Email correspondence with Vũ Hữ Nhung, 29 November 2005. His father died when he was young and prior to attending University, Nhung worked in some of the ceramics enterprises in Phù Lãng.

including a three storied showroom or gallery in Nguyễn Thái Học Street, one of the main streets of Hà Nội, just along from the Fine Arts Museum.(fig. 4.37)

His ceramics are fashioned from the local Phù Lãng clay but are definitely sculptural in their conception. Vũ Hữu Nhung acknowledges the influence of Nguyễn Trọng Đoan and Nguyễn Bảo Tòan on his practice, particularly when they were both firing works at Phù Lãng. However, since completing his University course, Nhung says that he 'tries to find out some method to create a revolution to renew our tradition products'.(sic)[87] In this process he feels, and the author believes that it is evident, that he has found a style for himself. Part of his oeuvre are dramatic constructions of decorated ceramic tiles, as can be seen at the doorway of the show room and in the work illustrated in fig. 4.38. A similar work was purchased for the headquarters of UNESCO. Many of his creations appear to be inspired by village life, one of the most potent markers of Vietnamese identity, and by natural forms. Two works by Vũ Hữ Nhung have been acquired for the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Hà Nội.[88] ( fig.5.6 shows one of these) Vũ Hữ Nhung, while extremely creative, seems impelled by a more commercial drive when compared to the 'literati' attitude of Đoan, Tòan and Quân. This difference may well be partly due to the three latter ceramicists' employment at the Museum of Fine Arts with its associated relative financial security. In the case of the latter men, the State has acted as a form of patron. Nhung seems driven, not only to research and draw upon the traditions of Phù Lãng, but to increase the prominence of his and Phù Lãng's stature in local and international contexts. Despite initial setbacks he has managed to negotiate a mix of mass production and his own sculptural works and now has his own company, North Star ceramics which employs one hundred people. [89]

While Vũ Hữu Nhung has been influenced by the older artist potters Nguyễn Trọng Đoan and Nguyễn Bảo Tòan and by his work experiences in Phù Lãng and Bát Tràng, his ability to create a new style of ceramics in his home village is also substantially due to the education he

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[87] Email correspondence with Vũ Hữ Nhung, 29 November 2005

[88] The two works are *Đồng đội*,(*Team mates*) a terracotta scuplture of solders and *Họp mặt (Meeting)*, two terracotta decorated tiles.

[89] http://64.233.179.104/search?q=cache:ropLCsptiIMJ:www.markets4poor.org/m4p/index.php%3Foption%3Dcom_docman%26task%3Ddoc_download%26gid%3D123%26lang%3Den+Thieu%27s+Ceramics&hl=en&gl=au&ct=clnk&cd=1

received at university. Perhaps it was this more than anything else which made him explore the relationship that exists between sculpture and ceramics. In turn he has inspired other Phù Lãng potters such as Nguyễn Manh Thiệu, b.1980, whose work appears as the frontispiece, to follow a similar direction.

### Nguyễn Xuân Thành

Nguyễn Xuân Thành (b. 1953) graduated from the Fine Arts University in 1972, having majored in sculpture. He also studied in the Ukraine between 1990-92. His works have been exhibited in Vietnam annually since 1974 and he has received numerous awards. Many of his works are in terracotta, but he has also explored Raku firings. His forms are not at all functional but are flowing and organic abstractions from figures and vegetation such as *Tree of Life*, from 1983. ( fig.4.39) Executed at a time when sculptural works were generally of a social realist style, this work is an abstract embodiment of energy such as the *chi* of Daoism, a theme that has also been explored by both Nguyễn Trọng Đoan and Nguyễn Khắc Quan. Thành is at present head of the sculpture department at the Fine Arts University and works on sculpture in ceramics as well as other material.

This last artist definitely approaches his work from a sculptural point of view, which, for the purpose of this study, begs the question of where sculptural ceramics begins and ends. If the description given at the beginning of part 1 Chapter 3 is accepted, then these works fit in with 'ceramic material, terracotta, stoneware or porcelain, that has been worked in a sculptural manner, whereby the functional nature of the object, if there is any, is of secondary importance.'

## Conclusion

Within Vietnam, potters and pottery villages specialize in making different types of ceramics. In the past, however, nearly all the people involved in making ceramics belonged to the third social rank - that of the artisan or *công*. Prior to the early 20th century in Vietnam, the hierarchy of social classes placed the scholars (*sĩ* ) first, farmers (*nông*) second, artisans (*công*)

next and finally traders (*thương*) at the lowest level.[90] Thus potters, as well as those people who carved wooden sculpture, those who painted with lacquer or those who created prints for festivals, were primarily classified as artisans, not according to the later western distinction between artist and crafts person.

From the inscriptions found on a number ceramic works it is clear that in the past, some of the people who were involved in making ceramics were also successful scholars. While it is difficult to know the precise reasons why certain ceramic pieces were signed by individual potters, it is clear that there was a great deal of prestige associated with being a scholar. In some instances, these two distinct societal ranks came together in the potter and the scholar. Furthermore, prior to the twentieth century, a certain type of ceramic practice, the creation of pieces with a sculptural quality that were made on commission for merit or for prestige purposes, was a highly regarded form of cultural expression.

In the twentieth century, especially since the introduction of formalized tertiary art education, there was a change in the way the artists worked and in their place in the social order. Artists were no longer artisans from the third rank in society, but were members of the new middle class. 'Art' was viewed as distinct from craft activities that took place in craft villages. 'Art' came to be associated with painting and to some extent, sculpture.

It is suggested that with independence, peace and greater prosperity experienced during the late years of the twentieth century, there has been a developing pride in and promotion of a national culture. This has taken expression in a distinct shift to reclaim the pre-colonial values of the long standing art/craft histories in the country. Thus ceramics, and ceramics practice, particularly when pursued by educated people, has come to be valued as a distinctive Vietnamese art form. Although as Nguyễn Xuân Tiệp states, it is difficult to gain recognition as a ceramic artist in Vietnam, the gap in prestige and recognition is not as great as that in some western countries, for example Australia, where the stigma of craft is still attached to ceramics. In Vietnam, where that attitude did not exist prior to the twentieth century, the ground is being reclaimed by ceramic artists. The level of acclaim given to potters, the

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[90] Bùi Như Hương & Trần Hậu Tuấn, Hội Hôa Mới Viêt Nam Thạp Kỷ 90: New Vietnamese Art in the 1990's , 2000, p.6

discussion of ceramics as an art practice, the prices realized for their works and the position that they hold in the art world is reaching a parity with that of the major Vietnamese painters. In a parallel with many of the early French artist potters whose work was discussed in Chapter 2, contemporary Vietnamese sculptural ceramicists have their initial training in other areas of art practice such as sculpture or painting. From the ceramic artists with whom I have had contact, it is evident that the University of Industrial Fine Arts has been of particular importance in providing an educational grounding for their practice.

Finally, while pre-industrial methods of pottery production persist in Vietnam today they coexist with industrial forms. There is also a growing body of studio or artist potters. Cooper's definition of the studio potter is useful in identifying the major characteristics of the Vietnamese artist potters today.[91] To summarize the studio potter:

i. works as an individual (some other definitions include a few assistants);
ii. has a primary concern for the material and an expertise in technical aspects;
iii. produces works with no essential role;
iv. sells the work on the basis of its artistic merit, which reflects the individuality of the maker;
v. sells through galleries which seek to persuade people to buy based on motives of desire rather than need;
vi. is not contained by a dominant technology or by prevailing styles; and
vii. finally, not mentioned by Cooper, but another important characteristic is that they works at his or her own pace.

A discussion of exhibition practices and the way in which at works are circulated in Vietnam will be taken up in the next chapter.

[91] Emmanuel Cooper in Ian Freestone & David Gaimster,(eds.), *Pottery in the Making*, p. 206

# Chapter 5: Markets and the Exhibtion Structure

Riegl made a point of avoiding the issue of value in his writings, as he considered that it was a spurious factor when attempting to analyse or theoretize about art. However, considering the dramatic effect that both changes in the way art has been displayed and circulated in Vietnam since the nineteenth century and the recent changes that a more favourable economic climate have had on artists there, I think a discussion of issues related to the art market and exhibition structure in Hà Nội is appropriate at this point.

Since the colonial period, changes in educational practice and the establishment of museums, commercial art galleries and artists societies, combined with a buoyant economy following the 1986 government policy of *đôi mới*, have all contributed to the development of an art market that has altered the way in which artists produce and view their works. Chapter 3 discussed the changes in institutional and educational structures through which artists have been able to move from an artisanal into a professional practice. This chapter will focus on the way in which these professionals now exhibit and sell their works. Many ceramicists world wide produce both a functional line of ceramics as well as art works, and this is also the case in Vietnam. Some examples have been discussed in Chapter 4. For instance the ceramic sculptors, Vũ Hữu Nhung and Lê Quang Chiến, operate both as artists and as entrepreneurs. The entrepreneurial aspect has existed for centuries, however, only since the late 19$^{th}$ early 20$^{th}$ centuries have ceramics been displayed and circulated in the same manner as other art works.

As noted by Becker, when artist-craftsmen change a craft practice, they "develop an 'apparatus' around their practice" which includes exhibitions, prizes, literature, sales and teaching positions.[1] In Vietnam, the art world that has developed since the French colonial period has enabled the ceramic sculptors to participate in the 'apparatus' that developed around painters and sculptors, rather than the artist-craftsmen creating the 'apparatus' around their own practice.

[1] Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds*, 1984, p.279, also referred to in Chapter 2 in relation to the development of studio practice in the West.

## Pre- Colonial period

During the pre-colonial period, art works – and specifically ceramics – were circulated through three main channels. They were sold either through local markets or entrepôts dealing with foreign traders or they were commissioned by the court and other patrons for royal or religious purposes or as diplomatic gifts.[2] Although by and large the bulk of the wares were made by artisans from the third social rank, some of the commissioned pieces were specifically inscribed and decorated by well-educated people. Generally trade in ceramics was carried out by people from the lowest social rank, as was elaborated in the previous chapter.

By the end of the colonial period in 1954, these social rankings had been overturned as, in the north of Vietnam under the communist system, all people were theoretically regarded as equal. Expanded and different educational opportunities than had existed under the mandarinate created a different set of career prospects and a growing urban middle class. Since the late 1980s, this more affluent middle class has continued to grow but, according to some commentators in Vietnam, they are generally not patrons of the arts.

Ceramics, including sculptural pieces, are still sold in local markets (fig 5.1)[3] and those destined for overseas are often sold either directly from the pottery enterprises themselves or from showrooms in the villages, such as those that now line the main street of Bát Tràng and the large show room constructed recently for the Hapro company at Chu Đạu (fig.5.2). In Hà Nội, there are now a number of specialty shops dealing in sculptural and artistic ceramic wares. Some are owned by the sculptors themselves, such as Vũ Hữu Nhung, (see fig. 4.37) and some are strictly commercial enterprises such as that illustrated in fig. 5.3, where decorative and sculptural works from Bát Tràng, Chu Đậu, Phù Lãng and ceramic enterprises

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[2] Some of the commercial ports from the 16th to 18th centuries included Phố Hiến, Thăng Long, Thanh Ha, Hôi An, ( Faifo) and Gia Đình, from Thái Bá Vân, 'An Outline of the History of Vietnamese Ceramic Art', *Vietnamese Studies*, (105) 3- 1992, p.43. Seventeenth century references to trade with Vietnam in ceramics are found in the Dargh register of the Dutch East India Company. T. Volker, *Porcelain and the Dutch East India Company*, 1954

[3] The ceramics shown at the Thở Hà market were not made in that village. At the time that photograph was take, due to language difficulties, I was unable to ascertain their source.

around Ho Chi Minh City are sold. The other major way in which sculptural ceramics are circulated is through exhibitions.

## Exhibitions during the colonial period

Exhibitions of professional artists' works were introduced through the agency of art schools and various cultural societies that were established during the colonial period. International exchanges went in both directions. Vietnamese works, with their exotic, 'oriental' character, were taken to France and European ideas of what constituted the fine arts were shown in Vietnam. In 1897, an annual exhibition of indigenous arts was established in Hà Nội, under the patronage of the Chamber of Commerce. The aim was to 'perfect' the work and to make it accessible to the markets of Europe and America.[4] The first exhibition of the students of the *École des Beaux-arts de l'Indochine* was held in a pavilion at the school in 1929. (fig. 3.20)

Exhibitions of Vietnamese ceramics were shown in international venues in Europe and Asia, largely due to their economic potential. They were exhibited as decorative pieces and the works were generally not signed. Mariette Balick, who taught at the *École d'Art de Biên Hòa* from 1923 until 1950 (with a short break between 1944-48), influenced the look of Vietnamese ceramics through the mediation of a European eye and taste. As mentioned in Chapter 3, she arranged for an agency of the school to be set up in Paris, however, this was short-lived due to the start of the French-Indochina war. Given the fact that the commercial potential of these works was of uppermost importance, in that they were designed for a European market in the throes of a craze for orientalism, these wares do not fit with all of the characteristics applicable to artist potters as outlined in Chapter 2 and at the end of the previous chapter. For example, the makers did not have independent recognition as artists, as the school was awarded the gold medals that were earned, rather than the individual potters.[5]

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[4] G. Dumoutier, *L'Enseignement Français en-Annam et au Tonkin,* (French Instruction in Vietnam- a report for the Universal Exposition of 1900), Hà Nội, 1900, p.27

[5] Some of the works were marked, but the school holds no record of the students. Information from Kerry Nguyễn Long who researched this type of ceramic for the article 'Ceramics of Bien Hoa', *Arts of Asia,* vol.33, no.4, 2003, pp. 66-78

However, the inspiration for the works involved a great deal of technical expertise in addition to knowledge of ancient styles: characteristics of the early artist potters in Europe.

In 1867, Doudart de Lagrée arranged for some art works from the colonies to be sent to an exhibition in Paris.[6] Later, increasing numbers of items – agricultural and industrial products, handicrafts and arts – were sent to cultural showcases such as the Universal Exhibition in Paris of 1878. Fig. 5.4 shows a photograph of a sculptor from Hà Nội, taken some time before 1926, (most probably prior to the establishment of the *École des Beaux-arts de L'Indochine*), putting the final touches on a ceramic elephant – the type of product that would have been shown at such venues.

For the 1922 colonial exhibition held in Marseille, George Groslier, director of *l'École des Arts Cambodgiens*, Phnom Penh, and Georges Serré, director of *l'École d'Art de Biên Hòa*, collaborated to send works from the decorative art colleges of the colonies of Indochina.[7] Serré had established the ceramics course at the Biên Hòa school. The subsequent colonial exhibition, which was held in Paris in 1931, included an exhibition of paintings and sculpture from the pupils of the *École des Beaux-arts de l'Indochine* and other decorative art colleges in the colony. These works were shown on the first floor of a replica of Angkor Wat, in keeping with the fascination that the lost kingdom of the Khmers held in the imagination of the French at that time.[8] Blanchard de la Brosse, (Director of Public Education and founder of the History Museum in Saigon which bore his name) organized exhibitions and sales of work from the graduates and students of the *École des Beaux-arts de l'Indochine* through *l'Agence du Gouvernement général de L'Indochine*, in Paris.[9] De la Brosse collaborated with Victor Tardieu, the founding principal of the *École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine*, to prepare a group

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[6] Nadine André-Pallois, *L'Indochine: Un Lieu d'Échange Culturel?*, 1997, p.51. Ernest Marc Louis de Gonzague Doudart de Lagrée was the leader of the French expedition up the Mekong River in 1866-1868 on which he perished. He had already arranged for the shipment of items to Paris prior to his death.

[7] Nadine André-Pallois, 1997, p.57

[8] Nadine André-Pallois, 1997, p.60. The works of Lê Pho (1907-2002), Nguyễn Phan Chánh (1892-1984) Vũ Cao Đàm (1908), Mai Trung Thứ (1906-1980) and Công Văn Trung (b. 1907 ) were included. See also Jean-François Hubert in Noppe, Catherine Noppe & Jean- François Hubert, *Arts Du Vietnam: La fleur du pecheur et l'oiseau d'azur,* exh.cat., 2002, p.171 for a description of this exhibition.

[9] Jean- François Hubert in Noppe, Catherine & Hubert, Jean- François, *Arts Du Vietnam: La fleur du pecheur et l'oiseau d'azur,* 2002, p.163 Hubert discusses the sales of paintings, the collectors in Paris and the vicissitudes of the art market pp.163-183.

of paintings and sculpture for an international exhibition in Rome that was also held in 1931.[10] In addition, Tardieu, on his retirement, acted as a European agent for Vietnamese artists.

Thái Bá Vân, in writing about cultural contacts between Europe and Vietnam, is one of the few scholars to note that the Vietnamese were introduced to European art by Christian missionaries from the 17th century and then through the work of French academics from the 1890s.[11] Most writings totally ignore this early period, for which little evidence remains, and focus instead on works produced after the establishment of the *École des Beaux-arts de l'Indochine* in 1925. Early Vietnamese painters in a western style include Lê Văn Miến (1873-1943), who studied at the *École National des Beaux-arts* in Paris between 1891-1894.[12] However, the first major exhibition of European art was shown in Hà Nội in 1902. Amongst the works by 180 painters and 22 sculptors, was the sculpture of Rodin, [13] whose non-didactic and psychological style of sculpture was quite revolutionary at that time.

Artists' organizations were created during the colonial period in Vietnam, with the purpose of holding exhibitions as well as with the aim of helping artists in times of trouble. SADEAI (*Socíeté Annamite d'Encouragement à l'Art et à l'Industrie*), the Annamese Society for the Encouragement of Art and Industry, was founded in 1934 with a membership composed of 'artists and handicrafts-men'.[14] This society organized annual salons from 1935 until 1939, when it was disbanded. The works were divided into four juried sections comprising painting, drawing and engraving, sculpture and decorative arts.[15] Following the demise of SADEAI, two further organizations were created of which one, FARTA (*Foyer de l'Art Annamite*), was

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[10] Jean-François Hubert in Catherine Noppe, & Jean-François Hubert, exh. cat. 2002, p.172

[11] Thái Bà Van, 'Contacts between Contemporary Vietnamese Art and European Culture Since the end of the 19th century', *Vietnamese Studies*, no. 3, 1992, p.76

[12] Quang Việt (ed.), *Các Họa Sĩ Trường Cao Đẳng Mỹ Thuật Đông Dương,* (*Painters of the Fine Arts College of Indochina*), 1998, p.15, Nam Sơn (1890-1973) also studied at the École National des Beaux-Arts in Paris between 1925 and 1927 and was involved with the establishment of the art school in Hà Nội, Hữu Ngọc & Hòai Việt, 'An Artistic Legacy Revived', *Vietnam Cultural Window*, no. 59, Feb. 2003, pp.2-4. The National History Museum in Hà Nội has some early paintings in Western style of the Vietnamese court at Huế.

[13] Thái Bà Vân, 'Contacts between Contemporary Vietnamese Art and European Culture Since the end of the 19th century', *Vietnamese Studies*, no. 3, 1992, p.76

[14] Quang Việt (ed.), 1998, p.139. Tardieu was the first Chairman.

[15] Quang Việt (ed.), 1998, p.139

a cultural body composed of Vietnamese people which had a 'fine arts' section that organised two salons in 1943 and 1944. The other organization, *Unique Salon*, was created with the assistance of colonial authorities as a counter to the Vietnamese Artists Society. Under the auspices of the Governor General of the colony, *Unique Salon* held exhibitions in 1943 and 1944.[16]

## Post-colonial markets and exhibitions during the war years

Direct French influence ended with the first Indochina war. From 1954 onwards, the art of the North tended to follow a socialist realist style (though there was a pocket of dissention) and the South became influenced by American art. In the North, this marked the instigation of greater government control over production, distribution and subject matter and a polarization between those who pursued patriotic social realism, which developed in relative isolation during the resistance years, and those who were declared 'decadent' and 'obscurantist' in the words of Trường Chinh, Secretary General of the Indochinese Communist Party. Trường Chinh wrote *đề cường về văn hóa* (Thesis on Vietnamese Culture) in 1943 (which was further elaborated in 1948), in which he requested artists to 'forsake the decadent and opportunistic art of the cities – meaning impressionism, cubism etc. – in favour of patriotic art to serve the people instead of the selfish interests of the bourgeoisie.'[17] One aim of the pronouncement was to build and develop a progressive Vietnamese culture imbued with national identity. In 1944, a committee entitled the National Salvation Cultural Association was established.[18] The role of this organization still persists under the Vietnam Institute of Culture and Information Studies, established in 2001, which has, as part of its mandate, the aim to develop a Vietnamese culture 'that is imbued with national identity'.[19] It is clear that, from the mid 1940's onwards, the government has taken a prominent role in prescribing and fostering what contemporary artists now call 'Vietnameseness'. What is

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[16] Quang Việt (ed.), 1998, p.139. Nora Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art*, 2004, mentions the salon of 1943 as being ignored in Vietnamese accounts for political reasons. However, the exhibition is mentioned in Quang Việt 's 1998 book.

