

CHAPTER 4:

VISUAL ARTS OF THE REPUBLIC OF

VIỆT-NAM (THE SOUTH) 1954-1975:

THE ‘OTHER’



Figure 1: Mai Chửng, *The War*, 1968, courtesy of the artist family.

This chapter will study the development of visual arts in the Republic of Việt-Nam (the South for short) during the period 1954-1975. Visual arts in the South developed from the foundations that had been established by the Fine Arts College of Indochina (FACI) in the colonial time. The National Fine Arts College of Saigon (NFACS) established in 1954 was the continuation of the FACI; throughout its twenty-one years of existence, the NFACS endorsed traditional Vietnamese art by focusing on customary themes and media. In their ongoing drive toward modernity, southern artists widely practiced abstraction as a new artistic expression and, given the South's extensive contact with American culture during the war, the modernising impulse has often been associated with this influence. However, the extent to which this has been the primary influence on southern art has been constantly debated, particularly since the South inherited a great deal of French aesthetic doctrine, which was considered by most southern artists to be more sophisticated than American values. The paintings of this period called 'Saigonese art' have been neglected in Việt-Nam but they are well known elsewhere, particularly in the private art collections of Americans who worked in Saigon during the war.

A comparison between the quality and standing of 'Saigonese art' and the art of the North will be drawn in order to emphasise their differences. Vietnamese history reveals that the northern victory over the South, secured them a prominent position in the documentation of art history. Furthermore, Saigonese art history, written by Communist historians, has been marginalised and is represented in the title of this chapter as the 'other'.

The fall of Saigon in 1975 put visual arts of the period in an untenable position, with most of the artworks either destroyed or relocated outside Việt-Nam. Neglecting the art history of South Việt-Nam from 1954-1975, distorts the nation's history and de-contextualises the successive periods. Most modern art practices of this era occurred in Saigon, therefore I nominate it 'Saigonese art' and will discuss it in relation to the social context in which Saigonese artists lived and practiced.

The analysis of Saigonese art is based on evidence from several art collections outside Việt-Nam, of which, the most remarkable, belongs to John and Marinka Bennett in Virginia, U.S.A. Through a careful consideration of the way various influences were taken-up and reworked through Saigonese art and the political and cultural factors shaping the emergence of this distinct genre, more complex notions of modernity will be explored, than is found in current accounts.

A YOUNG NATION AT WAR:

It was difficult for Việt-Nam to make a future political decision without being subjected to international pressure. Within the context of Soviet expansion, the 1948 establishment of two Koreas and the 1949 victory of Mao Zedong in China, the ‘domino theory’¹ speculated that if the whole of Việt-Nam fell to Communism then the West would lose the entire region.

The 1954 Geneva Accord, which partitioned Việt-Nam in July of that year, was influenced by international aims, rivalry in territorial expansion and political argument. The nation was divided into two parts along the 17th parallel, which saw the emergence of the Democratic Republic of Việt-Nam in the North, supported by the Communist bloc nations and the Republic of Việt-Nam in the South, backed by the United States of American and its allies.

The First Republic of Việt-Nam (1954-1963), headed by Ngô Đình Diệm, declared that its priority was to stop Communist expansion into the South and create a ‘free’ new nation, with American and allied support. The concept that Communism be contained and that South Việt-Nam should be the limit of Communist expansion into South East Asia, was the basis of U.S. intervention. After the signing of the Geneva Accord, approximately a million Vietnamese citizens fled the Communist controlled Resistance areas in the North and migrated to the South. The relocation was described as, ‘an election by feet,’² which included those who experienced

¹ For full explanation, see *Webster’s New World Dictionary of the Vietnam War*, p. 104.

² Vo Phien, 1992, *Literature in South Vietnam 1954-1975*, Vietnamese Language & Culture Publications, Melbourne p. 106.

horrific land reform and administrative victimisation. Others felt apprehensive due to their religious background, of which Christians were the majority.

With US and allied support, the First Republic was granted major national development programs: Atomic Centre of Dalat (1963); Hà Tiên cement factory (1964); Saigon-Biên Hòa Highway and Biên Hoà industrial zone, to mention a few. Rural workers were given access to tractors, cultivating machinery, fertilizers, wells and irrigation pumps. Living standards and education in the rural areas was improved, through the development of hygiene programs and schools. City transport also changed with the importation of modern bicycles, motorcycles and vehicles for private use. However, despite the many civil programs, political and military activities continued to control daily life. The rural developments of the late 1950s did not counterbalance the growing instability, created by Communist infiltration and Buddhist opposition, in the early 1960s to allied occupation.

The First Republic accommodated not only anti-Communists but also pro-Communist clandestine cells, appointed by the Communist Party to remain in the South. These were cadres and soldiers who had fought during the first Indochina war and regarded the Việt-Minh with patriotic admiration. Others, mostly peasants, with relatives who had regrouped to the North, were often Communist sympathisers. The anti-Communist policy of Ngô Đình Diệm's regime, targeted individuals in these categories for 'countryside-pacification,' which usually meant political harassment, and led to uprisings in the countryside. In 1959, after the U.S. and British consultation, the Strategic Hamlet program was implemented, in order to isolate Communist elements from peasants. These programs, however, uprooted peasants from their villages and infuriated the rural population.

In December 1960, the National Liberation Front of South Việt-Nam was established under Hà Nội's remote control, with the intention of overthrowing Ngô Đình Diệm and to reunify the nation under Communism. In the following year, this front helped give rise to the People's Liberation Armed Forces, usually known as Việt-Cộng, to carry out guerrilla resistance. Meanwhile, rural areas became

increasingly unstable, with peasants and farmers being taxed and harassed by both the South Vietnamese government and Việt Cộng. The neutralists, who did not want Communism or a U.S. alliance, also participated on the political stage and in many cases, weakened the South's position against its enemy. For instance the Cao Đài sect, established in the 1920s and the Hoà Hảo sect, established in 1939, were anti-Communist but in 1955, they organised their own militia to combat Ngô Đình Diệm's army, only to be crushed by his regime.

Diệm's suppression of political oppositions led to serious splits in the newly formed southern nation, which was fighting both the northern Communists and its own internal conflicts. His eradication of the Bình Xuyên gang was a death sentence to Hồ Hữu Tường, a southern cultural figure and former Trotskyite,³ who collaborated with the dissident sects but subsequently, held a strong anti-Communist stance. The condemnation of Tường triggered international protest that succeeded in saving his life.

In the later years of his presidency, Diệm gradually incited greater political opposition, by focusing on military activities, at the expense of economic and social reforms that would have met the growing needs of a new nation. In the early 1960s, his government became increasingly unbearable to Vietnamese citizens and the American administration alike, mainly because of its resistance to political reforms, the appointment of his relatives to government positions and conflict with Buddhists. When the 73-year old monk, Thích Quảng Đức, immolated himself in central Saigon he, "made an indelible stamp on America's collective consciousness and rudely awakened the Kennedy administration to the gravity of the Buddhist crisis."⁴ Four months later, on November 1963, President Ngô Đình Diệm was assassinated in an American supported military coup.⁵

³ Hồ Hữu Tường suggested to Hồ Chí Minh to take a neutral political path in order to avoid Communism as well as Western intervention. His book *Tương Lai Văn Hoá Việt Nam* (The Future of Vietnamese Culture) published by Huệ Minh in 1965 reveals his view.

⁴ Howard Jone, 2003, *Death of a Generation. How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War*, Oxford University Press, p. 269.

⁵ Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, Penguin Books, p. 295.

In the following two years, South Việt-Nam experienced numerous coups d'etats, organised by military figures and in the final coup in 1965, General Nguyễn Văn Thiệu became Chief of State. In 1967, Thiệu was elected president, then re-elected in a mono-candidate election in 1971. The fragile Second Republic (1967-1975) was formed and sucked into the vortex of U.S. involvement.

The incessant coups in Saigon produced political turmoil that weakened southern opposition to the Communists and forced President Johnson of America to commit more troops, thereby escalating the war.⁶ The first American troops were sent to South Việt-Nam in March 1965 and by December of the same year, reached 200,000. In 1966, the American presence had increased to 400,000 and in 1968, to more than half a million. They were accompanied by 60,000 combined allied troops, from Australia, New Zealand, Korea, Thailand and the Philippines. The presence of foreign troops built a negative social context, mainly prostitution and drugs, accompanied by bewilderment. Phạm Duy, the most famous composer in the South, noted:

The appearance of Americans in South Việt-Nam is serious; everyone is concerned about a cultural invasion. People do not like Communism, but they do not like American culture either, in particular they do not want American life entering into Vietnamese society.⁷

Hà Nội and the People's Liberation Armed Forces orchestrated the Tết Offensive in 1968, in an attempt to bring an outright victory over the southern Army and its American allies. Twenty-seven out of 44 provincial capitals in South Việt-Nam were under fire, with more than 1,100 American troops unexpectedly suffering fatalities. For a period, the Việt Cộng held the American Embassy, which shocked the American public, who subsequently demanded an end to the war they thought they were winning but, now, appeared to be losing. President Johnson shifted his strategy, by introducing "Vietnamisation of the war," a program, which would see

⁶ See Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, Chapter 10: *Disorder and Decision*, Penguin Books, p.349-386.

⁷ Phạm Duy, 1990, *Hồi Ký Phạm Duy, Thời Phân Chia Quốc Cộng* (Diary of the Nationalist-Communist Divided Time), Phạm Duy, Midway City, California, p. 276

the South Vietnamese army fighting the battles and the gradual withdrawing of American troops. The population was devastated with the suffering from physical and mental loss and being constantly relocated. Southern Nationalists were impelled to resist the intervention of foreign armies, in fear that national identity might be lost or distorted. In the early 1970s, when conscription was massively increased in South Việt-Nam, to fill the gap caused by the American withdrawal, casualties affected nearly every family. As a result, student and neutralist anti-war movements initiated the concept of a ‘civil war’, most noticeable in the anti-war songs composed by Trịnh Công Sơn (1939-2001), regarded by many as a Vietnamese Bob Dylan.⁸ The south, therefore, was at war all the time, in the battlefields against its opponents and in the society against cultural corrosion and assimilation, as well as the internal conflicts between fellow ‘hawks’ and ‘doves’. South Việt-Nam was so weakened by external and internal attacks that it fell into Communist hands on the 30th April 1975, with the ‘Fall of Saigon’.

There are various phrases used to refer to the second Indochina war: the North call it ‘The American war’ to emphasise a hostile invasion of Vietnamese territory, the South call it ‘The anti-Communist war’, to express their political aim, and to the West it is the ‘The Vietnam war’, simply because it occurred in Việt-Nam. Whether it is seen as a civil war, an ideological war or a patriotic war, it was a battlefield representative of diverse international powers, which saw Russian anti-air missiles against American B-52s and Chinese AK 47ss against American M16s.

After the fall of Saigon, visual arts and literature in South Việt-Nam was marginalised and under the banner of a Cultural Revolution, all publications were banned because they represented ‘imperialist and decadent culture.’ However, it is critical to the aesthetic history of Việt-Nam that art of the South is included, particularly in tracing the complex political and cultural changes. Furthermore, many southern artists continued their practice in Saigon and played an important role in decoding Socialist Realism, after its introduction in the late 1970s.

⁸ Joan Baez, an American folk singer, suggested this comparison when she was introduced to Trịnh Công Sơn. *A World of Trịnh Công Sơn*, p. 371.

The Literary Milieu

In spite of the consequences of a merciless war, Saigonese art continued to develop breadth and quality, in the stimulating and experimental environment of southern society. Saigonese artists had contacts with the West, which gave them greater awareness than their colleagues in the North, of international art movements. However, despite the contacts Southerners had with Americans during the war, for the most part, artistic development in Indochinese aesthetics was French-inspired.



Figure 2: Trần Kim Hùng, *Fellowmen Building a New Hamlet*, 1963.

In many social aspects, there was a distinction between the First and Second Republic, due to the development of the war and the extent of international involvement. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, southern society was still in a ‘half-colonial’ state and the elite from colonial times still held power in all aspects of society. For instance, tertiary education was still conducted in French until the mid 1960s and the first choice of overseas further education continued to be France, especially in the arts.⁹ On the other hand, southern Vietnamese intellectuals, including those who migrated from the North in a spirit of rebellion, attempted to make a break with colonialism in order to build a new national culture, as in shown in *Fellowmen Building a New Hamlet*, 1963 (fig.2).

⁹ Lê Văn Đệ, Ngô Viết Thụ, Văn Đen, Đào Sĩ Chu, Nguyễn Văn Thế and Lê Ngọc Huệ are some graduates in visual arts from France.

