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Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art by Nora A. Taylor

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Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art. By Nora Annesley Taylor. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press (2004).

With radical political shifts affecting the social meanings of art, from colonialism through revolution and war to a market economy, Vietnam provides an ideal arena for the meeting of art history and anthropology. This disciplinary fusion figures prominently in the scholarship of contemporary Southeast Asian art, but has previously focused largely on Indonesia and Thailand. In her admirable study, *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnographic Study of Vietnamese Art*, Nora Taylor asks what it means to be an artist in Vietnam. Her answers illuminate the complex workings of nationalistic ideologies, social formations prominent in changing Hanoi art worlds, the emergence of various art markets, shifting measures of value, and the concerns and fortunes of individual painters since 1925.

Taylor rejects the possibility of a comprehensive art history of Vietnamese painting – given decades of war and a paucity of written sources, photographic documentation, and, indeed, artworks themselves (as many have left the country). Her work builds instead on a critical reading of extant scholarship with extensive artist interviews, their memories, her participation in and observations of the lives of Hanoi artists, and the “chatter” that pervades the local art world. She pays critical attention to patronage and changing contexts of artistic production – selling paintings to French colonial administrators, serving the people and the resistance through optimistic depictions of the wartime landscape and soldiers’ lives, and now seeking to define Vietnamese-ness in a globalized tournament of artistic identity. Taylor thus makes comprehensible artists’ needs to continually seek answers to “whom to please, what to paint, whom to trust” (p. 9). In the spirit of new approaches to the study of artmaking, Taylor allows “art” and “society” to separate only slightly on the conceptual level, and only to show them continuously acting on each other. Being an artist in Hanoi has, it seems, always been as much about one’s position in society – background, education, friendships, political involvement – as about the art one produces.

She periodizes her account of Vietnamese painting into the colonial era (1925-45), revolution and resistance (1945-75), postwar reunification (1975-86), and the open market since 1986, characterized by tourism, a privatized art market, and artists’ participation in regional and international art events. The political and institutional shifts through these periods promote different ideologies around “art,” providing both economic opportunities for and constraints on artistic production. At the same time Taylor traces continuities in the works’ artists produce – derived from the French-inflected art curriculum at the major art schools in the North, artists’ concerns with village life, landscapes, and the diverse ethnic groups that comprise the nation, and the forces of family-like artists’ communities on individual artistic development. Never confusing structure for practice, however, Taylor documents how individual artists maneuver in and around institutional ideologies to construct the visual culture of a society at different historical moments.

Her discussions of the career trajectory of one of the “modern masters ” Bui Xuan Phai prove instructive in this approach: although he had participated in the revolutionary

struggle against the French for independence, Phai remained outside the official art world painting portraits, streetscapes, and still-lives that he sold in the underground art market to foreigners in Hanoi. A young generation of Hanoi artists has subsequently embraced and valorized Phai for his independence and commitment to “art for art’s sake.” In contemporary terms his somber paintings of Hanoi streetscapes evoke a sense of “grief and loss,” which Vietnamese intellectuals now openly admit characterizes the 1960s as much as heroism and struggle against the Americans. While Phai’s art remained consistent in its content and style—the meanings and social significance of his work has shifted with the changing cultural currents within Vietnam.

One might argue that segregating a discussion of women painters into a separate chapter replicates their marginalization in a male-dominated art world, but doing so does facilitate Taylor’s focus on Vietnamese gender roles and women’s strategies for participating in the revolutionary struggle while maintaining their familial duties and responsibilities. Tacking between the social fields in which artists paint, and individual biographies and career trajectories, Taylor states in her conclusion that Vietnamese artists remain acutely attuned to their “social selves” and their place within various artists’ communities, but “have found it difficult to delve deeper into their own psyches and understand what makes them artists and why they needed art to express themselves...” (p. 133). Taylor’s own observations suggest that these questions will remain imponderables, perhaps, until and unless the specific social meanings of “art” incorporate an individualist psychology of consciousness and creativity.

Painters in Hanoi adds important perspectives to the growing body of literature on contemporary Southeast Asian art – as it also illuminates the highly specific political, economic, and social conditions that shape, but not determine, that art. Taylor’s deeply satisfying work further erodes unitary notions of an artistic modernity and the authority of Euro-American paradigms of art history and art-making to explain art production throughout the world. She convincingly demonstrates that artistic identity never remains stable but is always asserted, tested, defined, and redefined in local and now global social worlds.

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