[17] Luu Yên, 'Contemporary painting and sculpture in Vietnam', in de Hartingh, Bertrand et al., *Vietnam in the 20th century: Plastic and Visual Arts from 1925 to our time*, exh. cat., 1998, p.52

[18] Neil Jamieson in Cultural Representation in Transition: New Vietnamese Painting, 1996, p.18

[19] http://www.culturalprofiles.org.uk/Viet_Nam/Directories/Vi_ACYAIw-7879_ADst_Nam_Cultural_Profile/-3916.html consulted 21.2.06

intended by 'national identity' has altered over the years and it is a concept that has not been without paradox. For instance, early on, under the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, art from the village was promoted as an appropriate model, at the same time as the prevalent Marxist-Leninist ideological view would have regarded this art as being saturated with unscientific and superstitious notions.

Is this 'Vietnameseness' what Riegl would have called *Kunstwollen*? Not exactly, as it is not an intrinsic, underlying drive or spirit of the culture, but an extrinsic, governmentally encouraged pursuit of what is constructed as the national form in art. Aspects of Vietnamese art that are seen to embody the idea of Vietnameseness were discussed in Chapter 1 and largely focus on periods during which Vietnam was perceived to be at its most independent – the Đông sơn, Lý and Trần periods – and that which is viewed as most closely allied to the Vietnamese people – the art of the village. What may be part of a national cultural core has been overlaid with centuries of different influences in permeable layers that have resulted in a syncretic construction of what is, in the twenty first century, viewed as embodying Vietnameseness.

The resistance years – 1945 to 1975 – consisted of a decade-long campaign against French colonial rule, followed by twenty years of resistance against the United States and its allies.[20] As was mentioned in Chapter 3, in 1945 the art school in Hà Nội was forced close due to the Japanese *coup d'etat* and was eventually relocated in the countryside, north of the city, under the leadership of Tô Ngọc Vân (1906-1954), who had previously won a gold medal at the Paris Salon of 1931. [21] Most of the artists took on a dual role as resistance workers or soldiers as well as artists. No sculpture was taught due to the war-time conditions which made the use of appropriate equipment and materials extremely difficult, if not impossible.[22] There was

[20] These are rough dates as the exact timing of these conflicts is open to interpretation

[21] Mai Lý Quảng & Đỗ Đức Thảo, (eds) 100 Vietnamese Painters and Sculptors of the 20th century, 1995, p.39

[22] Trần Tuy, in Vũ Giáng Hương et al.(eds), Điệu Khắc Hiện Đại Việt Nam (Vietnamese Contemporary Sculpture), 1997, p.18

also very little ceramic production during the war years, as the smoke from the kilns would have attracted the bombers.[23]

There were still exhibitions held in Hà Nội and in the countryside during these difficult years.[24] However, rather than providing a venue to sell the works, such exhibitions were organized to inform and inspire the public. In 1946, the first National Exhibition of Fine Arts under the new regime was held in the Opera House in Hà Nội.[25]

During 1956, there was a bitter debate known as the *Giai Phẩm*/*Nhân Văn* (Aesthetic Humanism) affair, named after two publications, which involved many artists and intellectuals. The two opposing views were that of 'art for art's sake' versus the government line that art should serve the people. Those who felt that there should be a separation between art and politics were severely dealt with.[26]

Art with the stated aim of being 'patriotic art to serve the people' made its first official appearance in the National Fine Arts Exhibition of 1958[27] the same year in which an exhibition of art from Vietnam was shown in Moscow. Based on the catalogue of the latter exhibition, it would appear that overt socialist realism was more in evidence in sculpture and posters rather than in paintings or prints. The paintings shown included romantic works by Trần Văn Cẩn and Tô Ngọc Vân, in addition to modernist works by Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm that are inspired by village art. Of the nine sculptures shown, one piece in terracotta, *Hứt Thước Lào* (*The Smoker*) n.d. by Vũ Văn Thu, was the only non-socialist realist work.[28] Ironically, (in view of the Marxist proscription against superstitious practices) although it is difficult to be definitive from the reproduction, through his dress – the elaborate headband and simple

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[23] Conversations held with Bát Tràng potters, 1997

[24] see Jessica Harrison-Hall, Vietnam behind the lines: Images from the War 1965-1975, 2002, p. 9 & p.15-17

[25] Trần Tuy in Vũ Giáng Hương et al.(eds), 1997, p.18

[26] see Jeffrey Hantover, 'Contemporary Vietnamese Painting' in *Uncorked Soul: Contemporary Art from Vietnam*, 1991, p.32

[27] Thái Bá Vân, 'Contacts between Contemporary Vietnamese Art and European Culture Since the End of the 19th Century', in *Vietnamese Studies*, (105) no. 3, 1992, p.77

[28] *Nhgệ Thuật Tạo Hình Việt Nam* (*СОВЕТСКИЙ ХУАОЖНИК*) 1959, exh. cat., Trần Tuy, in Vũ Giáng Hương et al.(eds), *Điệu Khắc Hiện Đại Việt Nam* (*Vietnamese Contemporary Sculpture*), 1997, p.17 mentions this work as a bronze (n.d.), which may be a later casting from the terracotta.

loin cloth – this figure may in fact represent a Shaman in the process of entering an altered state of reality. Such superstitious practices were frowned on by the government of the time.

In 1966, when he was secretary general of the Vietnamese Artists' Association, Trần Văn Cẩn (1910-1994), wrote the following words in an introduction to an exhibition of works on paper that were made during expeditions to the heavily bombed provinces adjacent to the seventeenth parallel, between Autumn 1964 and Spring 1965:

> …our artists, knapsacks on their backs and palettes in their hands, have left without regret their comfortable studios to throw themselves onto the roads of new resistance…..
>
> The authors, though different in their style and choice of subjects, have displayed an equal determination, that of a united people who will not lay down their arms until national independence and genuine peace are achieved.[29]

A range of styles is acknowledged in this passage and can also be gathered from the list of artists whose forty works appear in the catalogue. These include: Bùi Xuân Phái (1921-1988) whose works are generally quite expressionistic, Phan Kế An (b.1923), who worked in a very painterly style, and the author himself, whose works are distinguished by their sensuous linearity.[30] The choice of subject matter also varied but kept within the prescribed guidelines to provide images that helped in the war effort.[31]

Throughout the war years there was virtually no market for paintings and sculpture in the North as, apart from anything else, consumer goods were sold by coupons and were rationed

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[29] Trần Văn Cẩn, *North Vietnamese Sketches*, 1966- no page numbers.

[30] Trần Văn Cẩn won first prizes at the SADEAI exhibition in 1935, FARTA group exhibition in 1943 and at the National Fine Arts Exhibitions of 1946, 1951 and 1957. His most famous work, *Em Thúy* (Little Thuy) 1943, was conserved by Caroline Fry from the University of Melbourne in 2004 for the National Fine Arts Museum in Hà Nội.

[31] The fact that the abstract artist Tạ Tỵ (1922- 1999), held an exhibition of his cubist works in Hà Nội in 1951, underlines the fact that there was not just one style of art, nor one definition of the purpose of art during the war years.

between 1965 to 1981. There were no private galleries.[32] The *Hội Mỹ Thuật Việt Nam* (Vietnamese Fine Arts Association), established in 1957, had a monopoly over group exhibitions and for some time exerted strict control over subject matter.[33] The initial group of 108 members of this association had increased to 1,500 in 2006. In order to gain membership, an artist has to be proposed by two longstanding existing members and to have exhibited work in juried exhibitions.[34] The membership fee remains nominal and the organization, like the colonial organizations that preceded it, continues to provide an organized support system for its members. It is managed by a council of people elected by the members for a five year term.[35] All the positions are voluntary. Ceramicists were accepted into the association from the outset.[36] This accorded with the promotion of patriotic art, since by including ceramics, the organization re-asserted a version of Vietnamese culture that had been demeaned under French rule and signalled a return to a pre-colonial view of what constituted the arts. The current president is the ceramicist and writer Trần Khánh Chương and the organization continues to be a major part of the formal government level of the art world in Vietnam.

In 1993, the Vietnam Fine Arts Association instituted national awards for excellence in all branches of the visual arts.[37] The association has many branches which organize exhibitions according to different media, including separate exhibitions for sculpture and ceramics such

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[32] Exhibitions continued in the South of Vietnam. See Jeffrey Hantover, 'Contemporary Vietnamese Painting' in *Uncorked Soul: Contemporary Art from Vietnam*, 1991, p. 22-23 and Boi Tran Huynh, *Vietnamese Aesthetics from 1925 onwards*, PhD Thesis, 2005. During this time, Mrs M. Bennett held art exhibitions for promising artists in her Saigon home. Despite being evacuated from the city twice, in 1968 and 1975, the Bennetts managed to retain a large collection of works by Southern artists, including the ceramicist, Nguyễn Khai (see fig. 2.8). Many of these artists now live in the USA. Information from conversations with the Bennetts, especially in 2003. Private galleries were not officially sanctioned until the time of *đôi mới.*

[33] Jessica Harrison-Hall, *Vietnam behind the lines: Images from the War 1965-1975*, exh. cat., 2002, p.16. Other cultural associations were formed at this time in order to control and direct the creative powers of writers, musicians and artists towards the war effort.

[34] Conversation with Nguyễn Xuân Tiệp, 1999 and information from Trần Nguyễn Đân, former deputy director of the Museum of Fine Arts, 2004

[35] From conversations with member artists in Hà Nội, 1998, at which time the membership was 50,000 Vietnamese đông per year. The exchange rate then would have made this sum the equivalent of $3.82 USD

[36] Correspondence with Vương Hoá Ban, Fine Arts Museum, Hà Nội, 2000

[37] http://www.culturalprofiles.org.uk/Viet_Nam/Units/1810.html - this website established by the British Council in association with the Ministry of Culture,Vietnam and funded with the help of a Rockefeller grant, provides a broad range of information about various aspects of the arts in Vietnam.

as that held at the Hà Nội Fine Arts Association Exhibition House,16 Ngô Quyền, in September 1999, which featured works made at Phù Lãng. Lê Quang Chiến (who usually works in Bát Tràng), Trần Khành Chương (at that time vice president of the Vietnam Fine Arts Association), Nguyễn Ba Việt, and Ngô Dòan Kinh (b.1942) presented sculptures and garden lamps in this exhibition.[38]

## Socialist Realism

Art from the north of Vietnam produced between the 1940s until the 1980s has generally been labelled and dismissed as being largely informed by socialist realism as the war years saw a shift in external contact, causing Vietnamese art to became more closely aligned with the Eastern Bloc. Propaganda art that was produced to stimulate the war effort and encourage programs initiated by the government was viewed by those outside, or in the south of Vietnam, as the style of the Soviet Union or China – the style of the enemy.

The influence of socialist realism in Vietnam was perhaps more coherent in its written pronouncements than in the particular style produced in art works. Painters adhered to the principles to produce an art that was positive in outlook, popular in character and non-religious, however, when the medium was not poster art with written slogans, the styles produced were, as noted above, relatively diverse. Prints and public sculpture were the areas most affected by what is regarded as a socialist realist style, in that the subject matter is more strident. A great many of the posters displayed on hoardings throughout Vietnam since *đôi mới* carry messages relating to health, population control and the promotion of Vietnamese values.

Trấn Tuy asserts that prior to the end of the Second Indochina War, there were no public monuments in Vietnam.[39] Previously the Vietnamese attitude to commemorative works was that the sculptures of ancestors or deities were kept inside, decorated with colours or gilded

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[38] Discussion with members of the Vietnam Fine Arts Association at this exhibition.

[39] Trần Tuy in Vũ Giáng Hương, (ed.) *Điêu Khắc Hiến Đại Việt Nam,* (*Vietnamese Contemporary Sculpture*), 1997, p.25 There may have been some French monuments that have since disappeared. A few Christian statues from the colonial era remain, as well as public fountains such as the baroque style fountain in front of the Government guest house in Hà Nội.

and actively attended in worship or in appeasement to the spirits of the dead. In the case of the majority *Kinh* people, such sculptures were certainly not kept out in the open though some tribal minorities placed sculptures outdoors around funeral areas.(see fig. 6.23) However, with the introduction of a socialist realist style of monument, there was a change in placement, size and aesthetic. The new monuments were of much larger than life size figures that were placed outdoors in conspicuous public places. Instead of being gilded and lacquered or covered in coloured glazes, the figures were made in unadorned bronze, stone or clay.(see fig.2 and 5.7)

Ceramics that exhibit an influence of socialist realism were created in the art schools of Vietnam, as discussed in Chapter 3, and by individual potters as sculptures, particularly for National Fine Arts competitions. One of the more notable sculptures from this time is Nghiêm Xuân Hưng's (b.1953) terracotta of 1974 entitled *Mẹ Con,* (*Mother and child*) in the Museum of Fine Arts, Hà Nội. ( fig.5.5). While there are many sculptures representing soldiers with weapons, this defiantly strong woman supporting her baby could well be seen as a metaphor for the country and the socialist system nurturing the next generation. As far as the potters of Bát Tràng were concerned, alignment with Eastern Bloc countries meant increased trade with the USSR, which amongst other things, brought a demand for large, black glazed vases, often over two metres in height.[40]

In effect, the influence of socialist realism has extended beyond the introduction of *đôi mới* in 1986, as works with patriotic themes continue to be viewed as preferred subject matter for the National Fine Arts exhibitions. This has been particularly evident in the work of young artists. For example, a ceramic sculpture by Vũ Hưu Nhung, which received a prize in the National Fine Arts exhibition of 2000, was a work entitled *Đồng đội* (*Comrades in Arms*). (fig. 5.6) The circle of soldiers are portrayed in an angular, socialist realist style and the work would obviously be viewed as embodying patriotic subject matter. Furthermore, the soldiers are mounted on a shape reminiscent of a Đông sơn drum, which is decorated with a characteristic swirl related to the designs on these ancient bronzes. Both the form and decoration of the drum are signs that are interpreted as being imbued with Vietnameseness. The work was

[40] Conversations with kiln owners conducted in 1998

subsequently purchased for the Museum of Fine Arts, Hà Nội and according to the artist, to receive such an award as a new graduate was of enormous significance.[41]

Viet Hai claims that Art Gallery 7, Hang Khay, a company set up under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture in 1965, was the first art gallery established in Hà Nội but that until 1988, their activities were restricted to 'selling goods by commission through government retail outlets and the display and sale of souvenirs, paintings and statuary'.[42]

## The immediate post re-unification years

Following reunification of the country, the decade from 1975 to 1985 was an extremely difficult time for artists, due to government control over subject matter and the requirement by art schools, that students applying for entry should be of an acceptable social background.[43] Students from a bourgeois background were considered unacceptable. There continued to be severe shortages of materials. Thái Bá Vân considers that it was a decade of stagnation.[44] The critic Nguyễn Quân noted that during the immediate post-war years 'the scene was …much duller and more quiescent. ….Materials were very scarce and National Fine Arts exhibitions were held once every four years. Individual exhibitions could be counted on one's fingers.'[45] Pressing economic and social needs following the war did not produce a climate that could nurture an open forum in the arts. During this period, however, there were partial government reforms (from 1979 onwards) that eventually lead to *đôi mới* in 1986, when the

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[41] http://64.233.179.104/search?q=cache:ropLCsptiIMJ:www.markets4poor.org/m4p/index.php%3Foption%3Dcom_docman%26task%3Ddoc_download%26gid%3D123%26lang%3Den+Thieu%27s+Ceramics&hl=en&gl=au&ct=clnk&cd=1⊥

[42] Viet Hai in Jeffrey Hantover, *Uncorked Soul: Contemporary Art from Vietnam*, exh. cat.,1991, p.vii

[43] Conversations with artists and in Neil Jamieson , *Cultural Representation in Transition: New Vietnamese Painting,* exh. cat., 1996, p.23

[44] Thái Bà Vân, 'Contacts between Contemporary Vietnamese Art and European Culture Since the end of the 19th century', *Vietnamese Studies*, no. 3, 1992, p.78

[45] Nguyễn Quân, 'Multicoloured and Richly Idiosyncratic; The Art Scene in Vietnam in Recent Years' *Art and Asia Pacific*, September, 1993, p.28 For a discussion of Nguyễn Quân's background and work see Nora Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art*, 2004, pp. 89-90 and pp. 92-93

change in the economic and philosophical climate brought about a burgeoning art market and an increasing engagement with ideas from other parts of the international art world. [46]

During this decade, (1975 to1985), the dialogue with Eastern Bloc countries continued while the embargo placed on Vietnam by the United States following the Second Indochina War did nothing to foster an engagement between those countries in anything other than the repatriation of war dead. Thus, Vietnamese artists were excluded from early international exhibitions of modern Asian Art organized in the United States such as 'Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions', organized by the Asia Society in New York in 1996.

Although Government control was omnipresent, there was a nascent private art world in such venues as Café Lam, Nguyễn Hưu Huan Street, where artists exchanged their paintings with the owner. The paintings were generally works on paper and were sometimes sold to café patrons.[47] Some private collections were maintained but these were not officially sanctioned. A prominent collection was that of Đức Minh, (1912-1983) a Hà Nội millionaire, who amassed paintings from the 1930's onwards. This was said to be the best collection of paintings in Vietnam. Minh wished to donate his collection to the nation and have the gallery named after himself, however, the government refused the offer and the art works were distributed amongst his sons, all of whom, except one, sold the paintings.[48] The remaining works were taken to Ho Chi Minh city, where a purpose built gallery was opened in 2002, following the changes in law which permitted private art galleries and private collections. As he had sought, it was named the after the father: the Đức Minh Gallery.[49]

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[46] see Neil Jamieson, *Cultural Representation in Transition: New Vietnamese Painting,* 1996, pp. 25-26 for a discussion of the reforms that were carried out over this period.

[47] Information on visiting the café in 1996.

[48] Information provided by Nguyễn Mạnh Đức, collector, patron and alternate art venue owner, 1998. Nora Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art*, 2004, p.58, discusses the collection.

[49] Boi Tran Huynh, *Vietnamese Aesthetics from 1925 onwards*, 2005, p. 368. The name of the son is Bùi Quốc Chí.

There were some government commissions for sculpture during this time such as those listed but undated by Trần Tuy.[50]

## Post đôi mới

The policies and support of Nguyễn Vân Linh, Secretary General of the Communist Party when *đôi mới* was announced, were instrumental in removing strict ideological control over the arts in Vietnam. In November 1987, he met with artists and writers to implement the Party's new openness to issues relating to art and literature.[51] 'The government's strict supervision over cultural production and bureaucratic administration of art was…..weakened.' [52] Taylor notes that details of the changes relating to the arts were not archived.[53] Although the Ministry of Culture and Information still maintains the control over the arts, and there have been some instances when the government has clamped down heavily on artistic freedoms, there has generally been a greater freedom of expression possible for artists.[54] One of the features of the art scene since 1986 is an increasing co-existence of diverse styles and philosophies, despite the persistence of works in a socialist realist style in public monuments and in many of the submissions to the National Fine Arts Exhibition. The art world in Hà Nội has become more multifaceted, with different venues available in which artists can display and sell their creations. Three distinct tiers have emerged – the formal, commercial and the alternate.

### Formal Art World

The formal level, that most closely connected with the Ministry of Culture and Information, includes exhibitions (*Triển lãm*) in the state museums, those associated with the Vietnam Fine Arts Association – such as the National Fine Arts Exhibition, National Sculpture Exhibition – and the art schools. [55] Staff from the Ministry also examine and appraise the works of any

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[50] Trần Tuy in Vũ Giáng Hương, (ed.) Điêu Khắc Hiến Đại Việt Nam, (Vietnamese Contemporary Sculpture), 1997, p.25

[51] Nguyen Trung, 'The case of Dang Thi Khue', 15.8.1998, unpublished manuscript.

[52] Natasha Kraevskaia, 'From Artifice Toward Honesty' in *Vietnam Art Actuel,* 2002, p. 8

[53] Nora Taylor, Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art, 2004, p. 91

[54] One of the most notable incidents was the imprisonment of the writer Dương Thu Hương in 1991.

[55] The National Sculpture Exhibition has been held every 10 years since 1983.

artist from Vietnam who wishes to exhibit overseas. As well as Vietnamese institutions, international organizations, mainly associated with diplomatic missions, which arrange art exhibitions and cultural exchanges, are also part of the formal art world in Hà Nội. The most active of these in recent years have been the British Council, Goëthe Institute, Alliance Française, the Russian Cultural centre[56] and the World Bank Group, all of which hold art exhibitions on their premises. Art competitions that are sponsored externally, such as that inaugurated by Philip Morris and more recently *Jeunes Regards* (associated with the French cultural venue L'Espace, fig 5.8), constitute another aspect of the formal art world.[57] The competitions will be discussed more fully in a later section of this chapter. In addition, there is a growing number of sponsorships that are arranged by overseas organizations, under which Vietnamese artists can travel overseas to participate in workshops, internships and exhibitions. While an official art world existed prior to *đôi mới,* it has expanded greatly in scope and in the acceptance of different modes of art and artist exchanges since the late 1980s, to comprise the formal art world of the late twentieth and early twenty first century.