This was clearly the case in literature of the time, through the establishment in 1956, of the journal *Sáng Tạo* (Creation), which announced a literary revolution, by declaring the demise of *Tự Lực Văn Đoàn* (The Self-Reliance Literary Group)¹⁰ and the birth of, “a new literature as today’s literature.”¹¹ Participants in *Creation* included writers and painters, whose art practices established foundations for the *Society of Young Saigonese Artists* in the Second Republic. *Creation’s* aggressive manner affronted Nhất Linh (Nguyễn Tường Tam), a leading figure of *The Self-Reliance Literary Group*. Nhất Linh responded, by founding *Văn Hoá Ngày Nay* (Today’s Culture) in 1958, and attracted a number of old and new writers. The literature of *The Self-Reliance Literary Group* was included in high school textbooks at the time, while in the North all publications of the group were banned. (Refer to Chapter 3). The two journals, *Creation* and *Today’s Culture* attacked each other publicly, yet both caught the attention of large number of readers. Other journals were subsequently published, such as *Bách Khoa* (Encyclopaedia), *Đại Học* (University) and *Quan Điểm* (Opinion). *Bách Khoa* was the longest surviving journal of the era (1957-1974), which began as a quarterly and then became a fortnightly magazine that accommodated anti-Communist writers such as Võ Phiến, Vũ Hoàng Chương and pro-Communist writers such as Vũ Hạnh¹² and Lữ Phương. Philosophy and art theories were presented with a forum for new ideas through the growth of journalism and publications. Đoàn Thêm’s books, *Searching for Beauty*, and, *Try to Learn about Painting*, were published in 1962 and 1965 respectively. The influential artist and art critic Thái Tuấn, regularly reviewed exhibitions, in support of emerging artists and the thriving fine arts of the South. Nguyễn Văn Trung’s long article, *Sartre in My Life*, was published successively in three issues of *Bách Khoa Thời Đại*.¹³ Surrealism was also widely cited in the magazine and in *Mỹ*

¹⁰ mentioned in Chapter 2, p. 91-92.

¹¹ Võ Phiến, 2000, *Văn Học Miền Nam Tổng Quan* (General View on Vietnamese Southern Literature) Văn Nghệ, California, p. 231.

¹² Vũ Hạnh is a Communist cadre installed in the South. He later published *Tin Văn* (Literature News) advocating for a pro-Communist view.

¹³ *Bách Khoa Thời Đại* magazine was first published in 1957 as *Bách Khoa* and in 1965 its name was extended.

Thuật (Arts) magazine. However, the doctrine of Socialist Realism in the North had no comparable canon in the South, where plurality of resources opened up new horizons and provided scope for diverse art theories and philosophy. Many writers and translators facilitated the popularity of Existentialism, particularly the works of Jean Paul Sartre, Karl Jasper, Albert Camus and Friedrich Nietzsche, which were translated and quoted in countless articles. Other foreign classics and modern novels from various languages were translated in large quantities Dostoyevsky, Hemmingway, Herman Hesse, Erich Remarque, Françoise Sagan, Leo Nicolayevitch Tolstoy, Boris Pasternak, and Alexandr Solzhenitsyn to mention but a few. These works and others like them, encouraged artists to experiment with their various art interests, but without any real relationship to the local context. Therefore, Saigonese art was inclined to open up new horizons (if time was on its side) but did not promote a particular ‘Vietnamese’ direction in visual art.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, when southern society was strained by the war, literature continued to flourish, despite the fact that writers were often preoccupied as conscripts to the battlefields. However, subsequent to war weariness, the assertive voices of a new beginning gradually gave way to cynicism, as the attitude of discontent and the search for something new, became the norm in artistic and literary circles.

Before the fall of Saigon in 1975, there were about a thousand printing houses and 150 publishing houses in Saigon alone, to meet the growth in journalism and literature.¹⁴ Approximately 40 daily newspapers were published in Saigon and, despite strong censorship applied throughout the period, voices of opposition were still heard, through mocking articles and caricatures.

¹⁴ Nguyễn Khắc Ngữ, *Những Ngày Cuối Cùng của Việt Nam Cộng Hoà* (The Last Days of the Republic of Vietnam), cited from Võ Phiến, *Literature in South Vietnam 1954-1975*, Vietnamese Language & Culture Publications, p.50.

The Saigon government applied no pressure for a national arts policy or any indoctrination that artists must follow and exhibitions opened weekly, all year round, without censorship before openings.¹⁵

The artists in South Viet-Nam today seem to be experimenting and a visit to the exhibitions often held in major cities may bring some surprising results. Painting is very popular among the Vietnamese and thousands of people turn out for exhibitions held almost weekly in Saigon.¹⁶

In addition, government officials who were asked to open an exhibition always purchased, one artwork out of their own pocket, as an act of courtesy. This became such a routine practice that many artists took it for granted until they faced the harsh reality after 1975.

Saigonese artists were deeply involved in this intellectual environment and in many cases they were writers, poets or military personnel at the same time. Tạ Tỵ (1922-2004) carried these three occupations for the period of 1954-1975. Lê Thành Nhơn, (1940-2002) was a military officer in the battlefield, before taking up a teaching post at three art institutes, Saigon, Huế and Nha Trang. Trịnh Cung (1939-) and Đinh Cường (1939-) were painters, poets, art lecturers and military officers. Southern artists were among the intelligentsia of the society and a Vietnamese poetic spirit became their obsession. Absorbed in southern society, where everyone had to live with and fight the war, Saigonese artists combined their creativity in visual arts with poetic features. In the following section, the social environment of southern society is discussed in greater detail. Changes in clothing and architecture are readily noticed and become a background for the shifting aesthetics in sculpture and paintings.

¹⁵ Interviews by Boi Tran Huynh with Mr. Nguyễn Văn Quyên, former Director of the Visual Arts Department of the Ministry of Education of Saigon regime of the period 1969-1974, and artists.

¹⁶ Ann Caddell Crawford, 1966, *Customs and Culture of Vietnam*, Charles E. Tuttle Co. Publishers of Rutland, Vermont & Tokyo, Japan, p.133.

The social milieu: the new versus the old

Early days of the First Republic were optimistic, with enthusiasm about building a new independent nation. Despite French support for armed militias to deter the young government, by 1955-1956 Ngô Đình Diệm had successfully eliminated several dissenting sects including, Bình Xuyên, Cao Đài and Hoà Hảo. American aid no longer passed through Paris, but went directly to Saigon and helped contribute to a thriving independent society. Many notable cultural activities occurred, including the establishment in 1954, of a National College of Fine Arts of Saigon and the Fine Arts College of Huế in 1959. At the National Cultural Conference in 1957, the cultural figure Đào Sĩ Chu, read a 19 paged paper on painting¹⁷ and the presidential adviser Ngô Đình Nhu, read a paper endorsing the concept of a Vietnamese culture based on nationalism and humanism. The annual *Spring Painting Award* was founded in 1959 and the First International Exhibition was held in 1962.

Different, if not opposing, opinions of the first president of the South, Ngô Đình Diệm emerged at this time. Some described him as, “cold, aloof, nepotistic and never revealing any propensity for democracy, preferring instead, to keep power in the hands of himself and his family.”¹⁸ Other accounts portrayed, “a shy, determined, frank, devout individual of extraordinary stature and intellect, whose incorruptibility was conceded even by his most violent opponents.”¹⁹ Despite conflicting views, both sides acknowledge his nationalist sentiments and resistance to American manipulation. By the end of the 1950s, Diệm’s government was recognised by many nations at embassy level and when he himself visited a

¹⁷ Đào Sĩ Chu, 1957, *Bàn Về Hội Họa Việt Nam* (Essay on Vietnamese Painting), p. 152-173, published by Xã Hội Ấn Quán.

¹⁸ Howard Jones, 2003, *Death of a Generation, How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War*, Oxford University Press, p.9.

¹⁹ Leo Cherne’s word, cited from Joseph G. Morgan, *The Vietnam Lobby: The American Friends of Vietnam 1955-1975*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, p. 17.

number of nations he was warmly welcomed as a “dynamic leader of a new political force in Asia.”²⁰

The natural and social environment of the South was influential in shaping southern characteristics, particularly their view of traditions and modernity. When the First Republic was establishing its administrative body, the people lived in a relatively relaxed agricultural environment, which had a more fertile and moderate climate than the North. Southerners did not have to struggle for food like their counterparts in the North, where both poor management of co-operatives and State control, led to food scarcity. The South was already acclimatised to the new, through its history of early colonialism and adoption of various foreign influences of the past, including Chàm, Khmer and Chinese, all which accelerated new approaches to technical, business and social changes. However, despite this openness to external influences, early attempts to establish nationhood tended toward tradition and became one of the key characteristics in the promotion of a national identity, based on the pride of a newly independent nation. Hồ Chí Minh, for example, never wore a traditional tunic whereas President Ngô Đình Diệm appeared in public with a black tunic and turban-like headwear, called khăn đóng (fig.3). President Ngô Đình Diệm even bestowed his high officials with sets of blue-grey silk tunics and black turbans as ritual attires.²¹ While urban society and even villagers adopted western clothing in the 1960s, the traditional tunic retained its symbolic significance and was not seen just as everyday attire.

²⁰ Joseph G. Morgan, *The Vietnam Lobby: The American Friends of Vietnam 1955-1975*, University of North Carolina Press, p.99.

²¹ Đoàn Thêm, ‘Những Ngày Không Quên’(Unforgettable Days), *Bách Khoa Thời Đại* n. 152, p.30.



Figure 3: Ngô Đình Diệm and Archbishop Daniel Mannix, photograph from *Táin Magazine*.



Figure 4: Henry Cabot Lodge saying good-bye to Vietnamese at the airport Tân Sơn Nhất, 1964, photograph by Stanley Karnow.

This traditional mode of dress was so in vogue that the American Ambassador in the Republic of Việt-Nam, Henry Cabot Lodge, appeared in public in 1964, wearing a Vietnamese tunic and a khăn đóng (fig.4). The image was aimed at presenting to the Vietnamese America's appreciation of their culture, in order to, as the American motto went, "win hearts and minds," for conducting the war.²²

²² Anne E. Blair, 1995, *Lodge in Vietnam*, chapter 1, Yale University Press.

Interestingly, in opposition to the image of national attire and the preservation of tradition, Madame Ngô Đình Nhu, whose husband was the President's brother and adviser, introduced a new fashion to the áo dài. The traditional áo dài had a high collar and a loose fitting tunic but the new áo dài of the 1960s, usually referred to as 'Madame Nhu's áo dài,' had a close fitting top and a controversial collar that showed the neck all way to the clavicle (fig.5). To foreigners, this collar made sense, given the tropical conditions, but conservatives saw it as too suggestive for Vietnamese women. Moreover, Madame Nhu's áo dài was so tightly fitted to her body that she was described as, "moulded into her dress like a dagger in its sheath."²³ However, through her overseas travels, she promoted the modified áo dài to a wider audience and helped this very traditional costume to become a subject of fashion.



Figure 5: Madame Nhu in the new áo dài, photograph from *Thế Giới Tự Do* magazine.

Up to the First Republic, Madame Nhu was a controversial figure on the political stage of the South and as Ngô Đình Diệm remained a bachelor all his life, Madame Nhu acted as the First Lady in functions at the presidential palace. Furthermore, she established the Women's Solidarity Movement, which trained women in basic

²³ Howard Jones, 2003, *Death of a Generation. How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War*, Oxford University Press, p. 293.

military skills and exhorted them, to denounce America for leading Vietnamese women into decadence.

As a female senator, she pushed through the National Assembly the Family Code and the Law for the Protection of Morality, which banned dancing, polygamy, contraceptive pills, gambling, cockfighting and even beauty contests. These prohibitions caused many complaints from American troops, who, in accordance to these new laws, were not permitted to even dance with Vietnamese women in private premises. Madame Nhu was being discerning in her intention, of preventing unrestrained hedonism that would follow in the wake of foreign troops in a society at war.

The end of the 1960s saw the Vietnamese áo dài changed again, with the introduction of the raglan cut to the sleeves. Dung Dakao's tailor shop owned by Mr. Dung, who had studied in France and wanted to promote the áo dài into a high couture, initiated the cut.²⁴ The raglan áo dài required less fabric and provided greater movement for the arms, without creasing around the armpit.²⁵ The áo dài used to reach to the heels or at least to the ankles, as implied by an American female writer in the 1960s:

The women of Viet-Nam have, in my opinion, one of the most beautiful national costumes in the world. It is called the "ao-dai." The over-dress is form-fitting to the waist, with long tight sleeves. At the waist, two panels extend front and back to cover the long satin trousers underneath. Correct fit dictates that the pants reach the sole of the foot, and are always slightly longer than the dress panels.²⁶

²⁴ Interview with Mrs Trần Ngọc Hạnh, the owner of Lys Couture (1968-1975) at 15 Đoàn Thị Điểm, Saigon.

²⁵ Trịnh Bách, 'Áo Dài Việt Nam' (Vietnamese Áo Dài), *Xưa Nay*, n.131, January 2003, p.46-48.

