**Socialist Realism in Visual Art, Vietnam**

Socialist Realism was the dominant style in the visual arts of North Vietnam, from 1945 to the early 1980s. The style was widely promoted following the 1945 revolution through the writing of Truong Chinh (1907-1988), a senior Vietnamese Communist Party member and leading theoretician. Socialist Realism in Vietnamese visual art is characterised by its easily-legible, realist style, optimistic tone, and generally limited range of subject matter: portraits of Ho Chi Minh, scenes of industrial and rural work, soldiers, and historical events associated with Vietnam’s revolutionary development. While Socialist Realism in Vietnam was influenced by art from other Socialist states, the style was also adapted to local aesthetics, especially the artistic foundations of the École des Beaux Arts de l’Indochine (1925-1945), and influences from popular painting and printmaking. Socialist Realism in Vietnam retained several elements of colonial-period art, such as the techniques of silk and lacquer painting, and the influence of Impressionistic oil painting. Decades of war in Vietnam also affected the development of Socialist Realism, as many artists had to work primarily on producing ephemeral propaganda materials. Socialist Realism retained its primacy in North Vietnamese art until the 1980s.

**Beginnings in the First Indochina War, 1945-1954**

Although interest in Socialist Realism in Vietnam predates the revolution, the style had no substantial influence on the visual arts until after 1945. During the First Indochina War (1946-1954), the Vietnamese Communist Party’s ideological position on culture was set by the Party theorist and political leader Truong Chinh, through writings like the *Theses on Culture* (1943) and *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture* (1948). Influenced by Mao Zedong, Truong Chinh argued that Vietnamese art should be national, scientific and popular in character, and promote the development of a Socialist society. He specified Socialist Realism as the basis for artistic practice, and vigorously rejected Modernist formal experimentation (Truong, 1948, rep. 1977). Not all artists received the Party’s framework uncritically: for example, the painter To Ngoc Van (1906-1954) published some articles arguing for greater artistic freedom in the late 1940s (Ninh, 2002, 73-82).

During the war, many artists joined the Viet Minh resistance movement against France, and moved into the mountainous areas of northern Vietnam. The works they produced there can be considered the first phase of Socialist Realism in Vietnamese art. However, due to the extreme material shortages caused by the war, most artists were unable to produce major artworks during this period. Instead, they sketched the activities of farmers and soldiers, and made prints promoting various political campaigns. Stylistic and technical developments in the arts were minimal, although a studio for revolutionary lacquer painting was briefly established by To Ngoc Van and Nguyen Thu Nghiem (b.1919).

**Institutionalisation and the Second Indochina War (1954-1976)**

Once peace was restored in 1954, the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) began to establish new cultural institutions. The use of Socialist Realist style was strongly tied to the state-based system of art production and display. From 1957, visual artists were organised into an Artist’s Association (Hoi My Thuat). Without a private art market, many artists made their living through a stipend paid through the Association. The Association was also the main channel for the organisation of art exhibitions, thus exercised a strong influence over artistic production (Taylor, 2009, 53-56). The post-war period also brought more contact between artists from Vietnam and other Socialist countries. Vietnamese artists were sent overseas to study or exhibit their work in the Socialist countries, and in the early 1960s, teachers from the Soviet Union came to teach at the University of Fine Arts, Hanoi (Pham and Bui, 2005, 98). However, despite this increase in international contacts, there was also a deliberate emphasis on defining “national character” in the visual arts (Taylor, 2001, 113-4).

Improved material conditions after 1954 meant that artists were now able to develop larger works. A painting from this period that was considered to be an acceptable example of Vietnamese Socialist Realism was *Gap Go* (Meeting), by Mai Van Hien, appreciated for its positive tone, simple style, bright colour and message of cooperation between soldiers and civilians (Taylor, 2001, 116-7). Other artists at this time conducted further research into lacquer, creating large lacquer paintings on themes such as wartime victories, Vietnamese history, and idealised images of workers and farmers. A significant example is the large 1957 painting *Xo Viet Nghe Tinh* (Nghe Tinh Soviets), representing an anti-colonial movement of the 1920s, which was collaboratively painted in lacquer by six prominent Vietnamese artists, from a sketch by Nguyen Duc Nung (1909-1983). Painting on silk continued to be practiced, using the techniques developed at the EBAI, but capturing the lives of workers, farmers and soldiers, for instance in the works of Nguyen Thu (b.1930) and Vu Giang Huong (1930-2011). In sculpture, artists like Nguyen Hai (1933-2012), Diep Minh Chau (1919-2002) and Le Cong Thanh (b.1932) began to develop new styles for conveying revolutionary subject matter in a heroic mode.