Both the National History Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts devote considerable space to their ceramics collections. The Fine Arts Museum has a permanent display of historical ceramics that occupies one floor of a building and includes a section of twentieth century ceramics. To be included in this part of the collection is obviously a sign of recognition within the world of ceramic sculptors in Vietnam. The Museum of Fine Arts also has rooms that are given over to temporary exhibitions. Some of the exhibitions have been from overseas, particularly since the later part of the 1990's, whereas earlier, due to the political situation in Vietnam and the wars of the twentieth century, the museum did not had an active program of visiting exhibitions from foreign institutions.

The Museum holds temporary shows of contemporary ceramics, of which the first solo show by a ceramic artist, Nguyễn Khắc Quân in 2002, as discussed in Chapter 4 (see fig.4.27 &

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[56]For example, Nguyễn Phi Loan was selected to show an exhibition on March 8, 2003 for International Woman's day. She had studied in Russia for five years as a young woman where she gained her credentials as a minerals engineer. Having retired, she visited her daughter in the United States where she took an art course and now produces collages from recycled material. She is basically self taught and works on the floor of her bedroom. Interview with the artist 5 October, 2005.

[57] Information provided by the cultural office at L'Espace, November 2005

4.28). Another was an installation by Nguyễn Bảo Tòan, to be discussed later in this chapter. In contrast to most national institutions of art, the works exhibited by local artists in the galleries for temporary shows at this venue can be sold. At Quân's exhibition in 2002, works were purchased by local and foreign collectors and a representative of the National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, all of whom were in attendance at the opening. In fact, one of the characteristics under the current director of the Museum of Fine Arts is strong commercial orientation, due partly to a significant reduction in government money available for cultural programs and institutions since the introduction of *đôi mới*.

The government has continued to sponsor public projects such as the memorial to General Trần Hưng Đạo who defeated invading Mongol forces in 1228. This monument (fig. 5.7), which was inaugurated on the 23rd of September, 1998, comprises a gigantic sculpture of the general and a ceramic bas relief wall depicting his exploits.[58] The Nha Trang freedom monument, 1996, by Tạ Quang Bạo and Nguyễn Trọng Đoan, also combines a monumental sculpture of figures with ceramic sculptures, blending the socialist realist style of the large central work with ceramic components that reflect distinctly Vietnamese aesthetics. One of the surrounding ceramic sculptures, shown in fig 5.9, combines the stoneware ceramic type of vessel used for storing alcohol with stylized straws representing those used in the communal consumption of alcohol by minority people. The form of the sculpture also resonates with Daoist imagery in its gourd shape and the trigrams represented on its side. Thus the whole emphasizes the political imperative for the collaboration of the various ethnic groups in Vietnam in achieving the goal of re-unification. From three examples discussed thus far, the Trần Hưng Đạo monument, the Nha Trang monument and the smaller work by Vũ Hưu Nhung, *Đồng đội*, that was purchased by the Museum of Fine Arts, it would appear that there is a tendency to hybridity, sanctioned by the Ministry of Culture and Information, that combines the imported socialist realist style with elements that assert Vietnameseness. In the case of these three works, the references that underline the national are the use of Đông sơn motives and national heroes or movements associated with the achievement of independence, as well as the use of clay. Many other instances of this tendency to hybridity can be observed.

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[58] The artists involved with this project were Hà Trú Dũng, Khúc Quốc Ân, Vũ Ngọc Thành and Hòang Nhân, Khương Huân & Phạm Hoa, *Tương Đài Trần Hưng Đạo*, 1998, p. 9

International art events are also part of the formal art world and these have provided a widened intellectual stimulus for Vietnamese artists. After a period of restriction to interchange only with the Eastern Bloc countries, a re-engagement with the international art world commenced after *dôi mới*. This course of events has meant that Vietnamese artists are relatively late arrivals in the post-modern international art circuit. Institutional support from the government, established museums and art galleries has provided opportunities for works by Vietnamese artists to be shown in international exhibitions such as the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art held in Brisbane, and in the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennial, Japan.[59] Ngyuễn Quân, based in Ho Chi Minh City and Nguyễn Xuân Tiệp from Hà Nội, were both instrumental in arranging exhibitions and in introducing artists to the international art world.[60] Vietnamese artists were represented at the first three Asia Pacific Triennials but have not reached the same international profile as artists from other Southeast Asian nations.[61] Tiệp was the only Vietnamese artist to be included in the first Asia Pacific Triennial in 1993. 'A Winding River: The Journey of Contemporary Art In Vietnam' which toured the United States in 1998-99, was the first exhibition of Vietnamese art in the United States after the American-Vietnam war.[62]

Contemporary ceramic sculptors have participated in international venues, as has been noted throughout this thesis.[63] The selection of artists shown in international fora is largely dependent upon the particular preferences and knowledge bases of foreign curators who make choices about which artists are included in these extravaganzas. Works in international

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[59] Vietnamese modern artists were represented at the 1997 exhibition 'The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia' in Fukuoka 1997. see exh. cat.

[60] Both these men are artists and writers on the arts. Tiệp is the Deputy Director of the National Fine Arts Museum.

[61] Vietnamese artists represented have been: 1996,Vũ Dân Tân, Đặng Thị Khuê, Mai An Đũng, 1999 Nguyễn Minh Thành, Nguyễn Trung Tín and Vũ Thăng and Đặng Thị Khuê attended as a writer and artist. No Vietnamese artists were represented in 2002.

[62] A Winding River: The Journey of Contemporary Art In Vietnam, exh. cat., 1997

[63] Some of the artists working in ceramics who have had their work exhibited overseas are: Lê Thị Hiền, Budapest, Hungary, 1990, Lê Quâng Chiến, Baltimore, USA, 1996, Koblenz, Federal Republic of Germany, 1998 and Fine Arts Ceramics, Osaka and Kyoto, 2000, Nguyễn Bảo Tòan, ' Asian Art Ceramics' in Japan, 1996 & 1995,Osaka and Kyoto, 'Vietnam Open', 1995, Copenhagen, Denmark, 'A Winding River' in the USA 1997, 'Vietnam in the 20th Century: Plastic and Visual Arts from 1925 to Our Time', Brussels, 1998 and the USA 2004. Nguyễn Khắc Quân's in NEXUS, ASEAN-ROK Crafts exhibition, Cheongju, Korea, 2004, Nguyễn Trọng Đoan, Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures in Prague, Czech Republic, 2000, Vũ Đình Nhâm, Croatia, 1996, 'Asian Art Ceramics', Japan, 1997 &1996.

expositions, or 'Expo art' as it is described by Pastor Roces, represent 'specific moments of encounter and perhaps collusions, or, possibly coercion that transpire between societies being represented and societies assuming the task of representing'.[64] To a certain extent, the inclusion of aspects that mark the art as Vietnamese is reinforced by some overseas curators, for these are features that can be easily recognized as exotic in a foreign context. As the curators of 'A Winding River' advise: 'Their challenge is to hold on to the parts of their culture which are enriching and unique, not allowing them to be swallowed up by western materialism'.[65]

A major international art event held in Vietnam is the International Sculpture Symposium that was first held in Hà Nội in 1997 and subsequently in Huế in 1998, 2002 and 2004. Such encounters provide an opening for a continuing dialogue between artists from different environments.[66] Works from these symposia have been used to create a sculpture park along the Perfume River in Huế.

International meetings, diplomatic occasions or sporting events are viewed by the Ministry of Culture and Information as opportunities to promote Vietnamese art forms from all areas, including ceramics. For example when the Southeast Asian Games were held in Hà Nội in October 2003, the Department of Culture and Tourism sponsored an exhibition of outstanding ceramic works in a venue on the shores of Hoân Kiếm Lake in the heart of the tourist area. (fig.5.10 & 4.10) This exhibition, like one held at the Citadel in 2005, showed both historical pieces and contemporary works. Whereas the show for the Southeast Asian Games foregrounded contemporary pieces, the main emphasis of the show at the Citadel, held in relation to recent archaeological excavations there, was on historical wares with one room

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[64] Marion Pastor Roces, 'Consider Post Culture' Beyond the Future: Papers from the Conference of the Third Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Queensland Art Gallery, 1999, p. 35

[65]Nancy Mathews, Bill Dunlap & Pamela Maslansky in *A Winding River: The Journey of Contemporary Art in Vietnam*, 1997, p.17

[66] Conversation with Sue Pedley, an Australian participant at the second international Sculpture Symposium in Huế, 1998. For the 1998 Symposium, all the Vietnamese sculptors produced carved works in wood or stone, whereas the sculptors who included clay in their sculpture were both from Australia – Bonita Ely, who used local bricks and Glen Clark who combined local cooking pots in his work. Trương Bé & Bonita Ely (eds) *Ấn tượng Huế, Việt Nam '98 Impressions of Hue, Vietnam '98*, exh. cat., 2000

devoted to contemporary works. (fig.5.11) Both events underlined the enduring importance of ceramics in the cultural production of the country.

The Contemporary Art Centre in Hà Nội, founded in 1997, of which Trần Lương (b.1960) was the director, was sponsored by the Ford Foundation and operated under the Vietnam Fine Arts Association. The aim of the Ford Foundation grant was to provide an exhibition space 'available to all artists in a democratic manner' and to 'generate interest in the arts among the general population.[67] The centre functioned until 2003. Taylor discusses the reasons for the problems encountered by the centre and, from conversations with artists, found that there was a certain amount of distrust due to its Ford Foundation affiliation.[68] Kraevskaia considers that it failed due to constraints on the time of the director.[69] Another reason for its failure may have been the obscure location, as, although it was close to the Industrial Fine Arts University, it was a very difficult place to find, a factor that may have compromised the aim to generate interest amongst the general population. Nguyễn Bảo Toan participated in exhibitions at this venue.

### Private Commercial Art Galleries

The second level, that of the commercial art world in Hà Nội, is the area that has expanded the most rapidly in recent years. This has been a welcome development but it is not without its complications and problems. The number of commercial art galleries has expanded exponentially. Over 200 private galleries appeared in Hà Nội between 1986 and 2000, however, the rise in numbers was not accompanied by sustained quality.[70] Broadly speaking these galleries can be classified as:

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[67] Nora Taylor, Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art, 2004, p.124

[68] Nora Taylor, 2004, p.124

[69] Conversation with Natasha Kraevskaia, November, 2005. Kraevskaia operated a gallery in Hà Nội and is a writer on the arts.

[70] Trinh Quynh Hoa & Thu Hien, 'The Rise of Galleries', *Vietnam Cultural Window*, no. 29, August 2000, pp.18-19

i. those which exhibit well established artists;[71]
ii. those which exhibit emerging artists, including more experimental artists;
iii. those which exhibit tourist art;
iv. commercial outlets at state run Museums, and
v. galleries run by ceramic sculptors.

The first two categories tend to overlap, however, in specifying galleries that show well established artists, it is implied that these are some of the longer established galleries that tend to have overseas connections, such as Red River, Cố Đô, Opera and Art Gallery 7. Ceramic works are exhibited and sold at all these venues. For example, Gallery Cố Đô and Art Vietnam, both of which would be classified as galleries that deal with the work of well established artists, carry the ceramic work of Nguyễn Bảo Tòan. Tràng An and Quê are galleries of the second category, and carry works by Nguyễn Bảo Tòan and Nguyễn Trọng Đoan. Small works by Nguyễn Khác Quan and Nguyễn Bảo Tòan are sold within the precinct of the Museum of Fine Arts, where there are a number of concessions given to small commercial outlets. Vũ Hưu Nhung, is a ceramic sculptor who runs his own gallery in the city. Most of the ceramic sculptors also sell works from their residences or studios.

Clients who visit the galleries are mainly foreigners.[72] Since *đôi mới* there has been a large influx of diplomats, aid workers, business people and foreign tourists, many of whom are avid purchasers of the technically adept and wide ranging works. International organizations, hotels, restaurants and cafes buy paintings to decorate their walls, and increasingly, they also purchase ceramics. Galleries have proliferated in the old quarter of Hà Nội and in the areas around Hoân Kiếm lake, where a great deal of commercial and tourist development has taken place. Various commentators, including Natasha Kraeveskaia and Nguyễn Quân have bemoaned the fact that the rapid commercialization of painting, in particular, has resulted in emerging artists copying the work of successful painters and in successful painters persisting with successful formulae rather than extending themselves. While this tendency occurs in ceramics to some extent, it is not on the same scale. There are far fewer practitioners of

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[71] Some of these galleries also show new artists works for example Đông sơn and Nam Sơn galleries, Hài Vân, 'The buying and selling of Vietnamese art', *Việt nam News*, March 6, 1998, p.18

[72] Hài Vân, 'The buying and selling of Vietnamese art', *Việt nam News*, March 6, 1998, p.18, suggested that the clientele was 98% foreigners. Conversations with various gallery owners have confirmed this statement.

ceramics, they all know one another and the mark of a successful ceramic sculptor is considered to be one who has discovered his or her 'own voice'.[73] The success that Nguyễn Trọng Đoân achieved with his garden lamps has resulted in an replication of similar forms by other ceramicists, as can be seen when comparing the dates these of ceramics, however, the hand of the individual ceramicist remains obvious. There has been a slow but steady increase in the number of ceramic works exhibited as art and an increase in the number of galleries in which these ceramics works are exhibited.

Salon Natasha was one of the first private galleries to open in Hà Nội. Situated in the old quarter, it was managed by Natasha Kraevskaia, writer and advocate for the arts in Vietnam. The gallery operated from 1990 until 2004 and launched the careers of many of Hà Nội's younger, well known artists. Kraevskaia has agitated for better use of the government's scarce resources for the arts and is aware of the negative effects that uninformed tourist and foreign buying has had on the art market in Vietnam. She has encouraged Vietnamese artists to engage with conceptual issues, rather than persist in their tendency to focus on aestheticism. She has also been a guiding light in raising the profile of Vietnamese art abroad through exchanges and exhibitions in various countries in Europe, North America and Australia. Through the philosophy promoted by the gallery, of an engagement with contemporary attitudes to art making, Kraevskaia has enabled Vietnamese artists to gain access to issues that are relevant in an international context. Testament to the challenge that the art of this gallery presented to the art world in Hà Nội is the fact that, on visiting an exhibition opening at Salon Natasha, one was likely to be advised by a cyclo driver that the art there was not very good and that one should go elsewhere.

Another commercial gallery in the old quarter of Hà Nội that fostered overseas exchanges and an engagement with contemporary issues was Tràng An, managed by Nguyễn Xuân Tiệp, the artist and now deputy director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Hà Nội. When the author first visited this gallery in 1997, there had just been a show of some Australian artists. Tràng An was the first commercial art gallery in Hà Nội to sell contemporary ceramics as an art form

[73] From conversations with ceramic sculptors

and the first commercial gallery to exhibit an installation show by a ceramic artist, Nguyễn Trọng Đoan. The gallery closed 2001.

International connections are maintained by the gallery Art Vietnam, run by the expatriate American, Suzanne Lecht. Lecht was also instrumental in arranging for an installation by Nguyễn Bảo Tòan to be shown at the Museum of Craft and Folk Art, San Francisco. The installation entitled 'The New Rice Festival' was held between January and April 2004. The fact that the show was held at the Museum of Craft and Folk Art, highlights the difficulties faced in the reception of this art – its foreignness and allusions to ancient traditions places it within an ethnographic context. The installation had previously been shown at the British Council in Hà Nội in October, 2003. (fig.5.12) Lecht has an active program of representing Vietnamese artists in a gallery in Austin, Texas.

A consequence of the increasing international exposure of Vietnamese art is a developing international market for Vietnamese paintings and ceramics. International prices at auctions are regularly reported in publications such as the newspaper, *Asian Art* and the journal *Asian Arts*, however, the works of contemporary ceramicists have not featured in the international market at this level.

### Alternate Art Spaces

The third level is the informal art world, which is the part of the art world that is under the least control of the Ministry of Culture and Information. There are a handful of venues where artists can exhibit their works without having to go through the rigours of control by the Ministry. These exhibitions are called *trưng bày* – 'shows' – for which there is no legal requirement to register the works with the Ministry of Culture and Information as is the case with the public and private galleries discussed in the previous sections. Included in this informal world is the co-operative gallery Ryllega and small cafés and restaurants such as Chim Sáo (L'Oiseau Siffleur), 65 ngõ Huế and Café Báo, 62 Trần Quoc Toản, which both have intermittent exhibitions. Fig. 5.13 shows an exhibition opening at Chim Sáo. Other alternate art venues are private homes such as Nhà Sàn in the Hà Nội suburbs near West Lake and the studio of the performance artist Đào Anh Khánh (b.1959).

Nhà Sàn is the home of Nguyễn Mạnh Đức, who has a collection of antique works of art and

who has held many installation shows, including those of the ceramic artist Nguyễn Bảo Tòan. Fig. 5.15 shows the invitation to the exhibition *Đống đội* ( *Teamship*), held in October 2000. This show, although of the same name as Vữ Hưu Nhung's sculpture made in the same year, (fig 5.6) was dramatically different in conception and style. It is also of note that Toàn gave an English translation of the title as 'teamship', whereas Nhung translated *Đống đội* as 'Comrades in Arms', which has more of a ring of militarism for his hybrid socialist realist style work. Toàn's installation involved the burning of many pairs of sandals such as worn by the North Vietnamese soldiers during the American-Vietnam war. The latter included the mixed media work, *Đống đội,* 2000, initially shown in the same National Fine Arts exhibition as Nhung's ceramic sculpture, which that remains in the hands of the artist. (fig.5.14)

Ryllega is a non-profit space for experimental Vietnamese and overseas artists that opened in March 2004.[74] The founder/director is Nguyễn Minh Phươc and the gallery is occupied only when a show is current. To date there have not been any shows by ceramic sculptors.[75]

Another type of exhibition of ceramics takes place at the time of the village festival at Bát Tràng. However, this exhibition exists outside the recently developed art world of Viet Nam, in that it occurs in conjunction with the ritual obligations and secular celebrations carried out at a specific time each year, all of which centre on honouring of the founding geniis of the village. Since the post *đôi mởi* re-establishment of village festivals (that were banned in 1954), villagers from Bát Tràng have included an annual exhibition of ceramics as part of their festivities. This provides an opportunity for the various enterprises and potters to exhibit their latest creations, as well as a chance to display some of the ancient wares from the village. (fig.5.16)

## Features of Art since *đôi mới*

Nguyễn Quân wrote that an objective of the Vietnamese Fine Arts Association during the 1980s was ' the removal of formalism and schematism'. [76] He went on to outline some of the

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[74] http://www.ryllega.com/

[75] correspondence with Nguyễn Minh Phươc, March 2006

[76] Nguyễn Quân, 'Multicoloured and Richly Idiosyncratic; The Art Scene in Vietnam in Recent Years' *Art and Asia Pacific*, September, 1993, p.30

changes in Vietnamese art since the introduction of *đôi mới*, which included the rejection of European classical art training (academism) in favour of a basis of art in national forms inclusive of all the ethnic groups in Vietnam. Such features are evident in the monuments discussed above. Hồ Chí Minh's advice to artists to produce art that reflected 'the reality of everyday life,'[77] must surely have played a great part in these objectives. To achieve the aim of an art reflecting an inclusive Vietnamese spirit, Nguyễn Quân thought it necessary that Vietnamese artists become more familiar with their own heritage. In response to this need, he and Phan Cẩm Thượng, the Hà Nội based researcher, writer and painter, published the *Art of the Village* in 1989 and *Arts of the Vietnamese* in 1991, thereby augmenting the earlier work of Nguyễn Đỗ Cung. These books have become important references for young artists.[78] The books complemented, but at the same time contrasted with, the research of the colonial era which tended to focus on royally patronized art of the Vietnamese court at Huế or the Cham kingdom.

During the 1980s, some of the artists who had been discredited in the *Giai Phẩm*/*Nhân Văn* affair were rehabilitated, in that exhibitions of their works were held and their paintings were eventually rehung in the state galleries. Nguyễn Sáng (1923-88) and Bùi Xuân Phái (1921-89) were two of the artists concerned whose work is now highly regarded.[79] They, and Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm, (b.1922) are three artists whose work has been extremely influential for the current generation of painters. These three, and especially Nghiêm, are considered to be artists who moved Vietnamese art away from the academic style of the École des Beaux-arts.

Nguyễn Trọng Đoan's ceramic works were exhibited with paintings by Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm in 1989, in a show that is believed to be the first time that ceramics had been exhibited in the previously mentioned Art Gallery, 7 Hang Khai, a gallery that is thought to be the first art gallery established in Hà Nội.[80] By exhibiting his ceramics in an art gallery, Đoan, like Staite-Murray, whose work was discussed in Chapter 2, moved his ceramic works into the

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[77] Jeffrey Hantover, Uncorked Soul: Contemporary Art from Vietnam, exh. cat. 1991, p.31

[78] Bùi Như Hương & Trần Hậ Tuấn, 2000, p. 14-15

[79] Nora Taylor, 2004, p. 68, notes that Bùi Xuân Phái was posthumously awarded the Hồ Chí Minh prize in 1996 for his contribution to national culture.