²⁶ Ann Caddell Crawford, *Customs and Culture of Vietnam*, Charles E. Tuttle Co. Publishers of Ruthland, p.50.



Figure 6: Singer Khánh Ly in áo dài, which was in the process of ‘shrinking to the knees’, photograph from the singer’s website www.khanhly.com.



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

By 1971-1972, the áo dài had shrunk nearly to the knees, as if in competition with the length of the new mini skirt (fig.6). In order to compensate for this shortening, the pants were flared to accommodate the graceful features of the áo dài (fig.7) but also related to the flared pants of the ‘hippy movement’.²⁷ The mini skirt was initially popularised by Mary Quant from London, in 1966 and became a Paris fashion before gaining popularity in America. However, many Vietnamese blamed the Americans for importing the provocative skirt, which saw instances of regulations set in place, to combat the ‘American decadence.’ Some private girl schools, where French influence was strong, like Marie Curie in Saigon or the Couvent des Oiseaux in Dalat, had a ritual of measuring the students’ skirts every Monday morning. Some public schools followed, by measuring the length of the áo dài flaps, to make sure that they hung at least 10 centimetres below the knees. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was humorously claimed that American soldiers liked the Vietnamese áo dài so much that they had it made for their wives at home.

²⁷ This explanation was also agreed by Mrs Trần Ngọc Hạnh, the owner of Lys Couture (1968-1975) at 15 Đoàn Thị Điểm, Saigon.

However, many forgot to send over the pants, and only recalled their mistake, when a note came from home saying, “the Vietnamese dress is extremely sexy.”²⁸

With American technical and financial aid, television was introduced to Việt-Nam in 1966 and shown through two channels: a Vietnamese program run by the government and an English program run by the U.S. Army. While the latter focused on American soldiers and agents working in Việt-Nam, it also exposed American culture to a Vietnamese audience, through films, music, soap operas and comedies, which influenced urban Vietnamese entertainers. Rock music, for instance, became so popular that it was suggested, there was a Vietnamisation of rock and roll²⁹ and the musician Phạm Duy blended folk music into beautiful songs of national themes. Together, this combination, of adopting the new and preserving tradition, shaped the character of southern arts.

TRADITION VERSUS MODERNITY:

A Re-invented Tradition in architecture

During the war, there was nostalgia for the ‘lost’ homeland North of the 17th parallel and a reaction to the coercive western values of the time, that saw tradition return to architecture, in the form of shapes and motifs from old pagodas and temples. On the other hand, the pressure of war impelled southern architects to adopt international styles, defined by modernity and practicality.

²⁸ A common joke known to many Southern Vietnamese during the war.

²⁹ Neil L. Jamieson, 1993, *Understanding Vietnam*, University of California Press, p. 329-331.



Figure 8: Independence Palace, Designed by Ngô Viết Thụ, 1966.



Figure 9: The calligraphic meaning of the main elevation, sourced from the Ngô Viết Thụ Library.

The most prominent figure in Vietnamese architecture at the time was Ngô Viết Thụ³⁰ (1926-2000), who graduated from L'Ecole des Beaux Arts de Paris in architecture, won the Grand Prize de Rome in 1955 and elected as an Honorary Fellow of the American Institute of Architects in 1962. He was the architect of many important state buildings in South Việt-Nam, including the Independence Palace, built in 1962-1966 and renamed Reunification Palace in 1975 (fig.8). The Independence Palace successfully combines traditional forms with modern

³⁰ see Ngô Viết Thụ's website www.angelfire.com/ns/namsonngo/nvt/index5.htm

European architectural design and reflects both an Asian philosophy of life and the use of western architectural space. Its concrete façade is ingeniously woven with calligraphic details and softened by decorative motifs of geometric bamboo, which in Việt-Nam represents strength and durability (fig.9). His other important works include the National Atomic Institute in Dalat (1962-65), Central Market of Dalat (1962), National University campus in Thủ Đức (1962) and the Headquarters of Air Việt-Nam in Saigon (1970).

The aspiration to create new national sites for the young nation shaped the nature and practice of architecture in the South. After the Geneva Accord, many graduate architects from the Fine Arts College of Indochina in Hà Nội moved to the South. While the drive for modernity was enhanced by contacts with the West and new technology, tradition was also a focus, to retain national spirit.

Many constructions of this period bear a combination of tradition and modernity in cultural architecture including: Vĩnh Nghiêm Temple (fig.10), the State Library (now Library of General Sciences of Hồ Chí Minh City) and Thị Nghè Church (Nguyễn Hữu Thiện).



Figure 10: Vĩnh Nghiêm Temple, designed by Nguyễn Bá Lăng, 1971, photograph by Huỳnh Vinh Thanh.

Vĩnh Nghiêm Temple (architect Nguyễn Bá Lăng) was built during 1964-1971, with the intention of re-creating an old Buddhist temple in the style of the North for

northern refugees. The tower in the temple, which displays a strong Japanese influence, was built with funding from the Japan-Vietnam Friendship Association.

In comparison, the State Library (1967) (fig.11), a corporate work by architects Nguyễn Hữu Thiện, Bùi Quang Hanh and Lê Văn Lắm (graduated from France) is seen as, “the crest of a search of innovative modern architectural style.”³¹ It combines a tall storage block (43 metres) and a wide block with administration and reading rooms (over 70 metres), creating the impression of both height and volume. All of these constructions incorporated traditional motifs (phoenix, bamboo) or traditional designs (curving roof, three-part gate, bell-tower), which give a distinct Vietnamese character to the elaborate facades and Ionic and Corinthian columns of colonial French architecture.



Figure 11: State Library of Saigon, designed by Nguyễn Hữu Thiện, 1967, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

³¹ Nguyễn Hữu Thái, 2002, *Những Vấn Đề Kiến Trúc Đương Đại Việt-Nam*, (Issues of Vietnamese Contemporary Architecture), Xây Dựng Publishing House, p. 87.



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



Figure 13: Vì Dân Hospital (renamed Thống Nhất after 1975), photograph by Huỳnh Vinh Thanh. On the other hand, civil architecture like Chợ Rẫy Hospital (1971) (fig.12), Vì Dân Hospital (1973) (fig.13), Tân Sơn Nhất Airport (1960s) and Biên Hoà Industrial Zone, tend toward international styles, with attention paid to the practical needs of the facilities. The level of innovation in the South is apparent in the comment made by a northern architect, Trương Quang Thảo:

Southern colleagues had contacts with modern architecture, created with the benefit of Saigon resources and power; they quickly mastered

techniques of concrete and marble, creating architecture that amazed all Hà Nội's counterparts, after 30th April 1975.³²

The escalation of the war, particularly after the Tết Offensive, which turned cityscape into a network of fortified lookout posts (fig.14) and the increased number of American troops in the South, led to the expansion of cities and towns, in order to house the allies' officials and the peasants, who were uprooted from their villages by armed conflicts. A new word was introduced into everyday Vietnamese language: 'building' (pronounced 'bin-din' in Vietnamese) indicates the international influence on Vietnamese architecture in the South. Square, high-rise buildings with plain concrete façades, rose wherever American money could reach. The new housing unit and its style became a symbol of the 'American dream' of accumulating wealth, and building became a desirable career for the first time in Vietnamese history. These cement boxes replaced many traditional wooden houses, particularly in the vicinity of important military bases (fig.15).



Figure 14: A Saigon Street in 1968-69, photograph by Graham Renfrey.

³²Nguyễn Hữu Thái, *Những Vấn Đề Kiến Trúc Đương Đại Việt-Nam*, (Issues of Vietnamese Contemporary Architecture), p. 167.



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

Public Monuments: Going back to the origin

Architecture in the South made its mark on the urban landscape during the war era and survived in the post-war era but public monuments are another story. Public monuments are normally created to honour a political hero or a historical event, to reveal an ideological principle. As often witnessed in the past, radical changes in regimes and ideology, usually leads to the destruction of public monuments. In the case of South Việt Nam, after the fall of Saigon, a number of public monuments were destroyed but those that relate to historical themes remained intact.

A common desire for tradition and history emerged, after the partitioning of the nation in 1954, created an exodus into the South of nearly a million northerners and tangibly cut South Việt-Nam off from the North. With the establishment of a new defence force for the Republic of Việt-Nam, many public monuments were erected in Saigon, to symbolise the various units of the armed forces.



Figure 16: Statue of the Hero Trần Hưng Đạo, late 1960s, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.



Figure 17: Statue of Phù Đổng Thiên Vương, late 1960s, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

To represent the Navy, the statue of the hero Trần Hưng Đạo³³ (fig.16) was erected on the banks of Saigon River where he heroically points his index finger to the river

³³ A General who defeated the Mongolians three times in the 14th century.

as if he had just completed a victory. At intersection number 6 in Saigon, the statue of adolescent hero, Phù Đổng Thiên Vương³⁴ (fig.17) symbolises the Armour Corps. According to the myth, he wore an iron coat of armour and rode an iron horse to battle the Chinese, which he defeated around 500 BC. Similarly, the statue of Trần Nguyên Hãn (fig.18) representing the Signals Corps is placed in front of Bến Thành market. The figure is about to release a pigeon from his hand, representative of communication during the war. The movement of his horse and the anticipated release of the pigeon form an evocative composition. Of all the monuments left intact in Saigon after 1975, this is the most beautiful and expressive work.



Figure 18: Statue of Trần Nguyên Hãn. Late 1960s.

³⁴ A legendary adolescent hero who defeated Chinese before 500 BC and then flew up into the sky. Read Trần Quốc Vương, 'The Legend of Ông Gióng from the Text to the Field', *Essays into Vietnamese Past*, edit by K.W. Taylor & John K. Whitmore, Cornell Southeast Asia Program, p.13-41.



Figure 19: Statue of King An Dương Vương. Late 1960s.

A statue of the historical figure King An Dương Vương (fig.19) is placed on a towering Corinthian column, at the intersection of number 6 in Saigon's Chinatown and symbolises the Engineering Corps. In the areas surrounding downtown Saigon of the 1960s and 1970s, where few high-rise buildings obstructed the view, these monuments shaped a historical narrative of the battles against intermittent Chinese invasions. This narrative offered Saigon a sense of continuity in history, while Hà Nội, who was receiving military aid from Beijing, exercised diplomacy, by not making reference in public spaces, to Việt-Nam's historic past relations with China.



Figure 20: Statue of Hai Bà Trưng (the Two Trưng Sisters), 1963.

The rise and fall of public monuments also reflects the fragility of nationalism at the time. *Hai Bà Trưng* (The Two Trưng Sisters)³⁵ (fig.20) weighed three tons and stood 10 metres tall and was erected in the First Republic in March 1963 at the end of Hai Bà Trưng Street, which had been named after these two heroines. Nguyễn Văn Thế (1920-), its sculptor, had just graduated from Paris in the early 1960s. Hai Bà Trưng was one of his adventures into a new form of sculpture, representative of modernism with its straight lines and planes. Unfortunately, the monument was removed directly after the assassination of Ngô Đình Diệm and his brother Ngô Đình Nhu in November 1963, because of the outcry of the Saigonese, who considered the statues too reminiscent of Madam Ngô Đình Nhu and her daughter. Although Madam Nhu was beautiful and acted as the First Lady at all national receptions, the rendering of her face on national figures like Trưng Trắc or Trưng Nhị was seen as blasphemous.³⁶

Public monuments in the South became even more vulnerable with the fall of Saigon in 1975. A 16 metre high bronze monument of a bunch of rice erected in

³⁵ Việt-Nam's first Empresses, Trưng Trắc and Trưng Nhị, who overthrew Chinese Han rulers in 40 AD.

³⁶ Read Dennis Warner, *The Last Confucian*, Angus & Robertson, p.37.

