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| **Ecole Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de l’Indochine** |
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| The *Ecole supérieure des Beaux-Arts de l’Indochine* in Hanoi was opened in 1924 by the French government with the aim of training artists and teachers of drawing. The introduction of modern painting in Vietnam took place in a colonial context. The curriculum was supposed to combine Western art with Far-Eastern traditions, with the teaching modelled on that of the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. Topics taught there included: life drawing, linear perspective, open-air painting and oil painting, all of which were new for Vietnamese students and completely different from their own tradition. The school also taught Far Eastern art history and techniques, such as silk painting and lacquer painting. Those Vietnamese painters who chose oil painting accepted a completely new medium. |
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This way of painting was new regarding the Vietnamese way of thinking which usually worked with conventions and symbols, without being concerned with reality. The school’s first students, including Tô Ngọc Vân or Trần Văn Cẩn tried to mix what they had just learned with what they already knew from their own tradition.  The French took power in Indochina by the second half of the 19th century. From the beginning of the 20th century onwards, the French government promoted Indochinese civilizations and their traditions in creating a teaching structure to support the arts. Schools were established for the applied arts with French and Indochinese teachers, where the teaching took into consideration regional traditions. These schools opened at Thu Dau Mot, Bien Hoa, Gia Dinh (Cochinchine), Phnom Penh (Cambodia), Vientiane (Laos), Hanoi, Haiphong (Tonkin) and Hue (Annam). These were followed by the opening of *Ecole supérieure des Beaux-Arts de l’Indochine*.  Victor Tardieu, an academic and naturalist painter who travelled to Indochina in 1921 after being awarded the Prix Indochine (1920), was the founder and the first director of the school. After Tardieu’s death in 1938, Evariste Jonchère, a painter and a sculptor who produced very powerful works, became the school’s director until 1945. He was awarded the Prix Indochine in 1932. Nguyễn Nam Sơn played a large role in the early years of the school, which was quite rare for an Indochinese person. Having received a bi-cultural education, he first helped Victor Tardieu in his task of creating the school and then taught decorative art until around 1945, where he also helped greatly in organising traditional Indochinese instruction in the curriculum. His art was academic, realistic and full of expression.  The French painter, Joseph Inguimberty received an assignment from the French government in 1925, stayed in Indochina until 1945, and became a popular teacher. He enjoyed painting outdoors with his students, often sketching peasants at work. He painted large oils on canvass in his workshop from plein-air oil sketches, deploying linear perspective, simple forms, flat coloured areas (green and ochre) and bold black outlines. Inguimberty is now famous for the role he played in the development of lacquer painting in Vietnam. As a result of his efforts together with the Vietnamese artists who adopted the medium, lacquer painting progressed from an artisan technique to an artistic one.  André Mairetravelled twice to Indochina. The first time from 1919 to 1921 as a serviceman and drawing teacher at the Saigon’s *Lycée*; the second time from 1948 to 1958 as a drawing teacher at the *Ecole d’Architecture*, which was part of the *Ecole supérieure des Beaux-Arts de l’Indochine*, first at Dalat (1926), then at Saigon (1950). His example reflects the change in the French colonial artists’ style between the two World Wars. The works of his first stay were mainly oil paintings, with naturalistic compositions and colours. However, when he travelled to Indochina for the second time, he gained more maturity in his artistic work preferring to use gouache and red chalk, showing stylistic daring in his choice of colours.  Nguyễn Phan Chánh, Lê Phổ and Mai Trung Thứ were students from the first year of the *Ecole supérieure des Beaux-Arts de l’Indochine* and are all famous for their skilful silk paintings. Like silk, lacquer painting was a specifically Vietnamese artistic means of expression. While the Chinese and the Japanese also used lacquer painting, they employed it only for decorative purposes. After the 1930s, the Vietnamese students of the *Ecole supérieure des Beaux-Arts de l’Indochine* tried to go further and to develop the potential of this traditional technique. Nguyễn Gia Trí, who passed the exam in 1936, played an essential part in this revival. Nguyễn Gia Trí’s primary aim with regards the lacquer medium was to obtain the same level of painting as oils, with regards perspective, modelling in the roundand infinite variation of colours. Thanks to his research on what pigments could be used with lacquer, the range of colours increased greatly, whilst the rubbing down and the polishing of the lacquer board also increased nuances and produced a better finish.  Through the *Ecole supérieure des Beaux-Arts de l’Indochine*, Vietnamese artists were introduced to modern art, new aesthetics and mediums. The processes that they adopted from French avant-garde movements were not in opposition to traditional art forms, but tended to renew them. Perspective was included but rarely realistic, the artist preferring the intimacy of closed space and composition was synthetic, reflecting popular works. Vietnamese artists were also adept at using flat coloursand forms obtained uniquely by single accentuated strokes, in the style of calligraphy.  The first artists trained by the *Ecole supérieure des Beaux-Arts de l’Indochine* developed a modern figurative art which derived from an idealisation of everyday life. Following the Second World War and decolonization, these artists found inspiration elsewhere. Many left Hanoi and went into to the wilderness. They mixed daily with peasants, ethnic minorities and village folk. Their quest for a cultural identity may be explained in the context of Vietnam’s nationalist policy as a means of establishing its independence.  The former *Ecole* *supérieure des Beaux-Arts de l’Indochine* had seen some changes due to the war and the imposition of the official ideology of Socialist Realism by a Communist power but the Vietnamese authority has never disowned the school’s students, teachers, directors or famous artists. Researchers and Vietnamese contemporary painters all agreed that the school gave Vietnamese art and artists a new place in society and allowed the introduction of modern art in Vietnam. |
| Further reading:  (Du Fleuve Rouge au Mékong, Visions du Viêt Nam)  (Essays on Modern and Contemporary Vietnamese Art)  (Trường Đại học Mỹ thuật Hà Nội, 1925-1990, L’Ecole supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Hanoi) |