[80] Information from the artist, 2004, also discussed in Chapter 4 under twentieth century potters. Art Gallery opened in 1965.

domain of the arts and participated in the 'apparatus' that had developed for the exhibition of paintings.

Đoan engages in all levels of the art world in Vietnam: the formal, commercial and the informal. At the formal level, he has exhibited his works in national fine art competitions, for which he has received prizes. Fig. 5.17 shows one of his works exhibited in the national exhibition for 1996-2000. His work has been shown in a group exhibitions at the Museum of Fine Arts and is included in that collection, as well as having been shown in other exhibitions in association with the Vietnam Fine Arts Association. Internationally, his work was shown at the Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures in Prague, 2000. At the formal level, which does not have the sale of the works as the main part of the agenda, he has also had collaborative exhibitions with the (at that time) surrealist painter, Nghiêm Xuân Hưng ( b.1953) in 1991 and in 1995 at the IMF Hall in Hà Nội.[81] The surrealist forms of Đoan's ceramics, such as that of fig. 4.32, would have been an ideal match with the surrealist subject matter in Hưng's paintings. As discussed above, he has also worked on commissions for government monuments. At the commercial level of the art world, Đoan exhibited his ceramics at the private commercial, but avant-garde Tràng An gallery, until it closed in 2001. Other exhibitions have been held with his painter son, Nguyễn Đoan Ninh (b.1975).[82] He continues to exhibit in galleries from time to time, but mainly sells from his studio in the West Lake area or gives his ceramics away to friends.[83]

Along with the exhibition of ceramic sculptors' works in art galleries, has come another part of the 'apparatus' that has developed around artists in Hà Nội, namely, the publicity associated with such shows. For instance, prior to the opening of Đoan's exhibition at Tràng An gallery in 1997, there was a press conference and lunch with about a dozen representatives from various newspapers and magazines including the Economic Times, Vietnam News and the Vietnamese language press. Exhibitions by ceramicists are reported by art critics in the Vietnamese press and the art journal *Mỹ Thuật*. Due to increasing access to international

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[81] Nghiên Xuân Hưng taught at the Industrial Fine Arts University and since retirement lives in a small house on the campus. He painted in a surrealistic style during the 1990s, being influenced by the work of Salvador Dali. Information from Nguyễn Trọng Đoan, 2002.

[82] for example the 2001 exhibition at the Opera Gallery, Tràng Tiện Street

[83] from conversations with the Nguyễn Trọng Đoan.

audiences, the work by Vietnamese ceramicists is beginning to be discussed in international ceramics journals, but lags far behind the prominence given to Vietnamese painting in international art journals.[84] Some other parts of the media are also engaging in the promotion of the sculptural ceramicists work, for example, a review broadcast on prime time television for Nguyễn Khắc Quân's 2002 exhibition and notices of exhibitions on gallery websites such as that of Art Vietnam.

Legitimization within the art world in Hà Nội, as has been seen in the case of Đoan, necessitates an involvement with formal and commercial levels of exhibition. For the older ceramicists, however, their age and association with government institutions, such as art schools or museums, has been a significant factor, as well as their membership of the Vietnam Fine Arts Association. Due to the small number of people working in this area, the artists and critics know each other. The artists, in particular gather together to discuss their work and various issues to do with the arts.

There are two major restrictions on the development of contemporary art in Vietnam which arise from within the country itself. These are acknowledged by Kraevskaia as the commercialisation of Vietnamese art and the issue of government control.[85] Whereas previously artists were paid by the State, the removal of this patronage has created a competitive market where artists vie for sales and in which there has been a tendency to imitate 'successful' subject matter and styles: paintings that are often purchased by a non discerning and uninformed public. In recent years, young artists have preferred to exhibit at large venues such as the Goëthe Institute and L'Espace, as such venues provide generous grants, which poses a problem for serious commercial galleries in Hà Nội. Another result of the increasing commercialization is that some artists are asking a fee from art galleries in order to carry their works – a situation that has developed from the success of Vietnamese artists on the international market. The artists know that their works may be shown and sold

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[84] For example- Kerry Nguyễn Long, 'Portrait of a Master Potter and the Rediscovery of a Lost Glaze', *Ceramics Art and Perception*, no. 23, 1996, pp. 42-46, Ann Proctor, 'Nguyen Khac Quan, Ceramic Artist in Hanoi', *Ceramics Art and Perception*, no. 44, 2001, pp.86-88 & 'Nguyen Khac Quan: A Voice is Heard', *Ceramics Art and Perception*, no.53, 2003, pp. 44-46

[85] Natasha Kraeveskaia, 'Contemporary Vietnamese Art: Obstacles of Transition', *focas* no.4 2002 p. 363 and conversations with Natasha

overseas for sums well beyond what they could hope to obtain locally. There is no loyalty to one art gallery and well known artists tend to place their works in many venues.

## Patronage

Since the twentieth century, a different type of patronage has emerged in Vietnam. As well as that provided by state institutions – through employment or by their acquisitions – and that attendant on association with a commercial gallery, there is also an increasing number of prizes, competitions and sponsorships which provide an additional form of patronage and stimulation for the artistic community. Much more recently, due to a change in law, private collections are now permitted.

### Major exhibitions, prizes and sponsorships

During the war years, military prizes in the fine arts were awarded. The painter and installation artist, Đặng Thị Khuê won such an award in 1976. Government awards issued under the Decree on the Hồ Chì Minh Prize and State Prizes were instituted from 1985.[86] Under this scheme, Lê Văn Cẩm was awarded the master potter award in 1987.[87]

The National Fine Art exhibition (*Triễn Lãm Mỹ Thụat Tòan Quốc*), was first held in 1958, the first year after the establishment of the Socialist republic and after the founding of the Vietnam Fine Arts Association.[88] Many of the currently active ceramic sculptors have exhibited in these exhibitions and won prizes in the sculpture section of the competition. In addition, national exhibitions of sculpture have been held every 10 years since 1983. One of the effects of *đôi mới* has been that since the 1990s sculptors have produced small scale works in the hope of selling them to tourists.[89] Another aspect of this change to a smaller format may be the lack of subsidy and market for large scale works, a situation that is not unique to the sculptors of Vietnam.

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[86] http://www.culturalprofiles.org.uk/Viet_Nam/Units/1807.html

[87] interview with Lê Văn Cẩm, 1997

[88] These exhibitions are held under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture and Information

[89] Trần Tuy in Vũ Giáng Hương, (ed.) Điêu Khắc Hiến Đại Việt Nam, (Vietnamese Contemporary Sculpture), 1997, p.23

The Philip Morris ASEAN Art Awards were initiated in 1993 to stimulate contemporary art in the region. The aim is to help artists exhibit at home and overseas. Vietnamese artists have participated in this competition since their country joined ASEAN in 1995. Works are selected at the national level to compete at the regional level, for which the prize is an extremely attractive US $15,000. The judging panel is described as being composed of 'leading art authorities.'[90] A three-time winner of the national award is the artist Nguyễn Tấn Cương (b.1953), who was educated at the Saigon Fine Art College.[91] The winners of the national level prize in 1996, Đỗ Minh Tâm (b. 1963) and 1997 Trần Văn Thảo, ( b.1961) submitted paintings that were described as 'abstract expressionist works'.[92] While the competition is popular with young artists who consider it to be a wonderful opportunity to interact with artists from the region,[93] from the stipulation that the works must be two dimensional and that rewards are given to abstract expressionist art it could be argued to be skewing the efforts of young artists towards the aesthetics of the west.

*Jeunes Regards* is an annual competition for painters, sculptors and graphic artists under thirty five years of age. Inaugurated in 2001, the competition is conducted by L'Espace in collaboration with the Vietnam Fine Arts Association and held in the temporary exhibition space at the Museum of Fine Arts. To mark the fifth year of the exhibition, the French government offered an additional residency of three months at the *École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, to that already given to the winner, and monetary prizes for the runners up.[94] The aim of this competition is to promote a culture of innovation and creativity and to enable young Vietnamese artists to broaden their horizons.[95]

Other cultural organizations in Hà Nội award prizes to artists and sponsor their exhibitions. Benefits that have accrued to ceramic sculptors include a 'Golden Hands' award by the British Council to Vũ Hưu Nhung in 2001, sponsorship by the Swedish Embassy for Nguyễn

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[90] http://www.culturalprofiles.org.uk/Viet_Nam/Units/1992.html

[91] Hòang Anh & Nguyễn Xuân Tiệp, 'Scenario',*Vietnam Cultural Window*, no. 51, June 2002, p.24-25

[92] Bùi Như Hương & Trần Hậ Tuấn, 2000, pp.54 -55

[93] Hòang Anh & Nguyễn Xuân Tiệp, 'Scenario',*Vietnam Cultural Window*, no. 51, June 2002, p.25

[94] 5ème concours Jeunes regards *L'Espace*, 03 -04/05 no. 09, pp. 28-29

[95] Jean- Francois Blarel, '5 années de Jeunes Regards'*Mỹ Thuật* , no. 136, (81) 9-2005, p.2

Khắc Quân's 2002 exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, and sponsorship by the British Council for Nguyễn Bảo Toan's installation, *New Rice Festival* at the British Council, 2003. The British Council was also a sponsor for the latter's 2005 installation *Hối Tu*, (*Convergence and Assembly*) fig 5.18) at the Museum of Fine Arts. The show was closed after five days as the artist was asked, by the director of the museum to pay an additional two million đông per day for the duration of the exhibition in addition to the grant that the Council was making.[96] Rather than accede to the demand for more money, and despite the publicity that the exhibition had received in the press, Bảo Toàn removed the works.

The Indochina Arts Partnership, an American NGO founded in 1988, organizes travelling exhibitions featuring Vietnamese and American artists and residencies for Vietnamese artists, museum officials and government officials in the USA. Nguyễn Bảo Tòan was a beneficiary of an artist's residency in Vermont in 2005 under a separate residency program organized through the gallery owner Susan Lecht.

### Private patronage- private collections

As already noted, there have been a small number of private art collectors in Hà Nội, though for cultural, economic and political reasons, collecting art is not a widespread activity. On January 1, 2002, a law on cultural heritage was introduced, under which the government permitted the ownership, circulation and display of private collections. This law was particularly directed at the control and better management of antiquities but incorporates the entitlement for citizens to have private art collections, whether they are antiques or not. Prior to this new law, Vương Hồng Sển (1902-1996) a collector from Hồ Chí Minh City**,** had donated his collection of 849 antique ceramics to the state. In 1999 this collection was highlighted in a special exhibition at the Museum of Vietnamese History in that city.

In 2002 the *Hội viên Hội nghiênh sư* (Thăng Long ceramics association) was formed and since then a number of collectors have publicly exhibited their antiques.[97] One of those involved, Mr. Cụ (fig. 5.19) had much of his collection confiscated by the Government in the

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[96] Information from Nguyễn Minh Thanh, gallery owner and lawyer.

[97] Phan Huy Lê, 'Chơi Cổ vật một nghệ thuật một khoa học' (Going in for antiques as a scientific and artistic game) *Cổ Vật Thinh Hóa*, *Vietnamese Antiques Magazine* no. 1 6.2003, p.5

pre *đôi mới* years, but since the 2002 law was passed he has been able to re-augment his remaining collection. As yet, there are no major patrons or private collections of contemporary ceramics, apart from the patronage of Mr. Qúy for Nguyễn Trọng Đoan and the collections of the artists themselves. Phạm Quang Trung in an article in which he discusses the art market in Vietnam, notes that domestically, there are no good collectors.[98]

## Government control

Up until 2004 any organization that featured a display was required to have that exhibition reviewed by a committee from the Department of Fine Arts within the Ministry of Culture and Information. This applied to foreign exhibitions as well as locally curated shows. If any of the works in the exhibition were deemed unsuitable, decadent or critical of the government, the exhibition would be closed.[99] Prior to *đôi mới,* even copying a foreign style was not encouraged. Since 2004, there has been a lessening in the rigour of checking by government authorities, so that not every show in a private gallery is now reviewed; however, the authorities still keep an eye on what is going on.[100] As part of the control exerted by the government, it is necessary to register each catalogue that accompanies an exhibition with the Ministry. The cost, borne by the gallery or artist, is approximately one hundred US dollars.[101] Surveillance by the Ministry is stricter on printed media.

### Issues surrounding depiction of the nude

The ambiguous nature of the official attitude towards the depiction of nudes is illustrated by the photograph taken in the grounds of the Fine Arts College in Huế in 2001, where a classical female nude sculpture is juxtaposed with a socialist realist work.[102]( fig.5.20)

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[98] Phạm Quang Trung, 'Vài Suy Nghi về thị trường nghệ thuật và thế hệ họa sĩ thạp kỷ 90 của thế kỷ xx', *Mỹ Thuật*, no. 62, 8-2002

[99] Information provided by Trần Nguyễn Đân, former deputy director of the Museum of Fine Arts

[100] Information provided by Susan Lecht

[101] Information provided by gallery owners in Hà Nội

[102] The date of the nude sculpture is unknown, however it is purported to be 'very old'. Information provided by Sue Pedley, who has participated in the artist in residency programs in Huế

The first European style painting of a nude is believed to have been a 1929 work executed by Nam Sơn (1890-1973), a teacher who was instrumental in the foundation of the *École des Beaux-arts d'Indochine*.[103] Drawing from the nude model was one of the requirements of the school's syllabus.(fig. 5.21) As a result of the teachings of the school, there was a proliferation of images of beautiful women, including nudes. This subject matter was avoided during the years from 1945 to 1975, when the country was at war, due to the exhortation by Hồ Chí Minh and others to produce works that promoted the independence cause and that were egalitarian. All patriotic citizens were required to work for the national good, consequently nudes and sexual subject matter, being regarded as frivolous, disappeared from the artistic repertoire. Ironically, Đông sơn imagery has been sanctioned as a marker of what is regarded to be a national art, ignoring the fact that some of the drums are decorated with couples engaged in sexual intercourse. Only since the late 1980s, with increasing openness and prosperity, have artists been freer to express themselves. Included in this greater freedom of individual expression has been the opportunity to engage once more in sexual references in art. However it has not been all plain sailing.

The historian Hữu Ngọc considers that attitudes based in Confucianism caused the nude to be banned from Vietnamese art.[104] These cultural mores, the Confucian attitude and the expediency of propaganda, have incorrectly been regarded as law. Within present Vietnamese laws, there are no specific prohibitions to the depiction of nudes in artistic works. There is, however, a statute that prohibits the display of obscene, pornographic and extremely violent imagery.[105] Thus the law is open to interpretation and there have been instances in which artists have been imprisoned or their exhibitions closed. The painter Lê Quang Ha's (b.1963) exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts in December 2001, had works removed as the paintings were deemed 'not in accordance with Vietnam's customs and perspective on art'[106]

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[103] Quang Phòng, 'The Fine Arts College of Indochina and Vietnamese painting', in Quang Việt (ed.), *Các Họa Sĩ Trường Cao Đẳng Mỹ Thuật Đông Dương ,*(*Painters of the Fine Arts College of Indochina*), 1998, p.134

[104] Hữu Ngọc & Françoise Corrêze, *Hô Xuan Hương ou le voile déchiré*, Hà Nội, Fleuve Rouge, 1984, p.31

[105] Statute 96 Issued with Decree No. 87-CP of December 12,1995. Information provided by the Hà Nội lawyer, Nguyễn Minh Thanh

[106] 'Viet nam Censors Hanoi Artist' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Dec, 27, 2001- Jan 3, 2002, p. 10. Le Quang Ha's works are described as evoking ' the tragic spectre of war and human tragedies in modern society and

Up until the 1980s the display or exhibition of nudes was not permitted, even in one's home.[107] Nguyễn Bảo Tòan has been imprisoned on a number of occasions due to the subject matter of his works and the first time was due to the display of nude paintings in his own house.[108] There would appear to be a variance in tolerance towards subject matter between the Museum of Fine Arts and staff of the Ministry of Culture and Information, at least in relation to the art works produced by the employees of the Museum and some temporary exhibitions shown there. In recent years, Toàn and his fellow ceramic artists in Hà Nội have produced numerous works with indirect and overtly sexual references. The 'prohibitions' have been subverted with wit and style. Some pots are phallic in shape, recalling phallic objects used in festival games or the linga and yoni of Hindu temples of the Cham culture in central Vietnam. For instance, Nguyễn Khăc Quân's ceramic sculpture shown at the Museum of Fine Arts in 2002 entitled *Linga* (fig.5.22) clearly refers to both the Cham linga as the aniconic form of the Hindu deity, Shiva, and to the Uroja motif of breasts so distinctive to Cham culture. The Uroja motif was also used by Nguyễn Văn Y, as was discussed in Chapter 3 and seen in fig. 3.34.

Toần made a series of ceramic talismans representing male and female genitalia for his second installation in 1998, *Tết Trung Nguyên*, (*Wandering Souls Day*). Other potters, especially those who make high-fired pottery, paint or carve nude figures in their glazes. Ten out of the twenty five contemporary ceramicists in Ngô Dõan Kinh's book *Gốm Việt Nam Hiện Đại* (*Contemporary Vietnamese Ceramics*), 2001, depicted the naked human figure as part of their imagery.

## Conclusion

Besides greater diversity in styles, greater control by the artists over the means of production and circulation of their works and greater intellectual freedom, there are some additional issues faced by artists in the post *đôi mới* era. As Kraevskaia has noted: 'undoubtedly the

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through that, it reflects the brutality, the violence and the spiritual angst of mankind.' Bùi Như Hương & Trần Hậ Tuấn, *Hội Hôa Mới Viêt Nam Thập Kỷ 90 ( New Vietnamese Art in the 1990's)* 2000, p.34

[107] Information provided by Trần Nguyễn Đân, former deputy director of the Museum of Fine Arts

[108] From conversations with artists and gallery owners in Hà Nội

market is one of the main factors influencing the direction of contemporary art in Vietnam'.[109] The market has possibly impacted on painters more than ceramic sculptors, in the determination of subject matter and style, nevertheless, the reduction in government money spent on the arts may mean that there will be fewer artists like Đoan, Tòan and Quân, who can depend on a government stipend and develop their own works in a literati type of atmosphere. Younger sculptors, such as Nhung, are dependent upon producing a functional line of ceramics to fulfil their expectations of the goals they wish to achieve.

In contrast to earlier potters, such as the now renowned potter from Chu Đạu, the twentieth century potters have been able to travel overseas with their work. However, the way in which western countries prioritize the painters from Vietnam, in selecting their works for international exhibitions demonstrates a continuing fundamental difference between the way in which these art practices are viewed in Vietnam and in the west.

While there is a growing number of ceramic artists in Vietnam, as seen in this chapter, there is also a small but growing number who chose to exhibit their work in an installation format. It is that topic – installation art and its place in Southeast Asia – that the final chapter will address. It will be argued that, in installation art, any functionality of the piece is secondary to the conceptual basis of the whole work and the definition of sculptural ceramics is expanded to include the use of raw clay and sometimes even slip.

[109] Natasha Kraevskaia, 'From Artifice Toward Honesty' in *Vietnam Art Actuel,* 2002, 11-12

# Chapter 6: Ceramics as Installations

### A move from the aesthetic to the conceptual?

*'The object itself is not the work of art but the system of relationships'*[1]

This chapter will explore the development of installation art in Vietnam, its links with prior cultural forms of expression and its adoption by ceramic artists as a contemporary art practice. Included in this overview is a discussion of the ways in which these artists, like those from many other post-colonial Asian societies, resolve the need to express and refer to both tradition and the contemporary in their practice. One of the ways in which the contemporary has been negotiated is through the adoption of installation art. In order to set the introduction of installation art into Vietnam in context, the preliminary discussion in this chapter will address some of the issues surrounding the practice in some neighbouring Southeast Asian countries and provide a brief history of the evolution of installation art. As later sections of this chapter demonstrate, contemporary Vietnamese artists have used ceramics – a medium which this study has shown is embedded with notions of 'Vietnameseness' – and installations to marry the traditional and the contemporary in their work.