1972 in Long Xuyên,³⁷ symbolizing the agrarian culture of the Mekong Delta, was razed to the ground by the government in 1975. This large sculpture was commissioned by Việt-Nam Thương Tín Bank (Việt-Nam Commerce Bank), which planned to modernise agriculture in the Mekong Delta, through capitalist investment. Its creator was Mai Chửng, a captain in the southern Army, who was influenced by the work of Henry Moore and Zoltán Kemeny but his use of materials was quite extraordinary. *The Rice* monument (fig.21) was cast in bronze, from using melted bullet shells and discarded bronze pieces from the war but in many of his other works, these discarded items were used without melting. *The War* (fig.1, p.188) displayed in the Crystal Palace Shopping Center in downtown Saigon, was created in this style. The rawness of the media effectively expressed the scream of victims, and the brutal ugliness of the war. Unfortunately, it was dismantled after 1975.³⁸

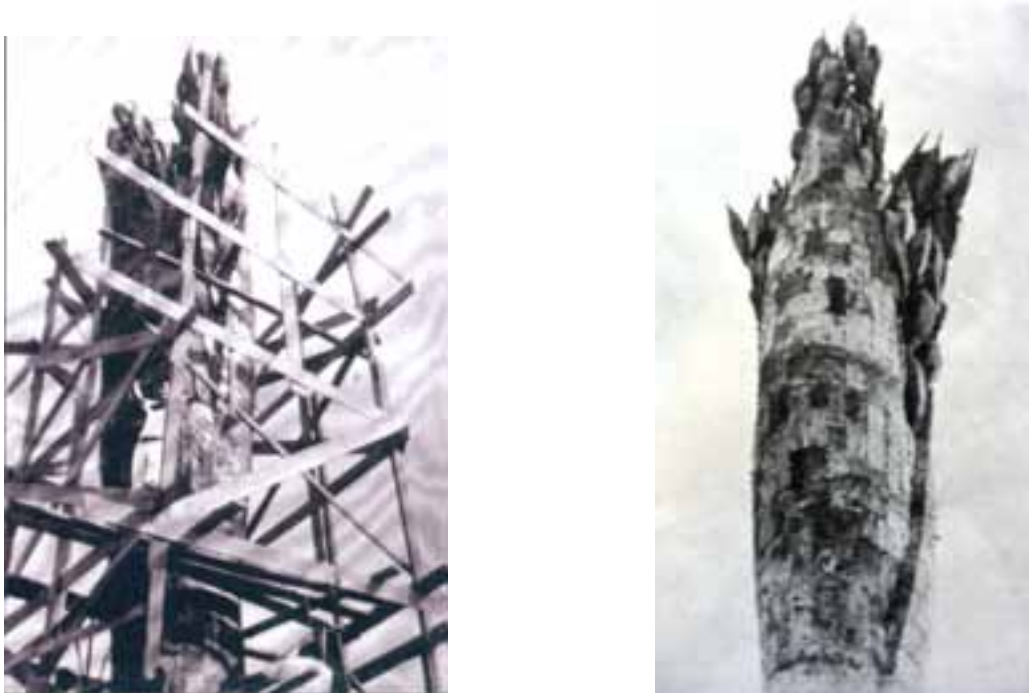


Figure 21: Mai Chửng, *Rice* (1972), [left] - The monument under construction showing the artist on the scaffolding, courtesy of the artist family. [right] - The finished work printed in a catalogue.

³⁷ A city on the Mekong Delta, 120 kilometres southwest from Saigon.

³⁸ Boi Tran Huynh interviewed Boi Nghi, the daughter of the sculptor.

With massive human loss in the South, concept of sorrow and the absurdity of civil war began to appear in the arts, most strongly expressed in the lyrics of musician Trịnh Công Sơn.³⁹

A thousand years of Chinese reign
A hundred years of French domain.
Twenty years fighting brothers each day,
A mother's fate, left for her child
A mother's fate, a land defiled.⁴⁰

Sơn's songs were mixed with anti-war sentiments and extremely well received by war-weary southerners and those involved in anti-war movements, who lamented about the war they were fighting. This contrasted dramatically with the Socialist concept of 'art is also a weapon' in the North where such emotional expressions were disapproved. The differences are strikingly visible from the sculptures that emerged in the South at the time.



Figure 22: Nguyễn Thanh Thu, *Lamentation*, (1966), courtesy of Dr. Nguyễn Mạnh Tiến.

³⁹ <http://www.vietquoc.com/na040701.htm>

⁴⁰ Trịnh Công Sơn's *Gia Tài Của Mẹ* (Mother's Legacy), translated by Nguyen Vu Thanh at http://www.comp.nus.edu.sg/~nguyenvu/Artists/TC_Son/Songs/TCSon_songs---Gia_tai_cua_me.htm

A four metre bronze statue by Nguyễn Thanh Thu (1934-) titled, *Lamentation* (fig.22), was installed at the front gate of the National Military Cemetery, on the Biên Hoà Highway in 1966. The statue depicts a seated ARVN soldier, with a rifle on his lap, thinking of his colleagues who did not return from battle.⁴¹ If Saigon is a *yin* city⁴², *Lamentation* is an artwork of *yin* spirit, in terms of representing the placidity and passivity of the subject. A useful comparison that illustrates the point is the monument, *Victory of Nam Ngạn*, created in 1967 by staff and students of the Fine Arts College of Hà Nội (fig.26 Chapter 3, p. 169), which signifies *yang* in ascendancy with its action and combative aggression. Furthermore, *Victory of Nam Ngạn* comprises of more than one character and represents a collective identity fighting the war, while *Lamentation*, as an artwork, delineated personal inner feelings and individualism. It expressed wartime sentiments that soldiers of the Democratic Republic of Việt-Nam were trained to see as petty-bourgeoisie. After 1975, the new *yang* society did not tolerate ‘individualistic art’ or commemorative memorials by the defeated enemy and *Lamentation* was demolished, leaving a void of unmourned death.

Another monument by Nguyễn Thanh Thu is *Resolved to Win* (fig.23). It was created to commemorate the largest military operation up to that time: the post-tết operation, Quyết Thắng (Resolved to Win), aimed at gathering up the Việt Cộng around Saigon and five surrounding provinces. Of all the war monuments that honour fallen colleagues, *Resolved to Win* was, perhaps, the most assertive. It depicted a soldier, with helmet and rifle on the ground, in an assault position throwing a grenade. The monument is related to what is obviously a crucial moment in battle and also to fallen comrades.⁴³

⁴¹ <http://www.vietquoc.com/thngtiec.htm>

⁴² Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, University of California Press, p. 236

⁴³ The sculpture was placed where Diệp Minh Châu’s *Hồ Chí Minh* is now, in front of the Town Hall, but the circumstance in which it was removed is unknown.



Figure 23: Nguyễn Thanh Thu, *Resolved to Win*, 1968, photograph by Mos Hancock.

While conflicts between North and South shaped the nature and fortunes of many sculptures, anti-colonialism was also taken as a theme, to express southern nationalism. One of the most remarkable public monuments in South Việt-Nam is the bronze bust of Phan Bội Châu (fig.24), a Vietnamese hero in the fight against French colonialism. The bust, to date is the largest in Việt-Nam, stands 2.5 metres tall and weighs eight tons. It was completed in 1974 and placed at the tomb of Phan Bội Châu, who is portrayed in Vietnamese history as carrying the agony of his people, caught in the tragedy of colonialism. The bust, which reflects the grandeur work by French sculptor Rodin, has bas-reliefs of various historical scenes embedded into it, symbolising patriotism and determination that mark the historic period in which Phan Bội Châu lived. Its creator is the sculptor Lê Thành Nhơn (1940-2002), who graduated from the Fine Arts College of Saigon in 1964. After military discharge, due to a severe injury, he practiced his art while teaching at the Fine Arts College of Saigon, the Fine Arts College of Huế and the Community University of Nha Trang. Despite his teaching load, Lê Thành Nhơn was one of the most productive southern artists and was represented at the 1963 Paris Biennale.



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

His statue of *Seated Buddha*, installed at the Huệ Nghiêm Buddhist Institute in Saigon, is an example of classic Vietnamese Buddhist art. Another of his statues, *Kwan Yin* (fig.25), installed in Huế's Liễu Quán Buddhist Institute, incorporates Art Deco features and portrays Kwan Yin as dignified and sincere, rather than the conventional affectionate motherly figure.



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



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

Overall, southern sculptures made a sustained connection with the Beaux-Arts tradition of visual representation, but there were works that related more to modernism. The sculpture *Jesus on the Cross* (1967) (fig.26), by Dương Văn Hùng (1940-), portrays Jesus in a geometric primitive form in which all marks embedded in the body refer to injury and damage caused by war. Thus, the artwork is a symbol for war invalids, who became a common sight in the society. After Dương

Văn Hùng graduated from the National College of Fine Arts of Saigon, he was appointed to be an art teacher in Tây Ninh, a town 100 kilometres northwest of Saigon, close to the Cambodian-Việt-Nam border. It was here that war was at its most devastating and Hùng gained first-hand experience, while travelling and working in the countryside. Later, he was conscripted into the Army of the Republic of Việt-Nam, but worked mainly in Saigon's Military Headquarters, using his art skills to design military medals and awards.

Trương Đình Quế (1937-) referred to the horror and cruelty of war in his stone sculpture, *Prisoner* (fig.27), created in the 1970s shortly after the 1968 Tết Offensive. Quế was spending time with his in-law family in Huế, when the event turned into a bloodbath for the community, after which, about 3,000 victims were discovered in mass graves. *Prisoner* portrays a squatting blindfolded male tied up at the elbows, with fear permeating from his face and open mouth, his head is raised slightly to sense what was happening around him. While a work of this type would usually be acquired by the State in the North, as a product for propaganda, Trương Đình Quế's *Prisoner* remains a personal expression of his encounter with the Tết Offensive.



Figure 27: Trương Đình Quế, *Prisoner*, 1970s, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

THE NATIONAL FINE ARTS COLLEGE OF SAIGON: A PROLONGED TRADITION

Although Saigon was heavily involved with the U.S., Saigonese art actually developed from colonial art and enriched the new visual arts tradition that the Fine Arts College of Indochina established in 1925.

In the 1960s, France was still the major contributor to art education in South Việt-Nam, despite diplomatic tensions between South Việt-Nam and France, when in 1964, the latter recognised Communist China. Alliance Française continued to be an exhibition venue for local art and works from France and in 1955 held an exhibition of Van Gogh's paintings, and an exhibition of more than 100 French paintings in March 1961. These events supported the teaching at the National Fine Arts College of Saigon and had an impact on practicing art in South Việt-Nam.

Not constrained by an art doctrine, as it was in the North, Saigonese art evolved from its colonial context with relative creative freedom, drawing on the broad influences of international art practices of the west. Visual art of this period is characterised by a range of oppositions and polarities serving as both catalyst and conflict. Tensions between tradition and modernism, figurative and abstract, Communist and anti-Communist and the First and Second Republic are evident not only in the work but also in the communities of artists emerging at the time.

In addition to these tensions, the complex interplay between local and international politics is evident in the nature of education, sites of work and interaction between visual artists. The National Fine Art College of Saigon, also known as the Fine Arts College of Gia Định, located in Gia Định district of Saigon, was established in 1954 on the model of L'Ecole Superieuse des Beaux-Arts de Paris, the Fine Arts College of Indochina in Hà Nội and the Fine Arts College of Rome (fig.28) and staff was recruited from Hà Nội graduates and from France. The migration from North to South, resulting from the 1954 Geneva Accord, brought to the South artists who had trained from the FACI, but rejected Communism and had decided to make a new start. The link between South Việt-Nam and the West also encouraged many

Vietnamese art graduates from France to return to South Việt-Nam, and not to the North, to live and practice the arts. It was the differences, then, between North and South that confirmed and reinforced the French influence in South Việt-Nam's art world, rather than a simple continuation of French domination.



Figure 28: Director Lê Văn Đệ explaining the College curricula to art critic Pierre Faucon,. Photograph taken 1957 on Graduation Day. Ms Trương Thị Thịnh (centre) was the first female student of the College, College archive.

Similarly, key artists, despite strong external influences and experiences, continued to use and think of traditional styles as a site to both explore and express their creativity. For instance, Lê Văn Đệ, born in 1906 in Bến Tre, studied at L'Ecole des Beaux Arts de Paris, later in Rome and Athens. The Vatican granted a commission to Lê Văn Đệ in 1936-37 and one of the works, *St. Madeleine under the Cross*, is a romantic Vietnamese image of Christianity, with a similarity to the way that Pre-Raphaelite artists portrayed women. He became the first Director of the National Fine Arts College of Saigon in 1954.

Despite Lê Văn Đệ's long period of study, travel and work outside Việt-Nam, his art retained a strong nationalistic style, as seen for instance, in, *Summer Light*, a 1954 silk painting (fig.29). The fitting resolution of the composition and image of the woman became a stereotype for 'Vietnamese-ness' in silk painting and the artist is regarded as a master of the technique of rendering hair. This skill became an obsession of many of his students, among them, Trương Đình Quế, although trained as a sculptor, claimed that he managed to come close to his Master in his own work, *Combing Hair*, 1972 (fig.30).⁴⁴



Figure 29: Lê Văn Đệ, *Summer Light*, 1954.

⁴⁴ Interview by Boi Tran Hunyh with the artist on 19 March, 2003



Figure 30: Trương Đình Quế, *Combing Hair*, 1972.

The extent to which education and local cultural history shaped the flow of European influence is evident in the relatively rapid infusion of French artistic styles in non-central areas of South Việt-Nam, such as Huế. The Fine Arts College of Huế was founded in 1959 as a faculty of the University of Huế. The first director was Tôn Thất Đào, a graduate from the Fine Arts College of Indochina. The second director of Huế's art school was Mai Lan Phương, a graduate from L'Ecole des Arts Décoratives de Paris, appointed in 1962. In the same year, Lê Ngọc Huệ (1936-), who graduated in sculpture from L'Ecole des Beaux Arts de Montpellier, was appointed to the position of lecturer in the sculpture department. New influences in teaching were introduced through these appointments and although Huế's art school did not have teaching staff with the high reputation of those in Saigon's art school, Huế, nonetheless, offered some alternatives in southern art education. It provided greater access to students in Việt-Nam's central regions and produced no less talented artists than Saigon, partly due to its cultural, poetic and historic environment. For instance, Huế was the site of the old Royal citadel and the place where Buddhist and anti-war activism usually first broke, before spreading to other southern cities, including Saigon.

