**To Ngoc Van (1906-1954)**

To Ngoc Van was a noted Vietnamese painter, one of the first generation of students to graduate from the École des Beaux Arts de l’Indochine, Hanoi, founded in 1925. He was particularly known for his works in oil, which captured the romantic subjects popular in Vietnamese painting of the 1930s and 1940s. As one of the first Vietnamese artists to write and publish art criticism in the local press, he was also influential in shaping the public discourse around Vietnamese modern art. Like many other intellectuals of his generation, he lived through the transition from the colonial period to the anti-colonial, Communist-led revolution, and consequently had to make profound changes to his ideas and practices. During the First Indochina War (1946-1954), he transformed his manner of painting to suit the new ideological environment, creating propaganda works to boost morale, as well as images of peasants and soldiers. However, he was still a strong advocate for the visual arts, and published passionate defenses of creative freedom, artistic education and the practice of modern Vietnamese lacquer painting, despite the ideological pressures of the period.

To Ngoc Van was born in Hanoi. From 1926-1931, he studied at the École des Beaux Arts de l’Indochine (EBAI). To Ngoc Van worked in several media, but became best known for his oil paintings, which were typical of the romantic tone of work from the EBAI. His paintings showed some Post-Impressionistic influences in the flattening of the compositional space, although he generally favoured gentle and harmonious colours.

In 1945, To Ngoc Van joined the Viet Minh anti-colonial uprising. When war broke out in 1946, he moved to the resistance zone in North Vietnam. That year, he was also one of the earliest artists to be commissioned to create a portrait of Ho Chi Minh. His artwork altered during wartime (1946-1954) to reflect the requirements of the Viet Minh’s cultural guidelines, using a more realist style and taking soldiers and peasants as his subjects. His artworks from wartime were predominantly drawings, as material conditions prevented the production of major works. From 1950-1953, To Ngoc Van served as the director of the first post-colonial art school in Vietnam, commonly referred to as the Khoa Khang Chien (Resistance Class). This class studied drawing, painting and printmaking in the difficult conditions of the resistance zones, moving between locations to avoid bombings, sharing their work with the local population in makeshift exhibitions. In April 1954, To Ngoc Van was sent to the battle of Dien Bien Phu to sketch the activities of the military, before his untimely death in June of that year.

To Ngoc Van also had an important role in developing the public discourse around Vietnamese art. In the colonial period, he wrote for a number of important cultural newspapers, reflecting on the progress of the fledgling Vietnamese modern arts. In his articles written after 1945, he advanced ideas that were controversial in the ideological environment of the revolution: for example, he argued strongly for the distinction between artistic creation and ideological propaganda, and for promoting the importance of education in the arts to create informed criticism. He also championed Vietnamese lacquer painting, which he thought could make an important contribution to global modernism. In his own resistance-period work, he experimented with creating lacquer paintings on revolutionary subjects. Although his writings were criticised in this period, To Ngoc Van was nonetheless revered as a revolutionary hero after his death.

**Further Reading**

Ninh, Kim N. B., (2002) *A World Transformed: the Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945-1965*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

An exploration of the development of the Viet Minh’s cultural policy during the anti-colonial war and in the early years of the socialist state. Of particular interest is the chapter on intellectual responses to the state, which details the debate over the writings of To Ngoc Van, pp.73-77.

Taylor, Nora Annesley (2009) *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art*, second edition, Singapore: NUS Press.

A critical analysis of the development of modern Vietnamese art history, which discusses the role of To Ngoc Van in the colonial and revolutionary periods, as well as his posthumous reception.

To Ngoc Thanh, ed., (2008) *To Ngoc Van: Hinh hoa va Ky hoa* (To Ngoc Van: Drawings and Sketches), Hanoi: Fine Arts Publishing House.

To Ngoc Thanh, ed., (2006) *To Ngoc Van: Drawings and Sketches*, Hanoi: Fine Arts Publishing House.

Two volumes of collected sketches and drawings, published by the artist’s family. Accompanied by brief biographical information.

Artwork List

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Thumbnail | Details | Copyright Holder |
| E:\BACKUP OCT 12\Pictures work\Thesis illustrations\Thesis illustrations 007.jpg | To Ngoc Van, *Hai Thieu nu va em be*, (Two Young Girls and a Baby), 1944, oil, 120 x 77cm, Vietnam Fine Arts Museum, Hanoi.  Note: An alternative version of this artwork is also held in the collection of Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. Both museums believe their work to be an original by the artist. | Note: Since To Ngoc Van died in 1954, these images are probably out of copyright. However, if a copyright holder is required, it would be best to seek permission from the artist’s son,  Mr To Ngoc Thanh,  Address: **Số 4, ngõ 46/15 phố Phạm Ngọc Thạch,**  **phường Trung Tự,**  **quận Đống Đa,**  **Hà Nội, Việt Nam.** |