## Definition of Installation Art

Installation practice is wide ranging in its use of media and often blends into performance art, thus it is difficult to find a precise, all encompassing definition. Many writers and practitioners view installation art as transcending the distinction between object and subject in art and especially in Southeast Asia, and see it as a link with prior forms of cultural expression in ceremonies and rituals. Definitions of installation art frequently stress the ephemerality and site specificity of installation practice and the participatory aspect on the part of the viewers. Ewington offers the following definition, stating that installation art is an:

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[1] George Alexander, in Geczy, Adam and Genocchio, Benjamin eds. *What is Installation? An anthology of writings on Australian Installation art*, 2001, p. 66

> ephemeral art composed by a number of elements or materials in a specific physical site, mostly constructed on site; characterized by extreme sensitivity to the site; and working through a multiplicity of senses – sight, touch, hearing, smell and all the kinaesthetic senses.
>
> Contemporary Installation was spawned from the ferment in multi-media and cross media art over the last half century. This is so whether installation is found in artist-run independent spaces, or in large museums, from whence the term 'installation' – from the professional term for putting art works on display – was surely borrowed.[2]

Another definition proposed by Guillermo highlights the conceptual underpinnings of Installation art:

> Installation art, which is premised on the interplay of signifying elements and structures within a defined space, has recently examined the concepts of space, time and process, breaking down the parameters of the pictorial field and the sculptural mass to open up new semantic possibilities.[3]

Installation art as a post-modern practice has taken art off the wall and plinth and out of the gallery environment, blurring the distinctions of what may be regarded as art. As Alexander notes 'ideas in and around installation corroborated with the robust anti-aesthetic stance of a lot of poststructuralist writing.'[4] While some definitions claim a Western genesis for installation practice, there are also Asian roots to the practice in Japan with the *Gutai* movement of 1955-1972.[5] *Gutai* artists sought to take art in a new direction through

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[2] Julie Ewington,'Installation in Southeast Asia in the 1990's: Heritage in Modernity, *TAASA Review'*, vol. 11, no.1, 2002, p.7

[3] Alice G. Guillermo in Caroline Turner, (ed.) Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific, 2004, p.264

[4] George Alexander in Geczy, Adam and Genocchio, Benjamin eds. *What is Installation? An anthology of writings on Australian Installation art*, Power Publications, Sydney, 2001, p. 66

[5] see Alexandra Munroe, *Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky*, 1994, pp. 83-98. The Gutai manifesto of 1956 can be found at http://www.ashiya-web.or.jp/museum/10us/103education/nyumon_us/manifest_us.htm

happenings, performance and conceptual art. Munroe, in her discussion of this avant-garde Japanese group makes the point that amongst their sources for inspiration, *Gutai* artists drew on Japanese festivals and other indigenous cultural sources. *Mono Ha*, another Japanese avant-garde group which was active from 1967 to the late 1970s, sought (amongst other things) to escape the bifurcation of the subject and object in art.[6] Lee U Fan (b.1936), was the motivating theoretician for this group. His ideas developed from a knowledge of western philosophy (Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty) and from aspects of Daoist and Buddhist thought. The *Gutai* approach was 'based on an attitude of bringing out the mutual relationships of the various elements rather than using things and space as materials for realizing an idea'.[7] *Gutai* artists posited an alternative structure for the interdependent relationship between consciousness and existence, things and site. Much of contemporary installation practice has now achieved this aim, albeit in more narrative or literal ways than it is developed in the work of Le U Fan. While many Vietnamese artists approach their work from a Daoist-derived view of the interdependence and constant flux inherent in all aspects of existence, this aspect often appears to be expressed or is subsumed (or is understood by foreign viewers) in a more literal interpretation of the work. As Alexander, in the quotation at the beginning of this chapter comments, 'The object itself is not the work of art but the system of relationships'.[8]

Current theoretical writings on installation art reveal a number of modes in which the characteristics of installation art operate. The problematization of the subject-object relationship is one. De Oliviera discusses this aspect as the 'immersive' factor of installations, in which sensation replaces the object.[9] Not only do relationships replace the object but there is also a distinctly haptic factor involved in much installation practice. A second major mode is the critique that installation art makes of the museum or art gallery: the artist has taken on

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[6] Lee U Fan, *The Art of Encounter,* 2004, p.146

[7] Lee U Fan, 2004, p.146

[8] George Alexander, in Geczy, Adam and Genocchio, Benjamin eds. *What is Installation? An anthology of writings on Australian Installation art*, 2001, p. 66

[9] Nicholas De Oliveira, *installation art in the new millennium*, 2003, p.49. The modes referred to are based on the categories discussed by De Oliveira, the writing of Mark Del Vecchio in *Postmodern Ceramics*, 2001, Edmund de Waal, *20th century ceramics*, 2003 Geczy, Adam and Genocchio, Benjamin eds. *What is Installation? An anthology of writings on Australian Installation art*, 2001, Bonita Ely, 'The Ancient History of Installation Art', http://home.iprimus.com.au/painless/space/bonita.html and the writings of Natasha Kraevskaia.

the role of the curator in controlling or interacting with the space and choosing whether or not the work is actually placed in a museum environment. Associated with this aspect is the ephemerality of the practice: once the installation is removed from a site, it is subseqently only accessed by photography, video or by drawings. The role of the audience, the interactive aspect of installation art and the collaborations involved are the third further distinguishing mode of installation practice. The fourth mode is of particular relevance for contemporary ceramicists, especially those in Vietnam, and that is the way that installation engages in narrative and history. Postmodern attitudes to art have freed creators from the strictures of modernist practice through the embrace of issues of meaning, the use of decoration, the acknowledgement of histories (identity) and, as a consequence, these features have become embedded in installation practice.

The issues addressed by installation artists can be separated into the following modes of practice which also mesh with post-modern concerns in ceramics practice:

i. immersion mode or dematerialization of the object;
ii. critique of the museum;
iii. theatrical mode/audience and interaction; and
iv. narratives and histories

Underlying each of these major modes is the issue of the social integration of the work. In developed societies the use of the latest technological processes and commentaries on issues of post-industrialization are often part of the installation, whereas in many Southeast Asian societies, and especially in Vietnam, the social concerns tend to centre on issues of tradition, ritual and nationality or post-coloniality. Both these aspects, the technological and the ritualistic, partake in what has been interpreted as the tendency of installation artists to create a microcosm of utopia.

## Ceramics as Installations

Contemporary ceramic art or ceramic sculpture has parallels with the development of installation art – many ceramicists from all parts of the globe have chosen to display their work in an installation format; whether the work is like that of Gwyn Hanssen-Pigott (b.1935,

Australia), who displays her vessels as still lives, or with those whose installation work is definitely non-utilitarian, such as Piet Stockmans (b.1940, Belgium), whose works are conceptual reflections within specific sites.[10] While some of the early ceramic installations were minimalist, such as those by Martin Smith (b.1950, U.K.), it is really under the rubric of post-modernism that contemporary ceramic artists have wholeheartedly adopted the installation format.

Ceramics have been used as a vehicle to express a wide range of concerns: Anthony Gormley (b.1950, U.K.), a sculptor who works across various media, has produced many works in clay, including collaborative projects that question the object-subject distinction in the museum space (fig.6.1) His installations reflect the first three modes intrinsic to installation practice, as does the work of the distinguished Japanese artist, Itō Koshō (b.1932). Recurring aspects of Itō's work appear to be the use of multiples (as was explored later by Gormley) and implied opposites such as frozen/fired, natural/synthetic, precious/common.[11]

The 2003 recipient of the Turner prize, Grayson Perry (b.1960, U.K.), is concerned, amongst other things, with notions of identity. (fig. 6.2) [12] Gwyn Hanssen-Pigott is reported to have decided to exhibit her soft-hued porcelains in groups, as she found that when they were exhibited individually they were ignored.[13] With this move she discovered that she had invaded the territory of the still-life genre in painting and her affinities with the painter Morandi were revealed.[14] In addition to exploring the factor of multiples and their relationship to still life, other intrinsic characteristics of ceramics, such as nesting, have been

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[10] http://www.pietstockmans.com/pages/navi.htm Stockmans does however produce a utilitarian line of ceramics.

[11] See Itō Koshō's 'Kido-Frozen Fired Earth',1984, 64 sq. m., 'Sentai-Series of Multiple Soft Surfaces', 1977, 150 x 200 x 70 cms. and 'Purple Entity', 1978 , 'Turning Saffron Yellow', 1979, 400 x 600 x 20 cms, and 'Shukyoku-Flexure', 1981, 86 x 76 cms, in Ito N. *Art In Japan Today 11* , 1984, pp.70 &71

[12] Anthony Gormley, who won the Turner prize in 1994, made *Asian Field*, in China with 190,000 figures. This project was exhibited in China, Japan, Korea and Singapore between 2003 to 2005.

[13] Mark Del Vecchio, *Postmodern Ceramics*, 2001, p.72

[14] Mark Del Vecchio, 2001, p.72. She was not the first person to make this connection as the Argentinean, Lucio Fontana (1899-1968) made still life sculptures in ceramics in the 1930's. (Edmund de Waal, *20th century ceramics*, 2003, p. 143) and Roy Lichtenstein dinnerware groups in the 1960's as part of the Pop Art movement were self-reflexive still lifes.

investigated by contemporary ceramicists who work in an installation or sculptural format.[15] Lê Quang Chiến's ceramic sculpture, *Flower of Life*, 1992 (fig.4.23), explores the use of nesting.

Gormley and Itō represent one approach when using ceramics in installations whereas Perry and Hanssen-Pigott exhibit a contrasting approach or the other end of the continum. These are the use of the raw form – clay or slip – and the use of the high fired vessel or ceramic sculpture as media for use in installation. These two tendencies may be said to be an extension of low fired and high fired wares, which also has parallels with the two distinct types of aesthetic evident in Japanese ceramics, namely the highly refined and decorative compared with natural unadorned wares. However, in contemporary ceramics this continuum is extended and interrogated: Ito and others use clay to explore its elemental qualities, while at the more decorative end of the spectrum, artists have explored the possibility of using the ceramic surface as a medium on which a one-dimensional motif can be rendered in three dimensions, as well as using the ceramic form as a signifier within a system of relationships.

## A brief overview of installation art in some Southeast Asian countries.

The following discussion relates to issues involved in installation art in the Philippines and Indonesia, as there are parallels between these two societies and Vietnam. All were once colonized, achieved independence in the 20th century and all have had periods of hegemonic rule. They are also countries which have had contact with each other through trade in pre-colonial times and are nations that are composed of ethnically diverse groups.

Installation art appeared in several countries of Southeast Asia during the last decades of the twentieth century as part of a major contemporary art trend. It appeared at the same time at which artists from this region emerged into international artistic arenas and coincided with the

[15] For example see Andrew Lord, (b.1950, UK) and Bobby Silverman (b.1956, USA) in Mark Del Vecchio, 2001, pp.70 & 74-75.

increasing use of installation as a format in major exhibitions.[16] This exposure fed the need to find a national identity in a post-colonial era, a need that arose not only from strong nationalist sentiments but also as a reaction to avoid being regarded as derivative. In Vietnam and in other parts of Southeast Asia, installation art is seen as coming from outside forces – principally from artists returning from overseas study or, in the case of Vietnam, from artists who had participated in international survey exhibitions of the 1990s. Installation art has also been embraced by many artists from Southeast Asian countries who have taken it on as their own form of post modern artistic practice.

Ewington notes the controversial claim made by some Southeast Asian artists and art historians, that installation art is an essentially Southeast Asian mode – a blurring between art and life, predating European and colonial art practices. As Ewington remarks, 'artists and critics in several countries have insisted that installation recapitulates traditional constructions like shrines and community celebrations and installation is particularly appropriate to regional customs and histories.'[17] As such, this view coincides with the four modes of installation practice outlined earlier: the art object is dematerialized, it is removed from the exclusive domain of the gallery or museum, it partakes in a theatricality involving the corroboration of the audience and it addresses issues of history.

The claim that installation practice is essentially a Southeast Asian mode has been hotly debated, especially in the Philippines by Pastor Roces, who maintains that such a view is a conflation of art and ethnography.[18] Objecting to the cultural determinism of this position and pointing out the complexities of seeking an 'ethos' which is at the same time common to an historical society and artists from the modern nation state – groups that are far removed in name and time – Pastor Roces calls for a more complex, less dyadically structured, more syncretic approach on the part of contemporary artists and art historians.[19] It is evident that

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[16] Julie Ewington, 'Installation in Southeast Asia in the 1990's: Heritage in Modernity', *TAASA Review*, vol.11, no. 1, 2002, p. 7

[17] Julie Ewington, 'Installation in Southeast Asia in the 1990's: Heritage in Modernity', *TAASA Review*, vol.11, no. 1, 2002, p. 8

[18] Marion Pastor Roces, 'Ethos Bathos Pathos', *Art and Asia Pacific*, vol. 1 no1, 1993, pp. 25-29

[19] Marion Pastor Roces, 1993, p. 29

installation practice has much in common with the pre-modern rituals and festivals which continue to be celebrated in many Southeast Asian societies. Both installation art and ritual practice involve the creation of a special environment through the specific placement of objects that are seen to be imbued with symbolic meaning or power: both ritual and installations are ephemeral. Nevertheless, despite these similarities, the adoption of installation art as a form of art practice is theoretically several removes in intention from ritual practice and has the added layers of social critique and a critique of the formalism of painting practice. Canta suggests that, in a ritual context, the forms anticipate the definition, whereas in installation art the idea or definition pre-empts the form.[20]

One of the possible justifications for the appropriation of indigenous art references is a reclaiming of the position that certain modes of cultural production held within Southeast Asian societies prior to the imposition of the Western hierarchy of the arts. This was accompanied, through the introduction of teaching institutions founded on European principles, by the imposition of the foreign term 'fine arts' which was opposed to 'craft', a term applied to many local cultural practices.

Another aspect of the problematic appropriation of pre-modern references, noted by Ewington, is the case in the Philippines where the use of pre-modern practices or elements from ethnic minority groups was seen as a form of cultural imperialism inside cultural boundaries.[21] In both the Philippines and Vietnam, where colonial attitudes and practices excised or devalued indigenous elements of their national histories and cultural practices, installation artists (and others) have appropriated elements of what they restructure as autochthonous aspects of their societies, in an attempt to forge or reclaim a national identity. This practice has also been used by artists to give a voice to marginalized peoples whose traditions are in danger of dying out.[22] In Vietnam, there is an added poignancy and edge, in that many of these ritual and

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[20] Marilyn R.Canta, 'Installation Art in the Philippines: Sourcing Traditional and Contemporary Aesthetics' *Pananaw 4, Philippine Journal of Visual Arts*, 2002, p.50

[21] Julie Ewington, "Installation in Southeast Asia in the 1990's: Heritage in Modernity, *TAASA Review*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2002, p. 8

[22] Marilyn R. Canta, 'Installation Art in the Philippines: Sourcing Traditional and Contemporary Aesthetics' *Pananaw 4, Philippine Journal of Visual Arts*, 2002, p.52

festive practices were (sometimes fiercely) suppressed by their own countrymen during the early years of the Communist system. Nevertheless, although Vietnam is a nation that consists of many ethnic groups, it is frequently the majority *Kinh* whose rituals are referred to by contemporary artists.

While the appropriation of 'indigenous' practices may in fact be cultural imperialism inside cultural boundaries, it is a practice that artists have adopted in many nations and across many artistic disciplines, as a way to reinvigorate artistic traditions. For instance, Gauguin appropriated Romanesque sculpture and the indigenous costumes of Brittany. And early twentieth century Russian artists, in attempting to define their own modern art as distinct from the modernism that was developed in, and imported from, France, looked to earlier forms of cultural expression from within their own traditions. Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova refer to Russian *lubki* prints in their works, while Vassily Kandinsky and Kasimir Malevich also turned to Russian folk art and the Icon tradition respectively, for inspiration in their works. Although the widespread nature of this type of appropriation does not ensure its justification, if it is done in a way that acknowledges the minority or disadvantaged group, in a way that the minority still has some agency, rather than in an exploitative fashion, then one can argue that it is more ethically defensible.

As in the case of Russian artists, referring to pre-existent art forms can also be interpreted as a stance taken against the colonizer or against the hegemony of Euro-American art. In the Vietnamese context, the use of specific references to cultural minorities is not without political nuances, as will be seen in the art of Nguyễn Bảo Tòan.[23] In some respects this desire to find a national voice, for whatever motivation, occurred in post-colonial Asia at the time when many artists in the post-war West were embracing multiculturalism and difference and exploiting global possibilities which were seen as progressive, anti-racist attitudes. Both projects can be interpreted as being driven by political aims. The search for a national identity in cultural terms can been seen as driven by a post-colonial necessity to distance

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[23] The expatriate Vietnamese artists Mỹ Lệ Thi , Hùynh Hoa and Nguyễn Đạo Hòang all reference tribal minorities in their art. See exh.cat. Ngọc Túan Hòang, *Time & Destiny: Vết Hằn Thời Gian,* Tin Sheds Gallery, 25 October-16 November 2002

oneself from the colonial regime. As Murphy notes, conservation and tradition are forces by which societies seek and renew meaning, consolidate history and secure a collective identity, as an alternative to cultural change involving replacement, grafting and hybridity of media and aesthetic concepts.[24]

Another of the criticisms concerning the re-deployment of ritual or festival practices in contemporary installations that has been made by writers such as Apinan Poshyanada and Natasha Kraevskaia, is that the use of 'traditional' elements is done on a superficial rather than conceptual level.[25] There is a fine line as to whether the objects selected by the artist are placed in such a way that they are aestheticized or that they, in fact, offer a critique. Understanding the nuances involved or intended is indeed difficult when one approaches the works from outside the culture and is perhaps not aware of the political constraints involved nor all the possible levels of meaning with which the artist engages.

## The Philippines

The initial appearance of installation art in the Philippines was the result of contact with overseas trends. The conceptual works and then innovative installations of Roberto Chabet Rodríguez (b.1937), were some of the first such works to be seen in Manila.[26] In the 1980s, Chabet, as he signed his works, and his successor as curator for visual arts at the Cultural Centre of the Philippines, Raymundo Albano, encouraged an anti-formalist trend amongst young Filippino artists that spawned a vibrant alternative art scene. According to Canta, these artists were interested in experimentation and sought to challenge the traditional notions of high art; they also wanted to take a stance against the commodification of art and used installation practice as a political tool.[27] Initially the works focussed on conceptual concerns but there was a growing tendency to address issues of identity. One of the reasons for this

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[24] Bernice Murphy, in exh. cat., Localities of Desire: Contemporary Art in an International World, 1994, p.42

[25] Apinan Poshyananda in *Art in Southeast Asia 1997 Glimpses into the Future*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, 1997, p.23. Natasha Kraevskaia, 'Contemporary Vietnamese Art: Obstacles of Transition' *focas*, n.4, 2002, pp 362-383

[26] J.T.Gatbonton et al., *ART Philippines A History: 1521-present*, 1992, p. 291

[27] Marilyn R. Canta, 'Installation Art in the Philippines: Sourcing Traditional and Contemporary Aesthetics' *Pananaw 4, Philippine Journal of Visual Arts*, 2002, p. 49-55

move may well have been to counter the accusations of derivativeness that accompanied art that repeated the styles of works produced in Euro-America.

Quite a number of artists, particularly those based outside Manila, incorporated references to tribal customs and used local materials in their works. Canta considers that the reasons for the use of traditional materials are an attempt at indigenization; an assertion of identity; to give a voice to marginalized peoples whose traditions are in danger of dying out; and as support for a resistance to commodification.[28]

Santiago Bose (1949-2002), ethnically of tribal ancestry, produced installations that were, as he stated, 'almost always a subliminal reproach to our own tragic loss of national identity'.[29] Both he and Roberto Villaneuva (1947-1995) worked in the mountainous area beyond Baguio on the Island of Luzon: the city that stands at the threshold of areas inhabited by the minority groups such as the Bontoc and Ifugao but that largely owes its establishment to its designation as a summer capital for the American forces. Villaneuva's work expressed the loss of identity that the Philippines suffered due to colonization first by the Spanish and then by the Americans, as he believed that the highland people represented the Filipinos' lost selves.[30] His installation at the First Asia Pacific Triennial, *Ego's Grave*, 1993, (fig. 6.3) consisted of an anthropomorphic form carved into the earth which was then covered with terracotta clay, ritually washed, fired and glazed.[31] This installation referred to the grave rituals of the Bontoc and symbolized the animistic strain underlying the Filipino psyche. Another work, *Soul Offering*, performed on All Soul's Day 1990, and dedicated to those who lost their lives in the eruption of Mount Pinatubo, has similarities with Nguyễn Bảo Tòan's installation *Rằm Tháng Bảy* of 1999, discussed later in this chapter.

Roberto Feleo (b.1954), Willy Magtibay (b.1954), Noberto Roldan,(b.1953) and Edson Armeta (b. 1949) were also involved with reviving ancient myths and rituals that were

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[28] Marilyn R. Canta, 2002, p. 51-52

[29] J.T. Gatbonton et al., 1992, p. 306

[30] Kokusa Koryu Kikin, *New Art From Southeast Asia*, 1992, p. 82

[31] http://www.artwrite.cofa.unsw.edu.au/0021/robertoV_Lerma/richie_roberto4.html consulted 17.9.05

perceived to have suffered apostasy as a result of introduced cultures.[32] Feleo's *Tau Tau* of 1994 reconstructed the narrative of an early Philippines creation myth.[33] This installation also critiqued the dualism of Christianity compared with the holistic view of the ancient belief system. More recently, there has been a shift towards works that comment on feminist issues and the plight of migrant workers, as seen for example in the work of artists such as Imelda Cajipe-Endaya (b. 1941) and the collaborative works of Reamillo and Juliet (once part of the Bagio group, now resident in Australia) who, in their series *P.I. for Sale* examine Filipino identity in a critique of the fetishization of icons.