Apart from the National Fine Arts College of Saigon and the Fine Arts College of Huế, the Republic of Việt-Nam also had three schools of applied arts: the School of Decorative Arts of Gia Định, standing next to the National Fine Arts College of Saigon, the School of Applied Arts of Biên Hoà and the School of Applied Arts of Bình Dương. With this number of art institutions, the South provided more options in art study than the North.

Painting: A ‘lost’ national art

The fact, however, that the RVN government could not afford a museum of fine arts meant southern artists were extremely disadvantaged. After 1975, they were not seen as artists, *per se*, because their works, as a ‘collection’, were not represented to the new Communist authority and were seen as ‘works of the American-puppet regime’. Furthermore, ideological beliefs and politics positioned them as ‘decadent and anti-revolutionary’. Another disadvantage, due to the lack of a fine arts museum, was that typical paintings of this national spirit were not housed in other Vietnamese collections, certainly not in the Fine Arts Museums of Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City. This explains the title, ‘A Lost National Art’.

At first glance, it seems illogical to conclude that paintings made during the war in South Việt-Nam do not bear a strong American influence, but a close investigation proves this point. In the first place, Saigon’s academic art played an important role in grounding French colonial aesthetics and a great number of practicing artists upheld this tendency in their paintings; Lê Văn Đệ was the first person in this line.

During his directorship of the National Fine Arts College of Saigon from 1954 to 1966, Lê Văn Đệ advocated Neo-Classicism and revealed his indifference, if not antagonism, toward abstract art. In 1962, in an interview by Nguyễn Ngu-Í in *Bách Khoa*, he said,

Today, with a few new ideas and western publications, some colleagues have painted new trends (like abstract art) but I don't think it is going to have much promise.⁴⁵

Aligned with Lê Văn Đệ's preference for figurative paintings were those artists who related closely to traditional themes and, in most cases, their styles reflected the influence of Impressionism. These included: Đào Sĩ Chu, Văn Đen, Nguyễn Siên, Nguyễn Sao, Văn Thọ, Thuận Hồ, Phạm Huy Tường, Bé Ký, to mention but a few.

Trần Dzụ Hồng, a senior lecturer at the National Fine Arts College of Saigon from 1956, was qualified in both lacquer and silk painting. The work, *Kiều and Kim Trọng* (1959) (fig.31), represents a 19th century scene, where Kiêu plays music to Kim Trọng who is impressed by her beauty and talent. Traditional themes, academic drawing and a conventional palette were characteristics of the Academy of Saigon that shaped a new generation of southern artists. To retain Neo-Classicism, these conservative artists-lecturers candidly expressed their antipathy toward abstraction. Trần Dzụ Hồng referred to abstract painters as "going too far - nobody can understand them, or they are insane."⁴⁶ However, other artist-lecturers and artists had more liberal views that served as a bridge between the two extremes: tradition and modernism.

⁴⁵ Lê Văn Đệ interviewed by Nguyễn Ngu Í, 'Quan Niệm Hội Họa' (Views on Painting), *Bách Khoa*, n. 144, p.86.

⁴⁶ Trần Dzụ Hồng, interviewed by Nguyễn Ngu Í, 'Views on Painting', *Bách Khoa*, n.143, p.94.



Figure 31: Trần Dzụ Hồng, *Kiêu and Kim Trọng*, 1959.

Đào Sĩ Chu (1911-) was a qualified pharmacist, a musician and a painter by profession. After graduation from high school, he went to Paris to study pharmacy, according to his family's wishes. He returned home to practice pharmacy in Hà Nội while studying art in his spare time. He then decided to study art seriously, leaving for France and studying there from 1949 to 1951. Although trained in Neo-Classicism, he keenly followed Impressionism and was at home with both portraits and landscapes (figs.32-33), and supported new art movements whenever he chaired in art awards.

Although there are many tendencies in Realism and Impressionism, I believe that the future will belong to Cubism, non-figurative and abstract arts.⁴⁷

Đào Sĩ Chu's liberal view in visual arts balanced the more conservative assessments in southern art awards, and he offered encouragement to worthy young artists.

⁴⁷ Đào Sĩ Chu interviewed by Duy Thanh, *Sáng Dội Miền Nam*, n. 1(7) 1960, p. 5.



Figure 32: Đào Sĩ Chu, *Thủ Đức*, 1959.



Figure 33 Đào Sĩ Chu, *Young Girl Feeding Chicken*, 1974.

The influence of the Fine Arts College of Indochina can be seen in Saigon's artist-lecturers' preference for Impressionism, as a style, and Romanticism, in spirit. Glistening light on objects and landscapes, flashing brushstrokes to create forms and an optimistic atmospheric subject matter, are common among their works. Văn Đen (1919-1988) studied at L'École des Beaux-Arts de Paris for three years, 1950-1952, and is regarded as a master in manipulating black. His still life paintings recreated a visual world in which each item spoke with a tranquil and multi-layered language of colours. Born in Cần Thơ, the main city in the Mekong Delta, Văn Đen had an empathy with peasants and country life. His paintings on this topic are

regarded as, “a successful application of western oil painting techniques, with a style that modernises the way to express a spirit of Việt-Nam, just as violins, cellos and pianos can be used instead of traditional musical instruments to render an age-old Vietnamese folk song...”⁴⁸ His painting, *The Pot*, was awarded the golden medal in the Spring Exhibition in 1960 and was considered, “the mark of a new phase for Saigonese visual arts.”⁴⁹ *The Barn* (1960s) (fig.34) reveals the influence of Impressionism but with a subtler palette, due to the nature of the subject. In comparison to paintings of peasantry in the North, Văn Đen presented what he really saw, without glorification and over indulgence in his subject matter.



Figure 34: Văn Đen, *The Barn*, 1960s.

Sharing the aesthetics in line with the National Fine Art College of Saigon, many artists worked in traditional themes and media. Tú Duyên (1915-) studied at the Fine Arts College of Indochina, 1935-38 and moved to live in Saigon from the 1940s. His place of birth, Bắc Ninh, the source of Vietnamese woodblock prints

⁴⁸ Trinh Cung, ‘Van Den: An Exemplary-Artist’, essay in *Van Den and His Paintings*, Hương Quê, California, p.44.

⁴⁹ Huỳnh Hữu Ủy, 1993, ‘Nghệ Thuật Tạo Hình Saigon trước 1975’, (Visual Arts in Saigon before 1975), *Hợp Lưu* n.10, (April & May), p. 116.

since the 17th century, might explain his preference for this medium, which he used to depict Vietnamese historical topics. The difference between his and the traditional method, is, that he used only two woodblocks for his prints, his fingers instead of brushes to apply the inks, oil instead of traditional pigments and printed on silk instead of *dó* papers.⁵⁰



Figure 35: Tú Duyên, *The Hero Trần Bình Trọng*, 1955.

The print, *The Hero Trần Bình Trọng*, (fig.35) depicts an event famous in Vietnamese history: in the 14th century, Trần Bình Trọng was captured by Mongolian troops and offered the throne if he agreed to surrender, but he declared, “I would rather be a ghost in the South than be a Prince in the North.”⁵¹ With similar qualities of western Baroque art, the image of Trần Bình Trọng is depicted as a robust man in his late thirties, posing in a challenging manner as he refuses the proposal from the Mongolian enemy. Curving lines capture the mood and inner strength of the character, while flame-like details on the cuff of his pants allude to

⁵⁰ A special handmade paper in Việt-Nam, the paper is made from the plant called *do*, from which the paper gets its name.

⁵¹ Nguyễn Khắc Viện, *Vietnam – A Long History*, Thế Giới Publishers, p.40.

the devastation of war. The artist claimed that the Rockefeller Foundation purchased one of these prints in the 1970s.⁵²

Although male artists dominated the art scene in the RVN, the most recognised artist in Saigon in 1960s and 70s was a female: Bé Ký (1939),⁵³ (her real name was Nguyễn Thị Bé), was orphaned by the famine in the North in 1945, and adopted by the artist, Trần Đắc (1922), a graduate of the Fine Arts College of Indochina, who introduced her to art. She also studied art with other established artists like Văn Đen, Nhan Chí and Trần Văn Thọ. Without a formal art qualification, Bé Ký was well received in the Saigon art world in the 1960s, She was first noticed while wandering around the streets in Saigon doing sketches, which sharpened her skill in catching people's figures and movements with simple lines and brushstrokes.



Figure 36: Bé Ký, *The Load*, 1960s.



Figure 37: Bé Ký, *A Hair Cut*, 1960s.

The Load, (fig36) in Chinese ink on silk, skilfully depicts with very minimalist lines, a person just about to carry a load or just about to place it on the ground. Bé Ký's art represents a genuine world that forms a link between Vietnamese folklore and reality and is more distinctive than Đông Hồ's woodprints. Her paintings depict the contemporary life: a street barber (fig.37), a cyclo driver, a woman selling snacks from her carrying pole and children playing ball on the streets. She can be seen as a

⁵² Interview by Boi Tran Huynh with the artist in 1999.

⁵³ More information can be found in *The Voice of an Invisible Vietnamese Woman: Everyday Life Painting in the Art of Be Ky*, a Master thesis by Cuc Nguyen, 2002, M A Thesis of the Department of Asian and Asian American Studies, California State University, Long Beach, USA.

“People’s Artist”⁵⁴ in that she stands for and speaks for the masses. Her solo exhibitions were always sold out and her buyers were mainly westerners. Although she is excellent with lines in producing a fleeting moment, her colours get muddled within the lines.

That female artists were marginal in the Saigonese art world was mostly due to their domestic role in families. While Bé Ký’s success was supported by the foreign taste for an exotic young woman selling art on the streets, Trương Thị Thịnh made her own academic achievement. She was the first female graduate from the National Fine Arts College of Saigon in 1958, and became an art lecturer there from 1963 to 1980.

The prominence of tradition can be seen in style of those artists whose names had been made at the Fine Arts College of Indochina before 1954. Nguyễn Gia Trí (1908-1993) was the most notable painter living south of the 17th parallel. He was held in high esteem during the war and in post-war era, not only because of his achievements in lacquer painting during the colonial era, but also through his serious commitment to this medium in the 21 years of the southern regime. He was known as the artist who delivered his paintings only when he thought they were completed, no matter who the patron was. Nguyễn Gia Trí was a persistent painter, producing large lacquer paintings for southern national sites like the Independence Palace and the State Library as well as wealthy art lovers, mainly from overseas.

Garden (1967) (fig.38) is typical of his work in the 1960s in its rich colours and illusive space; his fairy-like ladies emerge from a dreamy landscape that creates a surreal semi-abstract scene, which is representative of his style. Furthermore, Nguyễn Gia Trí was one of very few artists who worked on both figurative and abstract art (fig.39) in lacquer painting, and acknowledged abstraction as a new

⁵⁴ A title given to outstanding artists by the Communist government. The title was inaugurated in January 1984.

language in art.⁵⁵ This was also the language that Nguyễn Gia Trí's contemporaries sought in the drive to modernity.



Figure 38: Nguyễn Gia Trí, *Garden*, 1964.



Figure 39: Nguyễn Gia Trí, *Untitled*, 1968.

⁵⁵ Nguyễn Xuân Việt, (compiled) 1998, *Hoạ Sĩ Nguyễn Gia Trí nói về Sáng Tạo* (Artist Nguyễn Gia Trí Talks about Creativity), Văn Học Publishing House, p. 22.

Most of the works by the artists mentioned above represent a traditional art based on the achievements of the previous era and national themes. However, in retaining figurative and narrative styles, they risked being labelled ‘out of date’ by younger and more experimental artists and critics in the late 1960s and early 70s.

Unlike the ubiquitous American influences on architecture and social life during the war, Vietnamese southern paintings had a different trajectory: artists deliberately rejected American influences and French colonial influence still prevailed in education and the arts.

