**Nguyen Gia Tri (1908-1993)**

Born in Ha Dong, Vietnam, Nguyen Gia Tri was a modern painter, best known for his virtuosity in the medium of lacquer painting. Modern lacquer painting was invented at the École des Beaux Arts de l’Indochine, and was an experimental practice, drawing from traditional Vietnamese lacquer techniques to create a two-dimensional painted surface, akin to an oil painting. While a student at this school in the 1930s, Nguyen Gia Tri developed an expressive style in lacquer, marrying Post-Impressionist influences with an exploration of the medium’s visual characteristics, such as translucency and sheen. His most common subjects were aestheticized female figures, blending into amorphous backgrounds. Due to his work in the 1930s and 1940s, Nguyen Gia Tri was credited with transforming lacquer from a decorative art to a ‘fine art’ medium. The idea of lacquer as a uniquely Vietnamese form of ‘fine art’ had a special significance in the context of the burgeoning nationalism of colonial-period Vietnam. Following the Vietnamese Revolution of 1945, and the outbreak of the First Indochina War (1946-1954), Nguyen Gia Tri left Hanoi, eventually settling in Saigon, South Vietnam. While he continued to work in his characteristic style, he also experimented widely with the medium, including by exploring its innate facility for abstraction.

Nguyen Gia Tri began studying at the École des Beaux Arts de l’Indochine in 1928, graduating in 1936, after a brief hiatus. He was a leading student in the new field of lacquer painting, distinguished for his expressive handling of the medium, and his skill at creating different tonal effects from the limited range of colours available in the traditional lacquer palette. In the 1930s and 1940s, his characteristic lyrical paintings combined influences from European art – including Matisse and Botticelli – with an exploration of the aesthetic qualities of the lacquer medium. In the 1930s, he also became involved with the circle of modernizing Vietnamese intellectuals known as the *Tu Luc Van Doan* (Self-Reliant Literary Group), drawing illustrations and satirical cartoons for the groups’ publications. Because of his ties to nationalist politics, Nguyen Gia Tri was detained by the French colonial government for a period in the early 1940s.

Nguyen Gia Tri did not participate in the revolutionary uprising in 1945, but instead left Vietnam for Hong Kong, eventually settling in Saigon. In Saigon, he became an important figure in the South Vietnamese art world, which was open to international influences and Modernist experimentation. He continued to work on his characteristic subjects, but also began to create abstract lacquer paintings, one of which was used for the decoration of the new National Library of Saigon in 1968. He also created lacquers in a neo-traditionalist style, showing scenes of Vietnamese history. His last major work was *Spring Garden in the Center, South and North*. This massive composition took many years to complete, and represented the desire for the peaceful reunification of Vietnam, using female figures to symbolize the North, Center and South of the country. Nguyen Gia Tri’s continual experimentation in the lacquer medium is also evident from his large body of sketches (some using lacquer on paper), now held by the Ho Chi Minh City Museum of Fine Arts. Nguyen Gia Tri died in Ho Chi Minh City in 1993.

**References and Further Reading:**

Nguyen Xuan Viet (2009), *Hoa Si Nguyen Gia Tri Noi Ve Sang Tao* (Painter Nguyen Gia Tri’s Words on Creation), Nha xuat ban van nghe: Ho Chi Minh City. (A compilation of Nguyen Gia Tri’s thoughts about artistic creation, as recorded and compiled by his informal student and sometime assistant - the lacquer artist Nguyen Xuan Viet – between 1975 and 1992.)

Thuan Thien (1999), “Nguyen Gia Tri: Bac Thay Cua Son Mai Nghe Thuat” (Nguyen Gia Tri: Master of Lacquer Art), in eds. Hoang Hung et al, *Nhung Nguoi Lao Dong Sang Tao Cua The Ky* (The Creative Workers of the Century), volume 1, Hanoi: Nha xuat ban lao dong.

(An important chapter about Nguyen Gia Tri, containing detailed biographical information and descriptions of major artworks.)

**Illustration:**

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| D:\My Documents\ARTWORKS AND IMAGES_EXTERNAL\Ho Chi Minh City Museum of Fine Arts\cambodia 168.JPG  Please source full-size image directly from Fine Arts Museum of Ho Chi Minh City. | *Vuon Xuan Trung Nam Bac* (Spring Garden in the Centre, South and North), 1970-1988, 200 x 540 (9 panels), Fine Arts Museum of Ho Chi Minh City. | Nguyễn Gia Tuệ (artist’s son)  Address: 305/24/3 Lê Văn Sỹ, Phường 1 Quận Tân Bình, Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh, Việt Nam.  Email:  giathinh001@yahoo.com |