## Indonesia

In Indonesia, installation practice (instalasi) appeared as part of the Indonesian New Art Movement which was formed in Jakarta the mid 1970s, in an artistic revolt after the collapse of communism and the Sukharno regime. Supangkat, an original member of the group, notes that installation as a term, was introduced by 'the late highly regarded art critic Dr. Sanento Yuliman in 1991.' [34]

As in Vietnam, where contemporary art has flourished since *đôi mới*, the field of Indonesian art expanded greatly in the economic boom which followed the adoption of more liberal social and economic policies. In the decade leading up to the East Asia Financial Crisis in late 1997, corporations increasingly collected contemporary art, while private galleries were active in promoting contemporary artists. However, Supangkat notes that Government institutions have not been 'very active in promoting contemporary art, since government policy generally favours the traditional arts as they clearly demonstrate Indonesian identity.'[35] This is a somewhat paradoxical statement, given that many contemporary artists strive to

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[32] J.T. Gatbonton, et al., 1992, p.318

[33] Roberto Feleo, *Tau Tau,* 1994, mixed media, 240 x150 x1080cm, illustrated in K.K. Kokusa , *Asian Modernism: Diverse developments in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand*, 1995, 1-34, pp. 102-103

[34] Jim Supangkat, 'A Different Modern Art', *Art Asia and Pacific*, September, 1993, p.9 Members of the Indonesian New Art Group made two large collaborative installations in 1989 and 1991, thus the installation format appears to have preceded it's categorization in the literature on Indonesian art. Supangkat also noted in the 1990's that 'Installation has become the most popular contemporary art form in Indonesia'.

[35] Jim Supangkat, 1993, p. 8. Caroline Turner in C. Turner (ed.), *Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific*, 2004, p. 205, makes the same point.

represent a national identity in their work, however a disconnect occurs in contemporary art that involves new or hybrid forms. Conservative antipathy to change favours the 'traditional' formulae of the past.

Marianto believes that one of the driving mechanisms for installation art was *negledek*, an Indonesian term meaning to ridicule or embarrass, a type of teasing irony.[36] Within Indonesian society, *negledek* provides a mechanism for the expression of critical attitudes. Examples of this can be seen in the early works of Dadang Christanto, b.1957, such as *Golf Ball***,** 1991, and *Bureaucracy*, 1991-2 in which the artist taunts developers in the case of *Golf Ball* and the military in *Bureaucracy*.[37] Now resident in Australia, Christanto continues to address issues of poverty, exploitation and social/political problems, themes which are common to many Indonesian contemporary artists.

While some of Christanto's installations have involved the use of clay (fig. 6.4),[38] others such as *They give evidence, Mereka memberi kesaksian*,1996-97, use ground andesite from the Dieng plateau in Central Java, the site of the Buddhist and Hindu monuments of Borobudur and Prambanan. In employing this particular ground stone as part of the medium of his works and through his deliberate appropriation of the pneumatic forms of Buddhist and Hindu statues from the central Javanese Kingdoms of the eight to eleventh century, Christanto refers to a perceived 'golden age' of Javanese art. More importantly, however, the figural style he adopts is a deliberate stance against the 'western style' of depicting the figures with

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[36] Dwi Marianto, 'Mainstreaming of Ngeledek in Indonesian Contemporary Art', in Hugh O'Neil & Tim Lindsey *AWAS! Recent Art from Indonesia*, c1999, p.17

[37] Dadang Christanto, *Golf Ball***,** 1991, at http://faam.city.fukuoka.jp/eng/collection/img/cl_01_0408131603181291.jpg and *Bureacracy*, 1990, illustrated in J. Clark, *Modern Asian Art*, 1998, plate, 47, p.214

[38] For example, Christanto's installation '*Kekerasan* 1' (Violence 1), 1995 and 'Untitled', 1995, both use terracotta figures. These works are illustrated in Apinan Poshyananda, *Traditions Tensions: Contemporary Art in Asia*, exh. cat. 1996, pp. 144-147. 'Cannibalism', 2003, is a work that resembles 'Untitled', 1995, using ceramic body parts threaded onto satay sticks in a work that mourns violence. Caroline Turner (ed.) *Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific*, 2004, p. 213

anatomically correct muscles and skeletal structures, such as he was taught in the syllabus of the art school he attended in Yogajakarta.[39]

In the structure of Kererasan 1, Christanto replicates the form of the Buddhist stupa at Borobudur with its eight stepped terraces. Borobudur is seen both as a mandala and as a way of progressing through various levels of existence to a state of nirvana. Part of the philosophical intention of the original Buddhist monument is the extension of compassion to all sentient beings and the associated Buddha sculptures are works of inward, calm contemplation. In an ironic gesture, Christanto has replaced the multiple images of meditating Buddhas found on the terraces of the eighth century monument, with the open mouthed but voiceless, wide eyed, upward looking heads of the victims of political violence. Christanto engages in the use of multiples, irony and appropriation.

Other Indonesian installation artists have also taken critical political postures while re-employing or referencing earlier cultural forms. For instance, Heri Dono, (b.1960) and FX Harsono (b.1948) both use figures that reflect various forms of the Wayang theatre from Indonesia. Heri Dono worked with a Wayang master in the late 1980s and has also collaborated with disadvantaged communities in his installations and performances. Dono acknowledges his early influence from European and Western sources stating that it is a 'natural part of creative development'.[40] While Euro-American painters may have influenced his artistic vocabulary, the content of his works is centred in the Indonesian context and there does not appear to be any anxiety about being considered derivative – a concern of many other Southeast Asian artists.

Sunaryo (b.1943), an artist who works across many media, including ceramics, and exhibits some of his work in the installation format, has been influenced by sculptures from Irian Jaya,[41] an appropriation which could well earn the criticism of cultural imperialism, as the artist himself comes from Central Java. Perhaps the reason for some Indonesian artists to

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[39] Conversation with the artist, March 2004

[40] Joyce van Fenema (ed.), *Southeast Asian Art Today*, 1996, p. 17

[41] Jim Supangkat in Joyce van Fenema (ed.),1996, p. 45

refer to pre-Islamic forms in their post-colonial practice is the difficulty in appropriating Islamic forms of ritual for a critical artistic statement. The use of the Koran by Arahmaiani, (b.1961) in her outspoken, confrontational works that critique cultural imperialism and gender exploitation, caused local opprobrium.[42] Since September 11, 2001, however, Arahmaiani has combined her critical attitude towards some Islamic practices with an effort to counter the stigmatization of the religion.[43] Another indication of the effect of censure from some groups within Indonesian society occurred during Christanto's exhibition of *They Give Evidence* in Indonesia in 2002, when the work attracted criticism from a conservative Islamic group and local authorities required that the figures be covered.[44]

The issue of cultural imperialism within cultural boundaries and the expression of Indonesian traditions has an interesting twist in the Indonesian context which is discussed by the ceramic artist Hilda Soemantri.[45] Soemantri discusses the importance of *Pusaka* or sacred heirlooms. As with many cultural forms in the Southeast Asian context, *Pusaka* are associated with intangible powers. This contemporary ceramic artist, who was educated in both Indonesia and the West, has specifically decided not to use, or refer to, traditional Indonesian forms in her work as she believes that this would cause those items of *Pusaka* to loose power or potency. As she says:

> By virtue of their history, pusakas are saturated with power. As I see it, artworks that take inspiration from them or refer to them drain that power. I feel strongly that using traditional arts for my own objectives would in effect diminish their power and authority. Their animating power is the reason I fervently keep my work separate and I always decline to take any inspiration from these works of the past.[46]

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[42] Caroline Turner (ed.) Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific, 2004, p. 207

[43] Gerhard Haupt and Pat Binder, http://www.universes-in-universe.de/islam/eng/2003/03/arahmaiani/ consulted 17 October 2005

[44] The works were ceremonially unveiled with their acquisition and installation at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, October 2003

[45] Hilda Soemantri, 'Traditional Art: A *Pusaka*', in *Asian Art and Culture*, Winter, 1995, pp.25-37

[46] Hilda Soemantri,1995, p.29

She chooses to produce clay works which reflect her individual reaction to personal events or matters of national or international significance. However, the quest to remove cultural referents is an extremely difficult position to maintain as she discovered in the work, *World Food Balance*, 1986, (fig 6.5).[47] Even the symbolic placement of a sheaf of rice in the upper, 'developed world', bowl caused her anguish, as the rice could be regarded as *pusaka*.

Other artists have deliberately included and referenced items of *pusaka* in their works such as Nindityo Adipurnomo, (b.1961) in *Lingga and Yoni*, 1992, in which the artist incorporated patola cloth and a kris into a work which also included a contemporary linga and yoni.[48] The Indonesian kris and the imported patola cloth are two of the most potent items of Indonesian *pusaka*.

Andar Manik's ceramic installation and performance *Crack* of 1994 also referred to the mandala of pre-Islamic Indonesian culture.[49] This work was exhibited at the Ninth Jakarta Bienniale and a reviewer noted that

> a number of artists admitted that they were specifically requested to create an installation for the show, even though it was not their usual medium. For some of the younger, less experienced artists in the show …..the request was difficult to refuse, and in general, their work suffered as a result.[50]

Some artists, particularly sculptors, relish the opportunity to express their ideas in the installation format, whereas others clearly adopt this mode as a result of curatorial pressure or encouragement. Pastor Roces has suggested that installation art in the international context is

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[47] Hilda Soemantri, 1995, p. 35

[48] Nindityo Adipurnomo, *Lingga-Yoni*, 1992, oil on canvas, wood, copper, cloth and kris, 80 x50 x 40 cm, illustrated in A. Poshyananda (ed.) *Traditions Tensions: Contemporary Art in Asia*, exh. cat., 1996, p. 115 and Arahmaiani, *Lingg- Yoni*, 1994, Acrylic on canvas, 182 x 140cm, in the same catalogue, illustrated at p. 116

[49] Linda Owen, 'Bienniale Takes up the Fight for Emerging Artists' *Asian Art News*, vol.4, no. 2, 1994, p.21

[50] Linda Owen, 1994, p.23

art created ' to transact business in art currency'.[51] There is certainly a great deal of circumstantial evidence to suggest that the proliferation of installation art in international art fora is driven by curatorial preference.

While Indonesian artists have adopted installation practice with alacrity to voice their concerns about social injustice, they have managed to negotiate a way in which the works refer to their own culture and yet speak in a universal way. This last aspect is particularly evident in the works of Christanto, whose works have caused heartfelt reactions in the diverse locations in which they have been exhibited. When *They Give Evidence* was exhibited in Japan, flowers, poems and messages were placed before the figures by the Japanese public expressing regret at the events of the Second World War. A similar reaction, but expressing concerns about the events in East Timor, occurred with Christanto's 1999 installation at the Asia Pacific Triennial. In these works, the formalist concerns and social messages are accessible and understandable outside the discourse in which they were created, yet they retain local codes of meaning.[52]

## The Emergence of installation art in Vietnam

Not all installation art in Vietnam involves ceramics, however, what is credited as the first installation in Vietnam was done in 1994 by the ceramic artist Nguyễn Bảo Tòan.[53] (see figs. 1.4 & 6.19) The 1970s to 1990s saw many changes in pottery practice in Vietnam: with the advent of peace (except for the 1979 conflict with China), there was generally greater prosperity and such a climate offered greater opportunities for artistic creativity. No longer were ceramic pieces seen as just utilitarian or craft items, rather they began to be made and exhibited as an artistic medium in their own right. The historian, critic and painter Phan Cẩm Thượng wrote in a review of the first installation show in Hà Nội in 1994:

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[51] Marion Pastor Roces, 'Consider Post Culture' Beyond the Future: Papers from the Conference of the Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Queensland Art Gallery, 1999, p. 36

[52] John Clark, from a lecture presented at the National Gallery of Australia June 2005

[53] Jeffrey Hantover in 'Report from Vietnam The Road through the Village', *Art in America*, March, 1995, p.44 states that ' the only exhibition that could claim to be "installation art" was a 1992 show by a Saigon cartoonist who used his daughters dolls and toys to gently satirize bureaucratic corruption and capitalist greed', however, this exhibition is not cited by Vietnamese writers when they refer to installation art in Vietnam.

> In the period of 1970-1990, present-day authors gradually erased the inherent function of ceramic wares, they had shifted ceramics to sculptural plastic arts or created works standing half way between painting and sculpture and stone-ware ceramics. Throughout this transformational process they had learned a great deal from our tradition as well as from other countries' ceramics while focusing their attention on the aborigines' character and modern art structure.[54]

In this review, he stressed the integration of ceramics with sculpture and painting, a transformation that has been major aspect of ceramic practice in Vietnam in recent years. He also noted the contrast between Chinese ceramics with their concentration on perfection in glaze and technique as compared to the ceramics of Vietnam, a difference of which the ceramics artists who worked at the Fine Arts Museum in Hà Nội, such as Nguyễn Bảo Tòan, were well aware.

How do Vietnamese artists engage with installation practice? The following discussion explores the factors within Vietnam that have seen a growing interest in installation art.

While there was a post war impetus from within Vietnam to develop the arts, there was a continuing, if rudimentary, contact with various movements in contemporary art in the international arena. A major inhibitor to Vietnamese artists being shown in any exhibitions in the USA was an embargo which the United States did not remove until 1994, which amongst other things prevented any significant cultural exchange between the two countries. Some of the ways in which contact with art outside Vietnam has occurred have been explored in the previous chapter and include the agency of institutions such as the Alliance Française, Goëthe Institute, and British Council. Initially, in the mid 20th century there were artist exchanges with Eastern Bloc countries and subsequently Western countries, a trend that continues to expand. In addition, the international art scene is increasingly accessed through web sites. Although a relatively limited practice, prominent foreign artists have been invited to exhibit

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[54] Phan Cẩm Thượng, 'Artist Bảo Tòan and his "Fire Tempered Earth" on Display' text of an article written in 1994 in relation to Nguyễn Bảo Tòan's exhibition ' Earth through Fire', 1994, the whole text is at appendix 3. In referring to 'aborigines' the writer is referring to local ceramic traditions.

their work in Vietnam, for example, the German artist Wolfgang Laib, (b.1950), exhibited his installation work in the gallery of the University of Fine Arts, Hà Nội in 2004.[55] (fig. 6.6)

L'Espace, a cultural venue financed by the French Government, has a very active program of exhibitions of local and French artists. It also provides a well patronized library that carries the journals, *Art Press*, *Beaux Arts Magazine*, and *Connaissance des Arts*, along with other publications about cinema, fashion and design. Enquiries to date indicate that the art school libraries in Vietnam do not carry any publications covering contemporary international art. The journal of the Fine Art Association of Vietnam, *Mỹ Thuật*, carries a section on international art, however, these articles are generally historical pieces about artists no later than the early twentieth century.

Vietnamese artists are also able to access publications from overseas at some commercial art galleries. Salon Natasha, directed by writer and critic, Natasha Kraevskaia and Tràng An Gallery, directed by the painter and arts administrator, Nguyễn Xuân Tiệp, were a source of international publications, however both these galleries are no longer operational.[56] Art Vietnam, which opened in November 2002, is a commercial gallery run by an expatriate American, Suzanne Letch and carries the magazines *Arts of Asia* and *Art in America*: artists who visit her gallery are able to borrow these magazines and other catalogues that she collects.[57]

Since the 'opening up' of Vietnam to the west some artists have been fortunate enough to have their work selected for international shows. It is hardly co-incidental that Đặng Thị Khuê (b.1946), Nguyễn Bảo Toần (b.1950), Nguyễn Minh Thành (b.1971) and Vũ Dân Tân (b.1946), whose works were some of the earliest Vietnamese art to be shown internationally, are artists who have embraced installation practice.

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[55] This work was created for the Venice Biennale of 1997 and was subsequently shown in Australia at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2005.

[56] Tràng An closed in 2001 and Salon Natasha ceased to have exhibtions from 2004.

[57] Conversation with Suzanne Lecht, 6 October 2005

Kraevskaia observed in 1996, when installation art was a relatively new genre of art in Vietnam, that it 'was interpreted as a sentimental reverberation of the practices and experiences of ordinary individuals in daily life', rather than offering a new semantic paradigm in the transfer of objects to a new environment. [58] She considered that the artists poeticised certain situations or phenomena rather than creating new metaphorical meanings or content, thereby continuing an aesthetic rather than creating a conceptual trend. While this early criticism continues to be accurate in some instances, with time and increasing familiarity with the practice in Vietnam and as it operates overseas, there is a growing tendency for Vietnamese artists to engage with the conceptual basis of installation practice.

As Kraevskaia notes, such a banal approach to installation art seems paradoxical in a society with a highly developed degree of allegory and symbol.[59] Perhaps this intrinsic system of multiple meanings is another reason why Southeast Asian artists claim installation art as their own. In the Vietnamese environment, introducing an additional conceptual level can necessitate a doubling of the metaphor or relationships. The use of symbolic references, which in many cases was prohibited and discouraged in the early years of the Communist regime, when combined with an individual artist's personal intent, is one way of achieving a conceptual level in installation art in Vietnam. Individuality is an aspect which was not present in prior allegorical or metaphorical interpretations of symbolically charged objects.

A possible reason for the apparent lack of, or slowness to engage in, conceptual rigour may be due in part to the course which Vietnamese art took in the twentieth century. Vietnam seems to have missed out on many twentieth century art movements of the Euro-American art world, phases such as Pop, Funk, Minimalism and Conceptualism. During the mid to late twentieth century Vietnamese artists were bound by the requirement to produce political propaganda in a public format. Thus artists moved from the influence of Impressionism and Post Impressionism, conveyed to them during the period of French colonization, through a period of state directed political expediency into the diversity of the post-modern age. The interim

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[58] Natasha Kraevskaia, 'Windows on life: The Art of Nguyen Minh Thanh', *Art Asia Pacific*, no.24, 1999, p.49
[59] Natasha Kraevskaia, 1999, p.49

period of politically driven propagandist art and a restriction to the Eastern Bloc sphere of influence, proved a diversion on this journey. It is as though the various 'isms' of the mid 20th century, primarily propelled by artists from the West and in which artists increasingly focussed their attention on conceptual and philosophical issues, did not exist for artists in Vietnam. As is evident in the *Mỹ Thuật* articles on international art referred to above, it appears that even as yet the mid century movements are hardly discussed. Those stages in the progress of post-modernism are outside the radar, as it were, of Vietnamese artists and their world.[60]

A dominant trend in contemporary Vietnamese art in general and installation art in particular is termed by the writers Bùi Như Hương and Trần Hậu Tuấn as the 'Folk Aesthetics Exploitation'.[61] This fits within the mode of installation art that deals with narrative and history. Such a trend can also be seen to be a version of the cultural essentialism discussed in relation to installation practice in the Philippines and Indonesia. However, in contrast to those countries where the art of minority groups is used as a reference point, Vietnamese artists are in general quoting from the village art of the majority *Kinh* people. The reasons Hương and Tuấn give for the appearance of the 'Folk Aesthetics Exploitation' trend are related to the artist's dilemma of how to embrace the modern while retaining a sense of national identity. The authors consider that in adopting these themes and references, the artists are reflecting the essence of the Vietnamese people by referring to their agricultural roots and their natural tendency to light hearted optimism.[62] This is linked to a belief that the major differences between countries exist in their cultural roots: the national lies in the local.[63] It is also a fact that many of these artists grew up in, or spent a good part of their childhood in, country villages. Characteristics of the 'Folk Aesthetics Exploitation' style are references to carvings from village *đình*, the use of *dó* paper and the adoption of aesthetics of Đong Hô wood block

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[60] In an article on installation art in 2005, the author mentions some of the mid-century movements, but without any discussion of their theoretical underpinnings. Đặng Thái Hòang, 'Nghệ thuật sắp đặt', *Mỹ Thuật*, 130 (78) 6-2005, pp. 19-21

[61] Bùi Như Hương & Trần Hậ Tuấn, 2001, p.19

[62] Bùi Như Hương & Trần Hậ Tuấn, 2001, p.20

[63] Bùi Như Hương & Trần Hậ Tuấn, 2001, p. 32

prints. In addition to the view that this art represents what is perceived to be the essence of 'Vietnameseness', motifs from village life and the style of village carvings and prints were adopted by early modern Vietnamese artists such as Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm. They saw in them, not only a nationalistic statement, but a Vietnamese version of the 'primitivism' adopted by early twentieth century modernists in Europe. Some of the formal principles of modernism such as multiple perspectives, flatness of the picture plane, expressive colour and asymmetry, which were viewed by European moderns as a way to reinvigorate their art, are characteristics of Vietnamese village art forms.