Nearly every Vietnamese artist, living at home and abroad claimed to, “have nothing to do with American influences in art.”⁵⁶ Sculptor Lê Thành Nhơn even felt insulted when asked if he saw any American influence in art during the war. He proudly cited the fact that he refused the financial support offered by the Americans in favour of a tiny budget from the Vietnamese Ministry of Culture in order, “to have something of our own”- the huge bronze bust of the national hero, Phan Bội Châu.⁵⁷

Nguyễn Ngọc Bích, the Head of *Free Asia Radio*, refers to three points in his explanation of American interactions with Vietnamese art:

First of all, Americans were interested in military actions only, secondly, their time in Việt-Nam was actually short in terms of making a cultural impact and thirdly, they did not have much to offer to Vietnamese intellectuals who had had contact with French literature and arts.⁵⁸

His claim was reinforced by Đinh Cường (1939) and Trinh Cung (1939), the former from the U.S. and the latter from Việt-Nam, who both visited France in 1990 and experienced the same feeling of, “being at home in Paris. There is something in the air that seems so familiar to me, even on the first visit.”⁵⁹ Clearly, their French-

⁵⁶ Interviews by Boi Tran Huynh with Tạ Ty, Phạm Huy Tường, Lê Thành Nhơn, Đinh Cường, Trương Thị Thịnh, Nguyễn Thị Tâm, Bửu Chỉ, Nguyễn Khai, Nguyễn Lâm, Nguyễn Trung, Hồ Thành Đức, Bé Ký, Nguyễn Văn Trung and Hồ Hữu Thủ.

⁵⁷ Interview with the artist by Australia’s SBS radio in March 2002.

⁵⁸ Interview by Boi Tran Huynh with Nguyễn Ngọc Bích on 27 May 2003.

⁵⁹ Interview by Boi Tran Huynh with two artists in December 2002 and May 2003.

oriented education was woven into their first spontaneous ‘coup de foudre’ with the Parisian cultural environment.

Two other examples reveal that Vietnamese southern artists intentionally rejected American influence: Phạm Huy Tường and Nguyễn Trí Minh, the former working as a graphic designer in Saigon with Americans and the latter spending some time in the U.S.



Figure 40: Phạm Huy Tường: *Autumn*, 1970s.

From the 1950s onwards, Phạm Huy Tường (1934-2002) worked in Impressionism, Cubism and Symbolism. In the early 1970s an American colleague showed him reproductions of paintings by Jackson Pollock. Afterwards, he created, *Autumn* (fig.40) to demonstrate that a Vietnamese painter could have his own approach to abstract art and techniques in oil painting, without slavishly following a style.⁶⁰

Nguyễn Trí Minh (1924-) considered himself a semi-abstract painter with a strong preference for Impressionism. He was known as the first Vietnamese artist to use a palette knife instead of brushes for oil painting. The United States Information Service sponsored Nguyễn Trí Minh on a two-month visit to the US in 1963, where

⁶⁰ Interview by Boi Tran Huynh with Phạm Huy Tường in November 2001.

he captured the landscapes and cities in his Impressionist style (fig.41), with more liberal brushstrokes. Although he was exposed to American art, it did not seem to influence his own working style.



Figure 41: Nguyễn Trí Minh, *Chicago*, 1963.

Not surprisingly, the observations of American researchers at the time reconfirmed the situation, “In educated Vietnamese circles, however, there has been some adoption of French feelings of cultural superiority over Americans.”⁶¹ These accounts suggest that the American presence had little impact on the Saigonese art, despite their heavy involvement in the Việt-Nam war and some attempts to influence culture.

In order to foster a sympathetic understanding of America, abroad, and to build international public support for U.S. foreign policy, the United States Information Service (USIS) was set up in South Việt-Nam in the late 1950s. This organisation maintained information centres, libraries and branches of the Vietnamese-American Association in urban areas. The journal, *Art in America*, was among the

⁶¹ *Area Handbook for Vietnam*, p.278, by authors: Harvey H. Smith, Donald W. Bernier, Frederica M. Bunge, Frances Chadwick Rintz, Rinn-Sup Shinn, and Susanne Teleki, published in 1967.

flow of imported publications and was described as, “introducing American art, which was fresher, more liberal and different from the European one.”⁶²



Figure 42: 1959 Calendar sponsored by the United States Information Service.

A colour calendar of 1959 (fig.42) sponsored by the USIS included paintings by: Lê Văn Đệ, Trần Dzụ Hồng, Đào Sĩ Chu, Hà Văn, Duy Thanh, Vị Ý, Thuận Hồ, Trần Đắc, Huy Tường, Bé Ký, Tú Duyên and Nguyễn Cường.⁶³ These reproductions of Saigonesse paintings are a major documentation of an era of Vietnamese culture, lost in the course of ideological conflicts.

In 1965, the Joint United States Public Affairs Office (JUSPAO) was established in Saigon to handle the psychological war aimed at the enemy; for instance, the Chiêu Hồi (Open Arms) program was to encourage Việt Cộng defections. JUSPAO also provided works on psychological warfare and freely distributed the *American Cultural Journal*, *Free World*, *Quest* and *Rural Spirit* in Vietnamese and *World Today* in Chinese. These magazines tried to prop up the image of a free, prosperous

⁶² Nguyễn Trung, *Mỹ Thuật Sài Gòn 1954-1975* (Saigonesse Art 1954-1975), published in *Kỷ Yếu Hội Thảo Mỹ Thuật Việt Nam Thế Kỷ 20* (Analogy of the Conference of Vietnamese Art in the Twentieth Century), p. 64-73.

⁶³ Catalogue *Lịch Màu 1959* (Colour Calendar 1959), published by the US Information Agency, 1958.

and peaceful South Vietnamese society. *Thế Giới Tự Do* (Free World) (fig.43) was published with the latest offset printing techniques and included articles devoted to the visual arts among other fields, such as agriculture, craft, commerce, society and business. It promoted Vietnamese, western and Asian Art, but American art always had more colour plates than the others.⁶⁴ Most of the art articles in *Thế Giới Tự Do* were general descriptions, targeting a broader audience than specialised art circles. *Thế Giới Tự Do* established a good profile of South Việt-Nam’s artists while, at the same time, promoting the American propaganda of “winning hearts and minds.”



Figure 43: The cover of *Free World* magazine: *Fruit Seller*, lacquer painting by Trần Hà

Figure 44: The cover of the *Oil-Lamp Light* magazine, *Alley*, oil painting by Lê Cao Phan.

In terms of publications in offset colour printing, there were a number of Vietnamese magazines relating to art: *Sáng Dội Miền Nam* (Enlightenment in the South) funded by Ngô Đình Diệm, *Ánh Đèn Dầu* (The Oil-Lamp Light) (fig.44) funded by Esso Company, *Nghệ Thuật* (Arts), and *Trẻ* (Youth), all of which published articles on the arts. Cubism, Fauvism, and abstract art were popular in these publications. For instance, *Ánh Đèn Dầu* volume 12, number one includes a nine page article, *American Modern Art* promoting abstract art colour plates of works by: Hans Hoffmann, Ralston Crawford, Walter Murch, William Thon,

⁶⁴ See Appendix for the list of articles on American art in *Free World* magazine.

Malcom Greene, William Congdon, Grace Hartigan and Mark Tobey.⁶⁵ Unfortunately, these magazines were ephemeral and ceased publication in the Second Republic when the U.S. escalated the war with a huge build-up of troops and, as a consequence, all imported resources were war-oriented.

The desire to make something new was persistent in this dramatic era with various attempts by young artists to create new types of art. For instance, in 1956, the *Sáng Tạo* (Creation Group) established a magazine of the same name whose influence initiated a campaign in 1960 for a new creativity:

Cross out the old academic style, catch new tendencies in world art, do not stop at the decorative or objectively record matters, but mix up all the orders, forms and colours residing in nature in order to create new forms of objects and life and so spear a new avant-garde movement, a new language for Vietnamese art; to raise our young visual arts to the level of a Grand Art utilizing painting as an artistic means to express the inner world and life – *all in a record time*.⁶⁶

This paragraph indicates a desire to make something new and an anxiety to quickly catch up with the world. Duy Thanh, Ngọc Dũng and Thái Tuấn were the painting trio in the *Creation Group* advocating this ideal.

The *Creation Group* went further in suggesting an eradication of literature and arts of the ‘Pre-war era,’⁶⁷ particularly literature by *The Self-Reliance Literary Group*, under the name of creating a new art. Not every one was happy with this daring negation. In an article in *Bách Khoa* in December 1960, the prolific writer Nguyễn Văn Trung (1930-), a Professor at Saigon National University, opposed the idea of “crossing out all the arts of the Pre-war era”.

Saigonese artists looked at French/European modernism as their inspiration. Chagall, Modigliani, Kandinsky and Paul Klee, among others were studied in

⁶⁵ The black and white reproductions of American painting are by Richard Lytle, Milton Avery, Karl Zerbe, Hiram Williams, Ruth Gikow, Stuart Davis and George Tooker.

⁶⁶ Duy Thanh, Huỳnh Văn Phẩm, Mai Thảo, Ngọc Dũng, Nguyễn Sỹ Tế, Thái Tuấn, Thanh Tâm Tuyên, Tô Thuỳ Yên & Trần Thanh Hiệp, ‘Ngôn Ngữ Mới trong Hội Họa’ (New Language in Painting) published in *Sang Tao (Creativity)* magazine, September, 1960, p. 21.

⁶⁷ “Thời Tiên chiến”, the war in this term, means the Resistance war of 1946-1954.

publications, imported reproductions and seminars delivered by the cultural department of various embassies in Saigon.



Figure 45: Duy Thanh, *Chuong Duong Port*, 1957



Figure 46: (left), Ngọc Dũng, *Young Lady*, 1962.

Figure 47: Thái Tuấn paintings in the Mr. Kohlmans collection printed in *Thế Giới Tự Do*.

Duy Thanh is known as the first Vietnamese artist practicing Fauvism (fig.45), while Ngọc Dũng (fig.46) and Thái Tuấn (fig.47) had a preference for Cezanne and Picasso, particularly in line and composition. They developed a type of female

figure, which became a popular style; young women portrayed with Modigliani-like characteristics, with long neck, slender body and a melancholy expression.

It seems that this female imagery generated from a common model: oval faces, quite long, sometimes too long; big, gloomy, dreamy and perplexing eyes; a long, extremely long neck; a small mouth like a petite rose bud. Going down are sloping shoulders, then a slender, crane-like and fragile body as if it could bear no more than a misty dress.⁶⁸

The young Saigonese artists carried this style of female representation into the following era. Although each artist had his own way of painting a female, overall, it is obvious that she was a southern female, more precisely, a Saigonese beauty. It was in the combination of characteristics, grace and feeling that this image was conveyed and was in sharp contrast to female representations in northern Socialist Realist art, which had massive volumes, like a body built for labour.

The drive for a new art led Saigonese artists also to non-figurative representation. Two pioneering figures in this field are Tạ Ty and Ngô Viết Thụ who both made their name in the early days of the First Republic.

Tạ Ty (1922- 2004) is the first Vietnamese artist who seriously practiced Cubism and abstract art.⁶⁹ Nguyễn Sáng and Bùi Xuân Phái were his two close friends, who shared with him the excitement whenever he finished a new painting, when they were residing in colonial Hà Nội.⁷⁰ Had the war not separated them into different zones, they may well have established together a new school of abstract art in Việt Nam. While still an art student at the Fine Arts College of Indochina (FACI) in the North, Tạ Ty discovered in *L'Illustration*, an exclusive magazine published in Paris and shipped to Indochina for the French colonists, with reproductions of paintings by Gauguin, Van Gogh, Cezanne and other European avant-garde artists. His first

⁶⁸ Võ Đình, '“Thăng Mô-Di” và Người Nữ Việt-Nam' (Modigliani and Vietnamese Female Imagery), *Sao Có Tiếng Sóng* (Why The Sound of Waves), Văn Nghệ, Westminster, California, p. 199-200.

⁶⁹ Tạ Ty, 'A Pioneer in Vietnamese Art', at: <http://www.tienve.org/home/visualarts/viewVisualArts.do?action=viewArtwork&artworkId=2641>

⁷⁰ Exchanged letters between Boi Tran Huynh and Tạ Ty.

solo exhibition, *Modern Art*, was held in Hà Nội in 1951. The painting *Woman*⁷¹ dated 1950 (fig.48), a representative Cubist painting, was in the show. This painting, auctioned by Sotheby's in April 2000 for 19,550 Singapore dollars, was described as follows:

This one is a typical example of Ta Ty's cubist period. The clever use of bold colours, positioning of the central character, geometric forms, such as the asymmetrical treatment of the hair, the bold lines of the neck and the arrangement of the shawl into diamond shaped facets, personify Cubism.⁷²



Figure 48: Tạ Ty, *Woman*, 1951.

Tạ Ty was conscripted by Bảo Đại's government and shifted to the South in 1953 - and, Vietnamese Cubism was also moving to the South. *Music Calypso*, (1962) (fig.49) characterises the progression from Cubism to abstraction through sharp lines and movement. Tạ Ty commenced painting abstract art in the 1960s, leaving behind figurative art that he found "satisfied 'the look' more than 'the thinking.'" ⁷³ This was also the time when many painters, sculptors and architects returned home from Europe after graduation.

