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| Modern Lacquer painting in Vietnam |
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| Today, lacquer painting (sơn mài)is a specifically Vietnamese form of expression. Its revival was largely due to the active part played by the French and Vietnamese from the colonial era onwards and the foundation of the *Ecole supérieure des Beaux-Arts de l’Indochine* in Hanoi, in 1924. Prior to this, lacquer painting was used by the Chinese and the Japanese then, later, by the Vietnamese. At that time, lacquer painting was used only for decorative purposes, to protect and embellish religious and household objects, thanks to its thick and glossy coat. After the 1930s, Vietnamese artists tried to go further and develop the potential of this traditional technique. A lacquer workshop was organized at the *Ecole supérieure des Beaux-Arts de l’Indochine* with the help of Vietnamese craftsmen who taught the different steps to create a lacquer painting. Within these special surroundings and then thanks to their own research, Vietnamese students, budding artists, like Nguyễn Gia Trí, Trần Văn Cẩn, Phạm Hầukept on trying to increase the nuances of the medium and to give a superior relief to the lacquer board through rubbing and polishing. Lacquer has finally become a new medium for either figurative, realist or abstract paintings.  Lacquer is an organic substance which comes from a tree and lacquer painting remains an arduous and time consuming medium. The wooden board first needs to be prepared with various undercoats, amongst them traditional black lacquer that needs to be harden for hours in a specific hot and humid environment, then sanded down and polished to add strength. This smooth polished surface is then ready to receive the drawing and the different layers of coloured lacquers, which will build up to form the work. Each layer is left to dry and then burnished in water. The artist will only discover the result of his work after the final rubbing down of the layers to let the right colour appear at the right place. He has then to keep in mind his drawing and the different layers of colours. Nguyễn Gia Trí enjoyed this mental process as it appeared so fundamentally opposed to oil painting.  Since the end of the 1990s, Vietnamese artists who recognise in this medium a way to stay connected with their past, carry on experiments with finding new pigments that can be mixed with the lacquer, or texture effects like sprinkling gold or silver leaf dust, pearl powder or adding shells or eggshells, etc. However, lacquer process needs a specific environment hardly conceivable with the crammed conditions in which Vietnamese artists usually work, which could discourage some of them. Finally, some of the Vietnamese painters who have become masters in this long and rigorous technique provide, in return, training courses to European artists looking for new ways of expressing themselves. |
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