A further reason for the adoption of this tendency is related to politics. As Hương and Tuấn note:

> The return to village culture by young artists in the 1990s lies partly within a certain national movement under which, as a result of the Communist Party policy of renovation and the developments in culture, economics and society, people all over the country are following the trend to restore and renovate temples, communal halls and sites of historical heritage and to resurrect traditional folk ceremonies and festivals. What was once forgotten or unintentionally vandalized due to a lack of knowledge or the years of conflict is now being re-discovered, treasured and preserved.[64]

Whereas Hương and Tuấn's interpretation is a positive reaction to the government policy, it could also be interpreted in a negative way, in that this subject matter is now viewed as safe and acceptable, so that artists adopt this government sanctioned tendency rather than risk alternative modes of expression. Furthermore, from a commercial point of view, it is seen as being successful and worthy of emulation.

While the inspiration for one of the most popular trends in contemporary art, especially in the north of Vietnam, relates to village carvings and prints, village pottery made by anonymous

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[64] Bùi Như Hương & Trần Hậ Tuấn, 2001 p. 21. The comment 'unintentionally vandalized' is somewhat generous, as the caretaker of the village *đình* in Bát Tràng, Lê Cảo, showed the author photographs of government troops in the process of destroying the building.

potters has been used as a theme by Nguyễn Bảo Toàn. His first solo exhibition, *Earth through Fire,*1994, was also the first verifiable instance of installation practice in Vietnam. Bảo Toàn is officially recognised as Hà Nội's first installation artist.[65] Shown at *Nhà Triển Lãm*, (Exhibition House), at 29 Hàng Bài Street as part of the Contemporary Art Circle, the exhibition presented both readymade ceramics and some specially fashioned works that quoted everyday ceramics. All were placed in recontextualized situations that imbued them with layers of metaphorical meanings. Writing about this first installation, Hương and Tuấn note: 'With this installation, he plucked the viewers out of their gaudy, noisy, industrialised setting and returned them to the unembellished, reserved beauty of the homely ceramic materials they had often forgotten.'[66] In another review of this exhibition, which included paintings as well as ceramics, the painter and critic Nguyễn Quân noted that the employment of the installation format was 'quite contemporary with the installations done in neighbour Asian countries such as Thailand, Japan, Indonesia…'[67]

In an interview with the artist in January 2000, Bảo Tòan revealed that initially he was reluctant to exhibit his works as installations, however, he eventually realized that his art required that the works be exhibited in this format.[68] He has subsequently explained the circumstances through which he came to installation art as follows:

> When I began to place objects on my floor to show friends I also began to realize how important each object became and especially their relationship to each other. I didn't think of this as installation art but rather just a new art form for me.[69]

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[65] Bùi Như Hương & Trần Hậ Tuấn, 2001, p. 85 As mentioned in chapter 4, his work was included in the 1997 show, *A Winding River* which was the first show of Vietnamese art to be held in the United States after the embargo was lifted.

[66] Bùi Như Hương & Trần Hạu Tuấn, 2001, p.86

[67] Nguyễn Quân, 'The First Installation Artist in Vietnam "Fired Earth"- Bao Toan's One-Man Show' text provided by Nguyễn Bảo Tòan, see appendix 4

[68] Interview with the artist 29 January 2000

[69] C. David Thomas, 'Ceramic Artist Nguyễn Bảo Tòan,'in *Vietnamese Cultural Window*, no. 69, December, 2003, p.21

From this statement it can be seen that Bảo Tòan was primarily concerned with the relationships between objects rather than an aestheticization of folk practices. The way he surrounds himself with inspirational pieces can be seen in fig.4.33. His small house in Hà Nội's old centre is filled with paintings, pots, pieces that he has created and objects he has collected.

Following Bảo Toan's success, other artists, not involved with ceramics, eagerly adopted the installation format. Đặng Thị Khuê (b.1946), Nguyễn Minh Thành (b.1971) and Vũ Dân Tân (b. 1946), Trần Lương (b.1960), Trần Hâu Yên Thế (b.1970) and collaboratively, Nguyễn Xuân Tiệp, (b.1956) are some of the other artists who subsequently used the installation format. Of these artists, Vũ Dân Tân and Lê Thừa Tiến Thế have mostly exhibited their installations overseas and thus their work is little known to Vietnamese audiences.[70] Trương Tân and Trần Trọng Vũ, who also work with installations, predominantly live overseas and therefore infrequently exhibit their work in Vietnam.

## Vietnamese artists resident overseas

There are a number of Vietnamese artists who, having studied in Hà Nội, subsequently moved overseas to work and practice. They and the Hà Nội based artists Vũ Dân Tân and Nguyễn Minh Thành, have adopted modes of installation practice that do not predominantly or directly refer to the indigeneous culture of Vietnam. Nevertheless, although they are not part of the 'Folk Aesthetics Exploitation' trend, their works still have aspects of Vietnameseness embedded within them.

Trần Trọng Vũ**,** (b.1964, Hà Nội) studied at the University of Fine Arts between 1982-87. He then won a scholarship to study at the École Nationale des Beaux-arts, Paris in 1989, where he has since lived, returning to Hà Nội on an infrequent basis. Having left Hà Nội at a time before the impact of *đôi mới* had really taken effect, he contrasts the lack of individualism he

[70] As discussed by Natasha Kraevskaia in Vietnamese Installation Art: New Form in an Old Place, 2004

experienced in Vietnam with the extreme focus on the individual in the West and is aware that he occupies an area of hybridity.[71]

*Blue Memory* (fig.6.7) by Trần Trọng Vũ has the look of a parody of social realist poster art, with the use of generic faces, bright flat colours and the 'rain' of hammers. The figures painted on plastic sheets are the artist's reflection on the relationship between the individual and society.

Another overseas based artist, Trương Tân**,** (b.1963) was a most influential teacher during the 1990s at the Fine Arts University, Hà Nội after graduating from that institution in 1989. He moved to Paris in 1998, but still returns to Vietnam and has exhibited works such as the multi-media installation, *The Emigrant Birds*, at the Goëthe Institute in October 2003.[72](fig.6.8) The metal, angel-like figures of *Emigrant Birds* suspended on swaying poles represent the crossing of continents and cultures between Hà Nội and Paris in a work that emphasizes the hybrid feelings of this expatriate artist and express, in an installation format, sentiments found in the writings of Homi Bhabha.[73] The movement and constant change in relationship between the parts of the installation underline the position to be negotiated by those in between east and west, former colonized and colonizer.

Tân emerged as a gay artist in Hà Nội in 1992 and challenged the cultural establishment with his different vision about the potentialities of art. Prior to Tân's move to Paris, Hantover commented that through his choice of subject matter and his use of multiple media and text 'he may be the artist who moves Vietnamese painting into the post-modern world'[74] Tân's exhibition of 1995 at the Red River Gallery dealt with AIDS and homosexuality in a

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[71] http://www.international.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=8550 consulted 10.1.06

[72] The exhibition, called 'Red Green and Yellow- Go Stop and in-between' involved the work of sixteen Hà Nội artists at the unfinished building of the Goethe institute, was one of the most successful exhibitions of installation art in Hà Nội to date, according to the writer Natasha Kraevskaia. (personal communication) The writer and artist Nguyễn Quân's installation in the same exhibition critiqued the consumer culture of current day Vietnam. It was re viewed by Phương Anh 'Transformed Site hosts VN's evolving art scene" *Vietnam News* , 6 October 2003

[73] Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture , 1994

[74] Jeffrey Hantover, 'Report from Vietnam The Road through the Village', *Art in America*, March, 1995, p.45

confrontational manner. The complex reasons why this exhibition was closed down by the Government was discussed by Carruthers, who argued that Tân's subject matter of his own sexuality represented too much of a move towards the west – which is viewed by the Vietnamese government as 'the other that we are not'.[75] Tân's motto, expressed in a publication from *L'Espace,* is taken from Pier Paolo Pasolini 'Choquer est un droit, être choqué est un plaisir'[76]

Both Trần Trọng Vũ and Trương Tân, as overseas Vietnamese artists, investigate issues of hybridity, questioning their position between two cultures. Tân, who also deliberately sets out to shock, runs counter to the approach of many Hà Nội artists. Installation art in Vietnam has been described as avoiding adverse aesthetic reactions, [77] a position that fits within a Confucian ethic and a Daoist view of the maintenance of harmony. In fact high aestheticism is often cited as one of the preferred modes of Vietnamese artists. One of the strategies taken on by Western installation practitioners in particular, which fits within the mode of installation art's critique of the Museum, is the creation of works that shock the audience through the presentation of aesthetically repugnant material.

## Installation artists resident in Vietnam

Vũ Dân Tân (b.1946), as a basically self taught artist, produces work which is distinctly outside the mainstream trend that values aestheticism in Vietnam. (fig.6.9) He travelled to Cuba in 1973 and subsequently spent three and a half years in the Soviet Union.[78] Although his work has been shown in many international venues since 1988, the Second Asia Pacific Triennial (APT) at the Queensland Art Gallery in 1996 was the first time his work had been included in a major international exhibition. His installation for the APT, entitled *Monsters, Devils and Angels,* was made from an assortment of cut and painted cardboard packets, some of which were displayed in wooden, glass fronted small boxes used for selling wares in the

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[75] Ashley Carruthers, 'What bugs the State about Truong Tan', *TAASA Review*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1998, p.4

[76] 'Nghệ thuat thị giác Arts visuels', *L'Espace* no. 11, 9.10.05, p.11

[77] Bùi Như Hương & Trần Hậ Tuấn, 2001, p. 89

[78] Birgit Hussfeld, 'Monsters, devils, insects and angels: The bowerbird art of Vu Dan Tan,' *Art Asia Pacific*, no.16, 1997, p.55

streets of Hà Nội. (fig.6.10).[79] Vũ's use of found objects, such as cardboard sheets for his *Fashion* series of 2002, as seen in the background of fig.6.9, vinyl records in his works that involve sound and the use of old cars, in *RienCarNation*, have often been interpreted as an ironic take on the increasing materialism of Vietnamese society. But the relationships between the works and the site involve more than this, as his spouse, Kraevskaia explains. Vũ's installations, and to a large extent, the work of the Vietnamese installation artists dealt with so far, involve processes of questioning rather than certainty and set up relationships between the objects, site and the audience.[80] In an interesting parallel with the way in which many of the ceramic artists talk about their work, Kraevskaia also notes that Vũ's installations often involve an element of play, something that has been discussed in this thesis as a fundamental attitude of the Vietnamese towards ceramics. In his use of recycled materials and in his frequently adopted attitude of playfulness, Vũ distances himself from what has come to be regarded as high art. The adoption of an experimental manner that is not constrained by formal requirements could be said to be a return to the approach taken by sculptors in the *đình*, who carved genre scenes or by ceramicists who explored the relationship between the function of their work and its semantic associations.

Đinh Gia Lê**,** (b.1971), graduated from the Fine Arts University, Hà Nội in 1997, followed by a year in Dresden. He now works as an assistant in the sculpture department of the Fine Arts University and travels to Germany each year.[81] Đinh Gia Lê has created installations at the Goëthe Institute and L'Espace in Hà Nội as well as in locations in Germany, Singapore and the United States. His site-specific installations refer to Vietnamese culture in symbolic ways as in the installation *Goats on the Grass*, 2003, which was initially conceived in the year of the Goat (fig.6.11) and created for the French Embasssy in Hà Nội. However, rather than presenting a straightforward metaphor, a reference to the omnipresent zodiacal signs whose significance seems to be deeply embedded in Vietnamese thought and way of regarding time, he raises the reference to another level and produces a significant relationship to the site by

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[79] The installation has also been called *Suitcases of a Pilgrim*.

[80] Natasha Kraevskaia, Vietnamese Installation Art: New Form in an Old Place, 2004, p. 4

[81] C. David Thomas, 'Artist Đinh Gia Lê,' *Vietnam Cultural Window*, no. 61 April, 2003, pp. 26-27

placing his life-like goat sculptures in a rustic setting where the space is shared by a TV monitor screening brutal scenes from a slaughterhouse. According to Kraevskaia, in this installation he comments on the particularity of perception and the contradictory nature of any phenomenon.[82]

Nguyễn Minh Thành (b.1971), began to experiment with installation art after graduating from the University of Fine Arts, Hà Nội in 1996. Thành has said that the library at the Alliance Française and his teacher Trương Tân were influential in his exploration of installation art.[83]

His first installation entitled *A story like all others* was shown at L'Atelier Gallery, 6 Nhà Thơ in 1997. This work included the enormous vertical panels of paintings and drawings on cotton-scrolls that have since become a signature of his art. He has often used portraits and items from funeral and ritual settings as a reference to the past (fig.6.12) but, rather than participating in the Confucian practice of established heirarchies, his art is a controversial questioning of what is constituted by individuality.[84] His art, like that of his teacher, Trương Tân, represents a change from art being a pictorial representation of an illusion of the physical world to being a theatrical, psychological examination of the self and society.

Kraevskaia's interview with Thành in 1999 established that while his art is based on certain rituals and Confucian values embedded in the Vietnamese psyche, one of the motivations behind his work is to explore childhood feelings since, from his account, he experienced an emotionally deprived childhood.[85] Thành is one of the artists who benefited from the avant-garde environment of Salon Natasha, where his work was exhibited on a number of occasions. Despite his relative youth, Thành has already had many international exhibitions in Europe, Japan, Australia and the USA and his works are in the collection of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Queensland Art Gallery and others. He has had additional overseas experience

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[82] Natasha Kraevskaia, 2004, p.4

[83] Natasha Kraevskaia, , 'Windows on life: The Art of Nguyen Minh Thanh', *Art Asia Pacific*, no.24, 1999, p.53

[84] The wooden frames for the work *Mother's Portrait* and the corresponding *Father's portrait* were made by Mr. Đục, whose house, nhà San Đục has been used by many early installation and performance artists in Hà Nội.

[85] Natasha Kraevskaia, 1999, pp. 48-53

through participating in residency programs in Australia, at the Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, Sydney in 1999 and, in 2004 in London. He will represent Vietnam at the 2007 APT in Brisbane.[86]

*Portrait of Mother*,1998, (fig.6.13) on *dó* paper was included in the Third Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane in 1999. For Thành, this overarching image of his mother may stand for the profound contradiction between a Confucian world view and that of the artist who wishes to express or, in the case of Trương Tân, expose, their emotional interior. Jamieson discusses the relationship of the individual within Vietnamese society, noting that meta message in the Vietnamese thought system is the belief that virtue is linked to cause and effect, that there is a direct relationship between moral thought, virtuous behaviour and good luck in life. In this system, the behaviour of the individual reflects on the family unit, not just the individual. There is a notion of moral debt built around membership within the family which 'was the primary source of meaning in life', expressed in and reinforced by acknowledging one's ancestors and through the appropriate behaviour with regard to the family and village altars.[87] While it is difficult for anyone brought up in a twentieth century western society to appreciate this position, it nevertheless represents an enormous paradigm shift for many Vietnamese artists to make the leap to express inner psychological states directly in their work, particularly if they are in any way contrary to the harmony of the family unit.

Nguyễn Minh Phương, (b.1964), is described as a ceramist, however, ceramic works have not been particularly prominent in his installations.[88] Phương comes from Ho Chi Minh City and uses minority textiles as signifiers of ethnicity and poles in water as a general reference to stilt houses in the Mekong delta area.[89] (fig.6.14) An early installation, *Chợ Quê*, (*Rural Market*),

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[86] Thành was successful in gaining a Visiting Arts/Delfina Fellowship. Information provided by Art Vietnam gallery, Hà Nội

[87] Neil L. Jamieson, Indochina Initiative Working Paper Series 'Culture and Development' in *Vietnam Working Paper* no.1, nd. pp.10-11

[88] Jeffrey Hantover, 'The Road through the village', *Art in America*, March 1995, p. 47

[89] An installation on the same theme as fig.6.14 was part of a group show in Montréal in 2002. Natasha Kraevskaia, 'From Artifice Toward Honesty' in *Vietnam Art Actuel,* 2002, p.11

exhibited at Tràng An Gallery in 1999, used conical hats and baskets in creating a rather aestheticized space through the placement of the tools of trade of the market people.(fig.6.15). The shift from an aestheticization of objects to a more conceptual work which interacts with the site can be seen in comparing these two installations. His works are interpreted as not being spiritually motivated but rather concerned with environmental problems. [90]

Đặng Thị Khuê**,** (b.1946) comes from a family of Confucian scholars, whose parents joined the resistance movement against the French. She continued their support for independence of the country by using her talents as a graphic artist in the Second Indochina War. Her post war, pre *đôi mới* work, *The American Aggressors*, 1980,(fig. 6.16) is on permanent display in the Museum of Fine Arts.[91]

After the war, Đặng Thị Khuê worked as an official with the Executive Committee of the Fine Arts Association between 1978 and 1989 and was a member of the Secretariat of the Plastic Arts Association and a deputy of the National Assembly as an arts representative.[92] From 1990 to 2002, she worked at the *Viện Mỹ Thuật*, Institute for Art Historical Research. She has participated in two APT's, in 1996 and 1999, the first as a painter and the second as a writer. These visits gave her an experience that the critic Nguyễn Trung described as being a watershed in defining her confidence to work in the installation format.[93] Since 1997, and particularly since she retired from official duties in 2002, she has explored installation art often using Vietnamese handicrafts as a way of both documenting their existence and as part of her search for a Vietnamese identity. Like Nguyễn Minh Phương, she has used the art of ethnic minorities as an inspiration.[94] In relation to the way in which she considers that

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[90] Bùi Như Hương & Trần Hậu Tuấn, 2001, p. 93

[91] This work is amongst the politically driven art that is often mislabelled as socialist realism after work found in the art of the Soviet Union and China. In the author's opinion, while the subject matter of such paintings is politically driven, the styles vary and in this particular case, it is painted in a style that has more in common with cubism than the socialist realist style from Russia and it shows the enemy as pitiful humans rather than the Vietnamese as heroic victors.

[92] Bradford Edwards, 'A Study in Contrasts', *Vietnam Investment Review*, June 9-15,1997, p. 6

[93] Unpublished manuscript, Nguyễn Trung, 'The Case for Dang Thi Que', 15.8.1998

[94] Information given to the author by the artist in 2002.

Vietnamese artists can negotiate a path between tradition and modernity, she wrote in an article for the 1999 APT:

> Our choice is to accept selectively, as a necessity, the influences of modernist and post-modernist art from the outside world and retain, as a constant value, our original artistic traditions with their spiritual core, while keeping in mind that a national tradition can only be preserved and further developed when it is level with international standards. [95]

In this statement, Đặng Thị Khuê, suggests a way forward for Vietnamese artists who grapple with the issue of how to engage in the contemporary art world without loosing sight of their roots or being accused of being derivative. There is a parallel between the dilemma faced by artists today, over how far they should engage with modern art in an international arena, and that faced by the Vietnamese mandarinate and aristocracy when they were exposed to 'modern' aspects of French civilization in the nineteenth century. For today's artists, if there are no changes in art practice which reflect the changes in Vietnamese society as a whole, then there is a danger that the art will be viewed as irrelevant, both within Vietnam and internationally.

*Soul,* (fig.6.19) shown at the Goëthe Institute, Hà Nội is one of the installations that Kraevskaia considers uses a 'play/game like art (which) is a special model of reality … the mechanism of the game's effect lies not in the simultaneous co-existence of different meanings, but in providing the possibility of other meanings'. [96] I consider that this type of play/game is an extension of the model that was used in the past by some ceramic artisans as discussed in Chapter 3, in that it incorporates the spatial element in which the work is shown. With some pre-twentieth century ceramic pieces, such as those used in ritual situations, their relationship to the whole site of the ritual would be a part of their extended meaning. The piece gains significance through liturgical use as well as through its form and decoration. As discussed in relation to the work of Vũ Dân Tân, this model is also associated with the

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[95] Đặng Thị Khuê in Beyond the Future: The Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, exh.cat., 1999, p.162

[96] Natasha Kraevskaia, 2004, p.3

transgression of the distinction between high and low art, between oil painting and Vietnamese cultural forms. According to Kraevskaia, *Soul*, created an atmosphere of intangible connections that were in keeping with the artist's philosophical statement concerning 'Plato's postulates about the soul being something timeless and indestructible and which constitutes ultimate reality.'[97]

Returning to the installations of Nguyễn Bảo Tòan, *Đánh đu* (*The Swing*), 1994, (fig 6.19) was part of the first installation art in Vietnam, *Earth by Fire*. Apart from various reports by critics, some of which have been mentioned earlier, all that remains in the public domain of the installation are photos, such as reproduced here, from which we can no longer make any statements about the relationships involved in the work as a whole. However, from this photograph, and with some corroboration from the artist, we can elicit that he is engaging in a symbolic usage that is so much part of the artistic world of the Vietnamese. The two anthropomorphized pots, suspended on a wooden bench, call to mind the shelves in farmer's houses where similar ceramic pots are used to store food and liquids. Through their placement and anthropomorphized shapes, in addition to the red colour of the 'shelf', they also refer to lovers on a swing. For the artist, the whole is a metaphor for lovemaking.[98]

In Western art, the sexual references in Fragonard's *The Swing* c.1767, are well known, but what, in the Vietnamese context, makes Toàn's more abstracted image of the unglazed brown pots so evocative of the passion of young love? As noted in Chapter 1, many village festivals were founded in fertility rituals to ensure an abundant harvest and many children, while others are related to taboos. For centuries in Vietnam there have been numerous games with sexual connotations that are played at village festival times. The swinging game, is one such game that is still played in festivals in the Red River Delta area.