⁷¹ Sold by Sotheby's, catalogue 2 April, 2000, lot 171 at the price 19,550 Singapore dollars.

⁷² Cited from the Sotheby's catalogue.

⁷³ Tạ Ty, 'Một Nhận Xét về Kỹ Thuật' (A Note on the Technique of Painting), *Ánh Đèn Dầu*, v.2, n.3, p. 15.



Figure 49: Tà Ty, *Music Calypso*, 1962.



Figure 50: Tà Ty, *Untitled Yellow*, 1974, courtesy of Nghiêm Trương.

His other solo exhibitions were held in Saigon in 1956, 1961, 1966 and 1971. *Untitled Yellow* (1974), (fig.50) is one work among those planned for the 1975 exhibition which, however, did not take place due to the fall of Saigon. *Untitled Yellow* delineates the contrast between yellow and black; the spiky, rising eagle-like shape creates an intense movement and rhythm within the square canvas, where passion and drama are blended with great balance. Most of Tà Ty's works mentioned above are now in Melbourne, Australia, in a private collection established in the 1990s. This collection will be discussed in the last chapter as an

example of how international agents affect the Vietnamese art market and art appreciation.⁷⁴

Ngô Viết Thụ (1926-2000) was an established national and international architect; he was also a painter who practiced assiduously, yet not many are informed of this fact. His website, maintained by his architect son, makes no mention of the 1962 International Exhibition in Saigon, in which Ngô Viết Thụ designed the purpose-built venue (later demolished), and also participated as a painter.⁷⁵ One of his paintings, *Thần Tốc* (Great Speed), is included in the website but no context or comment is provided. Ngô Viết Thụ did not produce many paintings but did, indeed, make an innovative contribution to painting.⁷⁶



Figure 51: Ngô Viết Thụ, *City*, 1960s.

City (1960s), (fig.51) is a semi-abstract expressionist oil on canvas with free brushstrokes, like an explosion of fireworks, but elements of structure are visible in

⁷⁴ I am grateful to Robert Bezuijen, who permitted me to view his collection and use his research on Tạ Ty.

⁷⁵ <http://ngoviet.topcities.com/NgoVietThu-Library.htm>

⁷⁶ Huỳnh Hữu Ủy, 'Nghệ Thuật Tạo Hình Saigon Trước 1975' (Plastic Arts in Saigon before 1975), published in *Hợp Lưu* magazine, n. 10 April/May, 1993, p.92

the lines and forms. Tạ Ty and Ngô Viết Thụ, in their separate ways, laid the groundwork for the next generation to explore modernism.



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



Figure 53: Hiếu Đệ, *Buffaloes*, 1962.

Other artists, such as Văn Đen and Hiếu Đệ, were involved with figurative abstraction where narratives were not so important; instead, experiments with lines and colours became more appealing. Văn Đen's *Glass Blowing* (1963), (fig.52) is an expressive abstraction and Hiếu Đệ's *Buffaloes* (1962), (fig.543) is a geometrical abstraction.

The preference for abstraction disfranchised those artists who retained figurative expression. In 1963, the artist Trần Thanh Nhân (1914-2004) held his second solo exhibition in Saigon where reviews noted, "again with river, water, and rice fields, nothing new."⁷⁷ This, however, can be explained by the fact that South Việt-Nam, was still an agricultural nation with 90% of its population peasants and farmers. Also, at that time, the Strategic Hamlets project,⁷⁸ a scheme to separate Communists from peasants, uprooted many villagers and caused a restless situation in the countryside. The writer Võ Phiến lamented:

Intellectuals, writers and artists detached themselves from rice fields, villages, nature, agricultural life, peasants...they alienated themselves from the countryside with their restlessness."⁷⁹

Võ Phiến's statement voiced the estrangement between artists and their milieu at the time. In contrast, those who expressed their genuine love of the countryside tended to be looked down upon as trivial, as in the case of Trần Thanh Nhân. When artists tried to reach sophistication in their abstract art and exercise freedom to choose a way of expression, misleading interpretations diminished realistic art, which depicted life of the peasant majority, as an outdated movement.

The First International Exhibition and its impact on Saigonese art.

The inclination toward abstraction was even more pronounced after the International Exhibition in 1962, when southern artists saw, at first hand, abstract art from outside Việt-Nam. Saigonese art, especially in the early 1960s, developed

⁷⁷ Ham Anh, 'Gió Đông Gió Tây' (East Wind, West Wind), *Văn Hữu* magazine, n. 25, p. 148.

⁷⁸ See David, W. P. Elliott, *The Vietnamese War, Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta 1930-1975*, V. 1, p. 354 and 386-388.

⁷⁹ Võ Phiến, 'Nông Dân, Một Cố Nhân' (Peasant, An old Mate), *Bách Khoa Thời Đại*, n. 272, p. 25-27.

active international interactions that paralleled the international relations of the Republic of Việt-Nam.

In the field of foreign relations, however, South Viet-Nam has been far more successful than its northern counterpart. ... South Viet-Nam is represented in every international organisation to which it can lawfully be admitted. North Viet-Nam is not even a member of international organisations, such as the Universal Postal Union, in which such total dependencies as the Spanish and Portuguese colonies have their own seats.⁸⁰

While Hà Nội was restricted to the Communist block, Saigon had contacts with many major events in the art world including the Biennale in Paris and Venice, exhibitions in Rome, Tokyo, Malaysia, Thailand and India. The First International Exhibition held in Saigon in 1962, however, had the most significant impact on Vietnamese artists who now could see world art, in person. Importantly, in 1962, as a rehearsal for the big event, the annual *Spring Painting Awards* in Arts was held before the International Exhibition and attracted many foreign painters.

Twenty-one nations⁸¹ of the region and the West participated in the international exhibitions as did a miscellaneous group of ten Vietnamese artists residing abroad, ten foreign artists residing in Việt-Nam and ten foreign or Vietnamese artists especially invited by the organising committee. A temporary pavilion was built in Tao Đàn Botanic Garden to house the exhibition and Ngô Viết Thụ, a holder of the Grand Prix de Rome, prepared the design. The collaboration between Việt-Nam and other nations was promising and the benefits of the exchange were mentioned in the catalogue essays.

The Dutch, hydraulic experts know by experience, that water which is dyked-in, becomes a stale pool if no system to renew it daily is invented. It is the same with the spirit of Man if a dyke of haughty indifference surrounds it. New impulses from other civilizations are a necessity.⁸²

⁸⁰ Bernard B. Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams, a Political and Military Analysis* p.398.

⁸¹ The Netherlands, Federal Republic of German, The US, Switzerland, Malaysia, Republic of China, Australia, Japan, Maroc, Argentina, Hong Kong, Italy, Thailand, Korean, France, Great Britain, India, Turkey, Tunisia, the Philippines and Việt-Nam.

⁸² I. Verkade, catalogue of the First International Exhibition of Fine Arts of Saigon 1962, p.100.

Australia sent works by some of its prominent artists: Charles Blackman, Arthur Boyd, John Brack, John Perceval, Robert Dickerson, Albert Tucker and Fred Williams, were among 20 participating Australian artists. The paintings by Charles Blackman and John Brack were printed in colour plates in the catalogue. Despite the impact of Abstract Expressionism during this time and the resources of the U.S., they sent only prints to the exhibition (fig.54). Overall, abstract art and individualism emerged as the obvious tendency in the works of nearly all the participants (figs.55-56).



Figure 54: *Ảnh Đền Dầu* magazine, coloured reproduction of American prints in the International Exhibition 1962.



Figure 55: Fred Thieler, *Transparency 1/196.1*



Figure 56: Emil Schumacher, *Wagudu*, 1958.

There were only nine colour plates of paintings (four German, three Malaysian and two Australian) printed in the catalogue, yet seven of them were abstract art, and nearly 90% of the black and white plates of paintings and prints were of abstraction.

The catalogue essay by Baron Von Wendland, Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany states:

Modern painting reflects the background of our spiritual world and the uncertainty and helplessness to which modern man feels condemned.⁸³

The Vietnamese art critics reviewed the exhibition enthusiastically. The Argentinean painter, Victor Chab, was admired for his abstraction, his painting deemed “so distinctive that it stands out among hundreds of other abstract paintings in the room.”⁸⁴ Australian Thomas Gleghorn’s painting was praised by the art critic Thái Tuấn as “a mature work of abstract style in terms of composition as well as colours, moreover, the texture is excellent.”⁸⁵

But when it came to Vietnamese works in relation to the other nations’ works, Thái Tuấn, without much hesitation, made a ruthless comment that his native colleagues still had to catch up with international artists, particularly in silk painting, which clung to the tradition of figurative art.⁸⁶

After the First International exhibition, the First Republic was seen by both Dr. Nguyễn Quỳnh, a lecturer in art history at San Antonio College of the University of Texas, and the writer, Võ Phiến, as “the golden time for painting.”⁸⁷

The Second International Exhibition was planned for April in 1967⁸⁸, after being postponed from January 1966, but then it was cancelled altogether, due to the escalating war. Likewise, from 1965 onwards, the annual *Spring Painting Awards* ceased. In 1968, the Second Republic created a new award, *The President’s Awards*, which included literature, poetry, music, painting, sculpture, architecture and film. Although these awards covered broader fields of artistic endeavour, they

⁸³ Baron Von Wendland, essay in the catalogue *The First International Exhibition*, p. 116.

⁸⁴ Thái Tuấn, *Triển Lãm Quốc Tế Lần Nhất*, (The First International Exhibition), Bách Khoa magazine, n.141, p. 70.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p. 72.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 72-73.

⁸⁷ Nguyễn Quỳnh, ‘Nhìn Lại Hội Họa Việt Nam Hiện Đại (1930-1975): Một Bài Học Để So Sánh và Tìm Hiểu’ (A Review on Vietnamese Modern Art (1930-1975): a Lesson for Comparison and Understanding), p.30, published in *Hợp Lưu* magazine, n10. Võ Phiến, *A General View on Vietnamese Literature*, p. 287.

⁸⁸ *Nghệ Thuật (Arts) magazine*, June 1966.

were not highly regarded. First, the title, ‘The President’s Awards’ seemed too political to many artists; second, the judging committee was weighted with academic people trained in Neo-Classicism. These people were not going to look with much favour on the new avant-garde art.⁸⁹ Finally, the establishment of *The Society of Saigonese Young Artists* provided another venue for creative recognition.

THE SOCIETY OF SAIGONESE YOUNG ARTISTS

Hội Họa Sĩ Trẻ Saigon (The Society of Saigonese Young Artists) was officially established in 1966, having started as an informal group in the early 1960s, as a voice for advocates of a new art. It was unlike its counterpart, Hội Mỹ Thuật Việt-Nam (Việt-Nam Fine Arts Association), which was a governing body controlled by political authorities.⁹⁰ The Society’s manifesto was as follows:

To follow modern art movements closest to our tendencies and that resides in the hearts of our Vietnamese audience.

To bring art to the masses, devote art to them so that art is not a luxury item in society, but something necessary, a flame fostering life and humanity.

To bring in a positive atmosphere in criticism, leaving out the hypocritical diplomacy.⁹¹

To some extent, *The Society of Saigonese Young Artists* fulfilled the suggestion that the *Creation Group* made in 1960. Society members included: Nguyễn Trung, Nguyễn Khai, Trịnh Cung, Đinh Cường, Nguyễn Lâm, who were popular artists, whose art marked new ventures into different styles that inclined more to Symbolism and Expressionism than narrative. The common point among these artists was, that when still at art school, they all gained first success in the annual *Spring Painting Awards*. With the exception of Văn Đen (winner in 1960), who had his art education in Paris, all the other Award winners were members of *The Society of Saigonese Young Artists*: Cù Nguyễn (gold in 1961), Lâm Triết (gold in 1962),

⁸⁹ Interview by Boi Tran Huynh with Trịnh Cung, December 2002.

⁹⁰ See Nora Taylor, *The Artists and the State: the Politics of Painting and National Identity in Ha Noi: Việt Nam 1925-1995*, Dissertation at Cornell University, 1997

⁹¹ Manifesto of the *Society of Young Saigonese Artists*, published 10 November 1973.

Nguyễn Trung (silver in 1960 and gold in 1963), Đinh Cường (silver in 1962) (fig.57) and Trịnh Cung (gold in 1964). They used pseudonyms in order to get around the school regulation, which was, “not to participate in an exhibition without permission from the school.”⁹²



Figure 57: Đinh Cường, *Untitled*, 1974.

The artist, Trịnh Cung, quickly gained recognition after graduation. His painting *Autumn of Childhood*⁹³ (fig.58) was displayed at the First International Exhibition in 1962 in Saigon and awarded an Honour Certificate by the judging panel. His diffuse blue colours expressed a dreamy world craving for peace and gradually became a symbolic code for his art, mixed with Romanticism that described inward complexity and memories.