The late 1950s were also marked by the most significant episode of dissent against the Party’s control over culture, which was known as the *Nhan Van Giai Pham* affair, after two new literary journals which emerged in 1956. The intellectuals involved with these journals – many of whom were Communist Party members who had participated in the revolution – advocated for greater cultural and civic freedoms. The movement was repressed in 1958, and the key intellectuals (including artists) involved with the publications were punished (Taylor, 2001, 115; Ninh, 2002, 136-163). Following this incident, certain artists, such as the renowned Modernist painters Bui Xuan Phai (1921-1988) and Nguyen Sang (1923-1988), retreated from mainstream culture, working largely unsupported and outside state structures. This episode marked the beginning of a schism between the state system of Socialist Realism and underground Modernist art (Taylor, 2001, 115-120).

As the activity of the Second Indochina war increased in the mid-1960s, artists were less able to devote themselves fully to art, as many had to serve as soldiers or factory workers. The government began to devote most of its cultural resources to the production of propaganda materials. Poster production began on a larger scale in the late 1960s. The aesthetics of Vietnamese propaganda posters had several different influences and sources: the painterly sensibility of the EBAI, the influence of local folk printing aesthetics, and a bolder, high-contrast, graphic style.

**1975-1986 Waning Influence of Socialist Realism**

Following the end of the Second Indochina War and the reunification of Vietnam in 1975, Socialist Realism became the official style for the whole of Vietnam. Many large-scale works were made in this period, commemorating the heroism of the war. The theme of industrial labour emerged more prominently than in previous decades. However, from the early 1980s, artists increasingly began to broaden the stylistic parameters of their work, even within conservative settings like the annual national exhibitions (Pham and Bui, 2005, 243-4). Inside the Artist’s Association, a younger generation of reformists began to advocate for change (Taylor, 2009, 77-93). This anticipated the official shift in government policy from 1986 through the policies of *Doi Moi* (Renovation). In the years following *Doi Moi*, most artists moved away from Socialist Realism towards wide-ranging experimentation with different styles, subjects and practices, supported by the development of the private market and independent art spaces. The principal area in which Socialist Realist aesthetics persist in Vietnam is in the public posters and promotional materials for government social campaigns. Socialist Realist poster art from the wartime period also has a popular second life as souvenirs for the tourist market.

**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. Contains important analysis of the cultural policies spearheaded by Truong Chinh and the responses of Vietnamese intellectuals, as well as discussion of the *Nhan Van Giai Pham* affair.

Pham Trung and Bui Nhu Huong (2005) *My Thuat Viet Nam Hien Dai* (*Modern Vietnamese Art*)*,* Hanoi: Fine Arts Publishing House.

A detailed survey text of art in Vietnam in the 20th century, with substantial material on art in the wartime periods and Socialist Realist art. Contains descriptions of major works in each period.

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

A seminal text in Vietnamese art history, which uses an ethnographic methodology to document the artistic community of Hanoi and the evolving reception of Vietnamese art history, throughout the ideological shifts of the 20th century. Of particular interest for understanding Socialist Realism in Vietnam is the discussion in this book of the role of the Artist’s Association and state patronage

Taylor, Nora A (2001), “Framing the National Spirit: Viewing and Reviewing Painting under the Revolution,” in ed. Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in late Socialist Vietnam*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, p. 109 - 134.

A critical analysis of the evolving and contested definitions of ‘Vietnamese’ painting in both revolutionary and post-revolutionary contexts.

Truong Chinh, (1977) ‘Marxism and Vietnamese Culture: Report delivered at the Second National Cultural Conference, July 1948.’ In *Truong Chinh: Selected Writings*, Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, p. 217-296.

An English translation of Truong Chinh’s important address to the Second National Cultural Conference, which set out the cultural guidelines of the Communist Party, including its commitment to Socialist Realism in the arts.

**Artworks**

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|  | **Nguyen Duc Nung, Tran Dinh Tho, Nguyen Van Ty, Pham Van Don, Nguyen Sy Ngoc and Huynh van Thuan, *Xo Viet Nghe Tinh* (Nghe Tinh Soviets), 1957, lacquer on board, 160 x 320 cm, collection of National Museum of Fine Arts, Vietnam.** | Copyright may rest also with the Vietnam Fine Arts Museum – recommend to contact the Museum directly on this matter. |