Amongst the different types of swings in Vietnam, the one referred to in Toàn's work and in the poem below, is a swing made of bamboo.(fig. 6.20) The poles that hold the seat are suspended from a bamboo framework. A young couple stands on the swing 'seat' facing each

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[97] Natasha Kraevskaia, 2004, p.6

[98] Interview with the Nguyễn Bảo Toàn, Hà Nội, January 2002

other and propel themselves backwards and forwards. A 17th century record noted that Vietnamese village festivals had a 'swing on an engine made of a bamboo' and that the villagers 'gourmandize and debauch to excess during the festivals'.[99] Prizes are given to those couples who succeed in bringing the bamboo poles of the swing to a position parallel with the ground.[100]

One of Vietnam's most remarkable poets, Hồ Xuân Hương, wrote a poem entitled 'The Swing'. Writing in the late eighteenth century, her poetry conformed to the established poetic structure of the time, but her innovative themes often dealt with women and their lives. Hồ Xuân Hương also had a remarkable genius for double entendre: the literal meaning was accompanied by a sexual, (or obscene, according to some commentators) reading. For example, the Vietnamese word for 'swing', *đu*, when said with a different tone, translates as the colloquial word for lovemaking. While non-Vietnamese speakers miss out on all the subtleties of meaning and word play possible in the Vietnamese version of the poem, some of Hồ's saucy wit can be gathered from this translation.

> Glory be to whoever so pleasantly placed the four pillars!
>
> One lot to mount and balance, the other to look up watching.
>
> The lad arching his crane's knees strains his loins
>
> The girl curving her wasp's waist braces her wide haunches.
>
> Four peach pink pantaloons a-threshing in the breeze,
>
> Two pairs of legs jerk taut two by two.
>
> Now those who play such vernal games, how many understand:
>
> When wellhead stakes are down, shaft holes are left void.[101]

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[99] S. Barron in Pinkerton, J. A general collection of the best and most interesting voyages and travels in most parts ofthe world: many of which are now first translated into English, 1808-1814, vol 9, p.673

[100] P. Huard, & M.Durand, *Viet- Nam, Civilization and Culture*, n.d. p. 290

[101] Nguyễn Khăc Viện & Hữu Ngọc, *Vietnamese Literature*, n.d. p. 327

Just as Hồ Xuân Hương's poems dealt with sexuality by linguistic and metaphorical means though using familiar imagery, so Tòan's pots, through their direct manner of construction and with a subtle artifice, stemming from the pots themselves rather than imposed by some technical cleverness, speak to us directly in their anthropomorphic way.

Both Hồ's poems and Tòan's pots contain aspects of the same aesthetic of the *đình* carvings of village life, which are executed with directness and lack of artifice. The carvings, poems and Tòan's pots are not bound by the conventions that constrain more formal religious or court related art. Such qualities – directness and lack of artifice – are frequently cited by Vietnamese writers as invoking the fundamental nature of their society: the life of the village. Hồ's poem, 'The Swing', when read literally, reflects an aspect of village life. When read in a vernacular manner, it has a more earthy meaning. Tòan's 'swing' of farmer's pots on rice straw can also be interpreted in a number of ways. The unglazed, low-fired pots have many possible uses in the farmer's household where they are often stored on hanging shelves, similar to the hanging red board in *The Swing*. Moreover, the straw can be used for animal fodder, fuel, thatch, or maybe a love nest: as mentioned, Tòan ultimately intended the piece as a metaphor for lovemaking.

In Nguyễn Bảo Tòan's subsequent installations the conceptual relationships between the objects and the site are more nuanced. For example in his fourth solo exhibition in 1999, the installation, *Rằm Tháng Bảy, The 15th Day of the 7th Lunar Month,* the artist referred to the annual Buddhist festival and the funeral rites of minority people, as well as making a tribute to Vietnamese war dead. In this particular festival rituals are performed for wandering souls: those who died away from the family.[102] Artists in other Southeast Asian countries have used the same theme in their work, for instance Roberto Villanueva's installation *Soul Offering* of 1990 mentioned earlier in this chapter, was dedicated to those who lost their lives in the Pinatubo eruption and the Malaysian artist, Liew Kung Yu created installations entitled *Hungry Ghost Festival*, in both 1995, and 1996.[103]

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[102] *Vu Lan* or *Lê xâ vaong nhân*- literally the festival to forgive wandering ghosts.

[103] Art in Southeast Asia 1997: Glimpses into the Future, exh. cat. , 1997, pp.53 & 58

Bảo Toàn used this installation to remember the soldiers who died in the Second Indochina War. On a very personal level, one of Bảo Tòan's brother's was killed in that war and his body was never found. Another brother was wounded.[104] For Western viewers, the installation also had the ironic connection with the campaign for the return for American soldiers missing in action. This had been one of the major diplomatic stumbling blocks to the removal of the US trade embargo and re-establishment of diplomatic relations with the USA. The appalling figures of 300,000 Vietnamese missing in action and 2,211Americans during that war, make it not surprising that a Vietnamese artist has addressed this frightful unfinished business of war in his art work.[105] Prior to *đôi mới* such subject matter would not have been acceptable, and Bảo Tòan has circumventated a direct expression of these losses in combining it with referrences to an annual festival. Another of Bảo Tòan's installations, called *Đồng Đội* (*Teamship*) held at Nhà Sàn on October the first 2000, involved the ritual burning of hundreds of rubber sandals used by the North Vietnamese soldiers. The sandals were inscribed with a telephone number provided by the government for information about soldiers who were missing in action. As part of this installation, Bảo Tòan incorporated a mixed media work of lacquer and ceramics, also entitled *Đồng Đội*, which was shown at the National Fine Art exhibition of 2000. (fig. 5.14) The latter work, shown in isolation, was much less critical of the government and of the war in general than the act of burning the sandals.

Returning to a discussion of the installation *Rằm Tháng Bảy, The 15th Day of the 7th Lunar Month* , the exhibition space was divided between two rooms. One room was paved with votive money (fig.6.21) and clay incense sticks of 20 to 30 centimetres in height, resembling human shapes were placed in bowls and arranged like graves in a Martyrs'cemetery.[106] On the four walls were scenes of Hell with clay effigies bound with ropes waiting to be freed. The second room contained a ritual space for offerings in the centre of the room while animals from the horoscope were located around the walls.(fig.6.22) The two rooms appear

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[104] Interview with the artist 29 January, 2000

[105] Jessica Harrison-Hall, *Vietnam Behind the Lines: Images from the War*, 2002, p.7 gives these figure in addition to the statistics that between 1959 and 1975, more than 2,000,000 Vietnamese , 200,000 Cambodian, 100,000 Laotian, 58,000 American and many other Koreans, Thai, Australian and New Zealanders lost their lives.

[106] Some other clay 'soul' figures in this exhibition were 80cm in height.

to complement each other in that the first room refers to the official acknowledgement of this particular ritual and of the cemeteries for the war dead, whereas the second room is redolent of the non-official, shamanistic rituals associated with minority people. This interpretation is borne out by the artist's interest in the cult of mothers or female mediums.[107] Bảo Toần also used sound in this installation.

As well as the obvious Buddhist connection of this particular ceremony, the objects in both rooms and the space itself were embedded with Daoist references. Besides the animals of the zodiac, there were numerous references to heaven, earth and the axis mundi: Daoist notions of space in which the cosmos can be configured on either a macrocosmic or microcosmic scale and the complementarities between the two rooms The square space for the altar, the printed squares on which the bowls were placed and the fact that the whole assemblage of the bowls in the first room was a square, underlines this interpretation. The circular bowls are microcosmic versions of the heaven and the central circular altar in the second room performed the same function. Completing the metaphor are the ceramic souls/ incense sticks and the central post of the altar with the adjacent mountain-like shape, which in turn was placed in a tray, emphasizing the connection between earth and heaven. In Daoist terms the tray would represent the sea. Stein discusses the cosmological significance of the pillar axis and its parallel in the human body, as well as its relationship in spatial terms to heaven, earth and the watery underworld, as the connection between life and death. [108] This interpretation is paralleled in Bảo Tòan's utilization of these concepts in his installation. The shapes used by Bảo Tòan and their placement in this installation form a distillation of the essence of the cosmos in their relative smallness and it is this miniaturization that Stein would argue places them in a magical or mythic position:

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[107] Interview with the artist 29 January, 2000

[108] Rolf A. Stein, The World in Miniature: Container Gardens and Dwellings in Far Eastern religious Thought, 1990, p.241-246

-this raises it from the level of imitative reality and puts it in the domain of the only true reality: mythical space. Magical instruments share the nature of a work of art; the work of art shares that of a toy.[109]

Many of Tòan's works refer to ritual: ancient practices such as altars, shrines and community celebrations, which often, in turn, reflect his experiences during the years 1963 to1973 when he lived with the minority people during the war. The graves and sculptures of these people fascinated Bảo Tòan because to him, although they appear to be simple, they are fundamentally full of the potential of the spirits and of their purpose or function.[110] The soul-figure shapes used in this installation and which he continues to deploy seem to have parallels with the wooden figures used by Tây Nguyên people who use such ancestor figures as markers of sacred space.(fig. 6.23) Some of the ethnic minorities continue to construct a supernatural pillar in order that the soul can be precisely directed to the heavens.[111] In addition, the use of hanging lanterns which are seen in many of his works as in fig. 6.24. is a direct reference to these people.[112] Can Bảo Tòan be accused of cultural imperialism within national boundaries? Despite the political ramifications associated with various minority groups in Vietnam, in this instance the accusation is difficult to sustain on a personal level in view of the formative years that the artist spent with a group of minority people.

In his installation works Bảo Toàn transposes everyday objects into a different space and imbues them with a new internal meaning/logic which can either be related to a Daoist world view, village culture, life cycles/transformations or Vietnamese literature. In appropriating festival imagery in his installations he is working with both historical and contemporary issues in a manner adopted by other installations artists: for instance, Cai Guo Qiang (b.1957, China), uses gunpowder in installations that reference both Chinese history and the contemporary place in a post-modern mimicry of aspects of the past.

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[109] Rolf A. Stein, 1990, p.52

[110] Interview with the artist 29 January, 2000

[111] Phan Cẩm Thượng, Điêu khắc cổ Việt Nam, Ancient Sculpture of Vietnam, 1997, p.22

[112] Interview with the artist 29 January, 2000

As previously mentioned, Nguyễn Trọng Đoan's installation *Lotus on Fire*, held at Tràng An Gallery in June and July 1997 is believed to be the first instance of an installation at a commercial gallery in Hà Nội. The setting up and opening of the installation was recorded on video by the collaborator and gallery owner Nguyễn Xuân Tiệp, who had previously seen installations at the Asia Pacific Triennial.[113] Tiệp collaborated on the creation of the spaces in which the ceramics were placed. The exhibition took three days to install and the works came from a period of six years work. Fig. 6.25 shows some works from the installation that remained for some time at Tràng An gallery: works that were referred to by Hương and Tuấn as representing the planets and who also viewed the whole installation as evoking an 'Eastern Universe'.[114]

Two floors of the gallery were involved: one section was a river of sand with a number of tall, organic, columnar pieces, all deeply worked, such as fig. 6.26, which were placed on and around green coloured sand into which lines were traced. The lines both echoed the designs on the pots and revealed the natural sand colour. The upper section of the gallery included a pond filled with water, fish and water hyacinths. The perimeter of the pond was edged with small everyday unglazed terracotta pots and various large lamps, in Đoan's signature style, ( fig.1) were displayed on 'islands' within the pond. Rather than being placed on shelves or plinths, the sculptural ceramics were placed in a constructed environment which created a nuanced site embedded with Daoist references. During the exhibition opening all the electrical lights were turned off and the lamps were lit, casting shadows through their varied shapes. *Lotus on Fire* created an environment in which the viewers were removed from the commercial gallery space and immersed in signs redolent of the village – the pond, the lights, and once again, Daoist references to the elements, fire, water, earth, and air. This installation involved all four of the modes mentioned at the beginning of this chapter in addition to the tendency for installation artists to create a form of utopia.

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[113] The author saw the 100 minute video in 1999. All press reviews praised the show, which according to Nguyễn Xuân Tiệp, was the most successful he had ever had. Interview, March 1999.

[114] Bùi Như Hương & Trần Hậ Tuấn, 2001, p.92

Nguyễn Trọng Đoan is an artist who has collaborated with others in creating public sculpture such as the Freedom monument in Nha Trang, (Fig. 2) and with his painter son on single ceramic works. ( fig 6.27) However, he has not continued to work with installations.

Nguyễn Khắc Quan does not worked with installations in the same manner as other Vietnamese installation artists, however, his works have been displayed in a similar manner to those of Gwyn Hanssen-Pigott, in that a number of ceramic forms are placed together creating relationships between them. For example, his piece *Kén (Cocoons)* of 2001 (fig. 6.27) consists of a number of giant silkworm, cocoon-shaped ceramics balancing on bamboo 'silk filaments' ranging in height from 45 to 95 cms. This work resonates with some concerns of the so called 'Folk Aesthetics Exploitation' trend but does not resemble that style. The concerns are with the village, in that silk worm raising is a village activity, but more importantly for Quân are Daoist notions of the constant cyclical nature of existence, metamorphosis and a personal concern of Quân's which is the notion of sacrifice. In this work, the reference is due to the fact that in order for the silk filament to be retrieved, generally the worm is killed. Other works by Quân refer to sacrifice, for example, a series of works called *Hero's* which relate to pregnancy and the dangers that it can entail for women. Although these cocoons work together as a group, their placement, and thus their relationship to each other, is not a crucial element of the work. These installations, as with the still life's of Gwyn Hanssen-Piggott, do not dematerialize the objects but focus attention on the relationships between them rather than between them and the site.

Similarly, in the humorous work of the *Giant teacups* (fig.1.23), the ceramics on their rattan stools speak to each other in the way in which a couple engage in conversation as they sip their tea. However, Quân reveals the underlying nature of the encounter, the social conventions which disguise and control baser instincts, through his depiction of the naked figures painted on the cups.

## Summary

Installation art has roots in both the West and Asia. Its appearance in Euro-America is linked with the conceptual concerns of post-modernism, whereas its Asian connections, whilst aligned with the stance taken by artists from Japan with *Gutai* and *Mono Ha*, are seen by

some Southeast Asian artists as connected with pre-colonial ceremonies and rituals.

From an Asian perspective, oil painting is seen as intimately associated with the West whereas Installation art, which can use a range of media, including ceramics, validates local forms of artistic expression. With their layers of symbolic and philosophical meanings the media chosen are frequently culturally potent items and are seen by Southeast Asian artists as ideal markers of national identity: as a way of engaging in the modern while retaining one's own cultural identity. The artists have identified aspects of their culture that are integral and thus less susceptible to change and selected them to retain an aspect of national identity. A process of selection that fits with that suggested by Whitmore.[115] As a result, installation art in Vietnam appears to have more to do with an aestheticization of local practices or a redeployment of cultural events within a non-religious setting. Some of the societal mores that have inhibited expressions of individuality have been broken by installation artists who have taken the practice to a more conceptual level. On the other hand, an exploration of Daoist philosophy in relation to the perception of space and change, gives a different conceptual reading to the way in which some installation practice can be interpreted. Finally, the notion that the use of media not previously associated with art involves a type of play that fits well with the Vietnamese attitude to the creation of ceramics that are free of artifice but, in their form and function may embody a series of different meanings .

In Vietnam, the uptake by artists of the format of installation art lagged somewhat behind their Southeast Asian colleagues, especially those from Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines. The causes for this gap come, as one might expect, from both outside and from within Vietnam. Due to Vietnam's period of isolation from most of the western art world and a government imposed stricture against anything other than a socialist realist attitude towards art, artists have been relatively slow in adopting a western style conceptual approach to installation work. Another factor is that a significant percentage of internationally recognised Asian artists have studied, lived for some time or continue to reside in the West. While there are a number of Vietnamese artists who live in France and other European nations, as well as

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[115] John K.Whitmore, 'Foreign influences and the Vietnamese Cultural Core: a discussion of the pre-modern period,' in Truong Buu Lam, *Borrowings and Adaptations in Vietnamese Culture*, 1987, p. 47

those who made the United States their home after 1975, their position internationally has been somewhat problematic. Overseas Vietnamese artists have until recently not been recognised in Vietnam. Whether they have made a career in France, the United States or Australia, they have been perceived as wishing to dissociate themselves from the current regime in Vietnam, rendering their position somewhat problematic. Since 2004 however, there has been a more favourable attitude to *Việt Kieu* or returning Vietnamese.

Finally, as in nearly all forms of installation practice, items from the everyday world are redeployed in the service of high art. Thus installation art is a blurring between art and life that is seen by many Asian artists, including some in Vietnam, to have predated European and colonial art practices.

# Conclusion

As has been seen in this study, there are cultural practices in Vietnam that have developed over millennia, which represent both autochthonous developments and an amalgamation of introduced cultural forms, such as those associated with Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism and Hinduism. Ceramic works produced over the centuries have reflected these varying interests and influences. Prior to the twentieth century, the changes that occurred in the form and style of ceramics were driven largely by technological advances, changes in ritual or by the requirements of trade. However, the group of ceramic artists that have emerged in Vietnam during the last decades of the twentieth century have responded to a different set of imperatives, some of which are essentially common to those which saw the emergence of a generation of artist potters in the west. These common conditions are a reaction to a perceived loss in cultural knowledge due to industrialization of many of the processes involved in ceramics, a wider knowledge of the history, processes and design principles related to ceramics, through the introduction of formal education in the field, and an engagement by studio potters and ceramic sculptors in the art market.

There are additional factors in sculptural ceramics in Vietnam that have made this move from a village craft-based practice to an art practice more nuanced and complex. A major influence has been the introduction of a system of communist government and the recent changes within that system. Under this system of governance, the societal strata that originally placed ceramicists within a certain ranking was replaced by a theoretical equality, augmented by educational opportunities. Another aspect of the profound political changes and their implications is the heightened desire in Vietnam to highlight signs of the national in their art. Driven initially by political expediency, this has been heightened by contemporary artists' desire to not appear to be derivative of western forms of artistic expression. While political encouragement to accentuate the national, especially art forms associated with the village and with the ancient Đông sơn culture, has been problematic, artists have nevertheless used these references as a rich source of inspiration. For these artists, these references can constitute the essence of what it is to be Vietnamese or represent the idea of Vietnam in their art work. The more recent changes in the political system have allowed the development of an art world and art market in which the ceramic sculptors are participating.

The role played by the Industrial Fine Arts University, with opportunities for professional training in ceramics and sculpture, teaching positions and a research institute, has been of fundamental importance for the majority of the ceramic sculptors considered in this study. The other institution that has played a major role as educator and patron is the Museum of Fine Arts. Changing attitudes in the role that government should play in the arts is having a considerable impact on the directions that young artist potters can take. While there was a short period in which government stipends provided a sufficient income for ceramic sculptors to be free to practice their art, altered circumstances are forcing the new generation to focus on profit making activities at the same time as developing their 'own voice'. It is to be hoped that this economic necessity does not eliminate one of the enduring aspects of Vietnamese ceramic style, namely, the tendency to playfulness. An area for further research could be an exploration of the nature and role that this tendency performs in Vietnamese aesthetics.

Another aspect that has not been fully developed within this thesis are the connections and parallels between ceramics in Japan and Vietnam. In addition, a comprehensive empirical survey of the existent historical ceramic sculpture in Vietnam would provide a valuable research asset.

One of the most striking features of the work of the ceramic sculptors and, indeed, all artists in contemporary Vietnam, is the tendency to hybridity. Perhaps this is a major factor in the *Kunstwollen,* or spirit, of the present age. Such hybridity, quoting freely from the past and including personal as well as symbolic meanings, was not possible previously. Even the more stringent years of communism have failed to erase underlying beliefs in Shamanism, Daoism and Buddhism, while an engagement with the West has encouraged an overt expression of the individual and personal in art.

Where is Vietnamese contemporary sculpture? Does it actually exist? This question was asked by Nguyễn Quân in 1999.[1] This study has shown that sculptural ceramics is certainly a growing field and is positioned to play a role in the future of contemporary sculpture within Vietnam.

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[1] Nguyễn Quân in, Không Gian Mới Điêu Khắc Đương Đại Việt Nam,"New Space" Vietnamese Contemporary Sculpture. exh. cat 1999, no page numbers.