⁹² Lê Văn Đệ, interviewed by Nguyễn Ngu I, *Views on Painting*, Bách Khoa, n.143, p.89.

⁹³ Now in the possession of the Bennetts in Maryland, the US.



Figure 58: Trịnh Cung, *Autumn of Childhood*, 1962.



Figure 59: Nguyễn Trung, *Girl at the Table*, 1964. Figure 60: Nguyễn Trung, *Girl and Lotus*, 1972.

Due to personal problems, Nguyễn Trung (1940-) dropped his studies at the National Fine Arts College of Saigon after second year in 1963, when he won a Gold at the *Spring Painting Awards*. He tried to escape from Việt-Nam in order to get to Paris, “the capital of the Arts” in the eyes of almost all Vietnamese art students. He was captured and spent a year in jail. After that misfortune, Nguyễn Trung became a prolific painter and art activist. He was chairman of *The Society of Saigonese Young Artists* from 1967 to 1972. Nguyễn Trung exemplifies the

aspiration and success of finding a language of one's own to represent something Vietnamese in the European medium of oil painting. In comparing his two paintings, made eight years apart: *Girl at the Table* (fig.59) and *Girl and Lotus* (fig.60), one can see that he moved from a Picasso-type blue period, in which he painted solitary subjects to an original image of tranquillity. He still preferred blue, but the former chunky brushstrokes became transparent, smooth and affirmative in his later paintings.



Figure 61: Nguyễn Khai, *Mother and Child*, 1975.



Figure 62: Nguyễn Khai, *Untitled*, 1973.

Nguyễn Khai (1940-), was born Bửu Khải, a royal offspring, who graduated from the National Fine Art College of Saigon in 1963. In the same year, he won a Bronze in the *Spring Painting Awards*. Nguyễn Khai shared with other members of his group a Modigliani look to his female subjects that Thái Tuấn had earlier initiated, as seen in, *Mother and Child* (1975) (fig.61). Nguyễn Khai then began working with semi-abstract work (fig.62) and moved in the direction of minimalism. Marc Planchon, a French art critic working in Saigon, called Nguyễn Khai's painting "Peintures? Ou Poemes peints?" (Painting? Or Poems painted?).⁹⁴ Paul Klee was Nguyễn Khai's favourite artist.

⁹⁴ Cited from Huỳnh Hữu Ủy, *Nghệ Thuật Tạo Hình Saigon trước năm 1975* (Plastic Arts in Saigon before 1975) p. 130.



Figure 63: Hồ Thành Đức, *Eastern Dance*, early 1970s.

For Hồ Thành Đức, poverty, rather than a search, led him to a new medium. His finances limited him to collage and eventually marked him as the first artist of this medium (fig.63). It is said that Hồ Thành Đức produced a collage in which he incorporated into his canvas part of the tattered and burnt robe of the venerable Thích Quảng Đức.⁹⁵

Nguyễn Lâm (1941-) (fig.64) was born Lâm Huỳnh Long. The pseudonym was initially used in order to get around the National Fine Art College's principle when he entered the *Spring Painting Awards* in 1962 and won a silver prize.

⁹⁵ The first Buddhist monk to immolate himself in public, on 11 June 1963 in Saigon, to protest the Diem regime's treatment of the Buddhists.



Figure 64: Nguyễn Lâm, *Black Still Life*, 1972.

The Society of Saigonese Young Artists could have done more for Vietnamese Modernism in the South but the war and the lack of a national fine arts museum was devastating to their works. If people in the North were threatened by American bombings, then southerners were endangered by their own countrymen, either Việt Cộng or Northern army, through roadblocks, road mines and ambushes. The joss paper (fig.65) showing a line of male figures between the two rifles implies people's fear in South Việt-Nam toward the war and conscription. Joss papers were burned in the belief that the image could substitute for the loss of a life, usually soldiers or innocent civilians caught in cross-fire. They are still produced in contemporary Việt-Nam, no longer with images of rifles related to war.



Figure 65: Joss paper during the war.

In contrast to the weak American influence on Saigonese visual arts, American individuals contributed considerably to the arts by keeping Vietnamese paintings of this period in their private collections. Marinka and John Bennett in Virginia, U.S. own the largest Vietnamese art collection of this era. Dr. John Bennett went twice to Việt-Nam to work: in 1963-1965, as an adviser in economic development programs and again in 1972-1975, as Deputy-Director of USAID in Việt-Nam. On John Bennett's assignment in Saigon, Marinka worked as a volunteer teaching English at high schools and she became a cultural activist, gradually becoming involved in Vietnamese art.



Figure 66: John and Marinka Bennett at an exhibition, beside Mai Chửng's *The Seed*, courtesy of the Bennetts

Marinka and John Bennett attended many exhibitions in Saigon and came to know the artists over the years (fig.66). Marinka was asked to run a few exhibitions relating to business, for example, the exhibition celebrating the opening of the Agricultural Bank in Saigon in 1974. Also in the 1970s, Marinka co-operated with artists, particularly those of *The Society of Saigonese Young Artists*, and hung their paintings in her large home in Saigon where the Bennetts' American and Vietnamese colleagues gathered and sometimes purchased a painting.



Figure 67: Tôn Nữ Kim Phượng, *Construction in Grey*, 1964.

The Bennett's collection includes 50 paintings of different media from 12 well-known artists of the period. Nguyễn Trung's six paintings range from his early dark blue period of 1964 to his established style of 1972. Nguyễn Khai's geometrical images of people are also held in the collection, as is *Construction in Grey*⁹⁶ (fig.67) by the female artist Tôn Nữ Kim Phượng (1941-), a Mondrian-like abstract painting in light blues and greys projecting a dynamic and complicated mood.

The two unusual artists in this collection are Cao Bá Minh, a self-taught artist, who painted organic shapes (fig.68), and Hồ Nguyễn, who painted with oil on aluminium (fig.69), ranging from abstract art to portraits of young, gloomy women. There was hardly any trace of these two artists in the publication before 1975. La Hon, who remained active after 1975, was also collected by the Bennetts. *Peaceful Mid Autumn* (fig.70) and *Birds and Man*, (fig.71) were two of his surrealist haunting works.

⁹⁶ This painting appears in the catalogue of 1964 *Đình Cường, Trinh Cung, Tôn Nữ Kim Phượng Peintures*



Figure 68: Cao Bá Minh, *Abstract I*, 1974.



Figure 69: Hồ Nguyễn, *Untitled*, 1974.



Figure 70: La Hon, *Peaceful Mid Autumn*, 1970s.



Figure 71: La Hon, *Birds and Man*, 1971.

The Bennett's collection also contains Trịnh Cung's, *Autumn of Childhood*, which gained an honour certificate in the International Exhibition held in Saigon in 1962. However, to trace the whereabouts of other paintings that won national awards would require further research. The collection also incorporates works by the artist-couple, Nguyễn Trí Minh (1924-) and Trương Thị Thịnh (1928-). Beside these 50 paintings, Marinka Bennett also collected 37 high quality offset printed reproductions of Saigonese paintings, torn from calendars produced between 1972-1974, by the Agricultural Development Bank and the Industrial Development Bank

of Việt-Nam. These calendars reproduced paintings by Tạ Ty, Văn Đen, Nguyễn Lâm, Tú Duyên among many others.

While Saigonese art enjoyed the diversity of styles and wide contacts with the world, it also accommodated dissident art, representative of the disintegration in southern society.



Figure 72: Bửu Chí, *The Lock*, 1974, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 73: Bửu Chí, *From the Inside*, 1974, courtesy of the artist.

For instance, Bửu Chí (1940-2002), was a member of the Nguyễn Royal family. He was studying law at the University of Saigon in the late 1960s, and practiced art as a hobby. He joined the student movements in early 1970, was arrested several times and spent three years in jail until 1975. His drawings in ink (fountain pen) on paper are strong and convincing, using metaphors to criticise the Saigon government. *The Lock* (fig.72) and *From the Inside* (fig.73) seem to correspond to the voice of the National Liberation Front (NLF),⁹⁷ and the most negative aspects of southern society. His works were smuggled out of the jail and fed to information-greedy newspapers in the West and, thereby, fuelled the anti-war movements outside Việt-Nam. In doing so, he gave credit to the NLF and was well taken care of by the “brothers of the other side” both before and during his time in jail.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Established in December 1960, commonly known as Việt Cong

⁹⁸ Interview by Boi Tran Huynh in March, 2002.

Phạm Huy Tường painted *Chúc Mừng Năm Mới* (Happy New Year) at the end of 1975 to celebrate the first Tết (Lunar New Year) of national reunion. All the characters of the phrase *Chúc Mừng Năm Mới* are woven together in optimism. Tường, like other Southerners, was expecting a new departure for Việt-Nam. However, their hope did not last long.



Figure 74: Phạm Huy Tường, *Chúc Mừng Năm Mới* (Happy New Year), 1975, courtesy of Robert Bezuijen

Conclusion:

Having modelled itself and utilising the human resources from the Fine Arts College of Indochina, Saigonese art was like a young tree planted in a new and forward-looking land; that young tree later bore different fruits to those of the old root. The change of aesthetics in South Việt-Nam fluctuated between the drive toward modernity and tradition. Despite the existence of foreign troops and their interactions in everyday life, southerners managed to preserve their cultural identity and the visual arts. National symbols and motifs in architecture became a signature of the townscapes, with buildings such as the State Library, Independence Palace and Vĩnh Nghiêm Temple, as did the international style, seen in the Chợ

Rẫy Hospital or Caravelle Hotel. The tension between tradition and modernity was portrayed most dramatically and fascinatingly in the modifications made to the áo dài, from its collar to its flaps. Changes were applied to all of its parts; yet, the áo dài retained its distinctive character. It was not eliminated from the Vietnamese wardrobe.

The neo-classicism nurtured at the art schools in the South turned out beautiful images of landscapes, peasantry and Vietnamese-ness, which was presented in this chapter as the ‘lost’ national art. At the same time, non-figurative representations proliferated in the works of the avant-garde and young Saigonese artists.

However, the political pressure imposed by the Communist authorities, the ‘imperialist-decadent’ label that Saigonese art was to bear after the fall of Saigon, obscured the art of this period in prejudices. Even current Saigonese artists, who have made great contributions to Vietnamese contemporary arts, dare not reveal all aspects of their works. Out of 42 papers read at the conference on *Vietnamese Art in the 20th Century* in Hà Nội,⁹⁹ there was only one paper by Nguyễn Trung on Saigonese art of the period 1954-1975. He tends to compare Saigonese art with current contemporary standards rather than in relation to the historical context, for instance, in comparison to that of the North of the same period.

Saigonese artworks were different to those produced by the North and the post-war art historians did not accept this difference. Saigonese art was, in fact, healthy, because the works produced departed significantly from the teaching of imitation at the art schools. Furthermore, Saigonese art managed to communicate in a universal language without being unduly influenced by the U.S. Infact, European influences were deliberately chosen to oppose the rise of American power. This preference was also founded in the long established contact and understanding of French culture. The progress from figurative to abstract art (but not Abstract Expressionism) was made in an attempt to explore new horizons in art. This

⁹⁹ *Kỹ Yếu Hội Thảo Mỹ Thuật Việt Nam Thế Kỷ 20* (Conference Papers on Vietnamese Art in the 20th Century), The Fine Arts University of Hà Nội and the Fine Arts Institute, Hà Nội, 2000.

demonstrates the autonomy that southern artists upheld in a turbulent time and by applying ‘the philosophy of water,’ Vietnamese art could integrate new elements while retaining its own characteristics.

Unlike northern artists who accompanied North Vietnamese and Việt Cộng forces on the battlefields and used their art as a weapon to fight against the Saigon regime and America, southern artists did not directly reflect the war in their art. Rather, they portrayed the hope for peace, the tiring acidity of a prolonged civil war and the confusion of a generation who wondered about life while fighting. Whilst most northern Vietnamese artists were compliant with Socialist Realism and had no objection to become ‘artist-soldiers/ soldier-artists’ in nationalistic art production, southern Vietnamese artists experimented with their creativity, leaving very little room for propaganda and battle art. Saigonese art preserved the romance and yin spirit of Việt-Nam and approached modern art by simultaneously opposing and integrating outside influences, which were not Socialist. In the context of the cold war of the second half of the 1970s, Saigonese art was alienated because of its dissimilarities with Socialist Realism. Understanding Saigonese art of this period helps to apprehend the causes and consequences of the next phase of Vietnamese art history, when the two brothers – the North and the South – met in 1975.

Most Saigonese paintings are now in collections outside Việt-Nam, by travelling overseas with French, Belgians, Americans, and Australians, who worked in Việt-Nam during the war. They also reside with some expatriates, those who chose artworks related to their personal memories. The provenance of these artworks was accidentally drawn by war, migration, dislocation and discrimination. Over time and through conciliation, Saigonese art might be acknowledged and afforded an appropriate status and location in Vietnamese art history.