

THE 
GRIFFIS ART CENTER

INTERNATIONAL ARTIST-in-RESIDENCE PROGRAM – MAISON des ARTISTES
NEW LONDON, CONNECTICUT USA

BUI Mai Hiên

1998 July Artist-in-Residence
Hà Nội, Socialist Republic of Vietnam (Former North Vietnam)



"Moonlight"

Date Acquired: 10/15/1998, Date Created:
Framed Dimensions: Unframed, Picture Dimensions: 27.5 X 36"
Medium: Lacquer on Board

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"I love the lacquer tradition of painting and I want to use modern art to express it. I am always looking for ways to use old tradition to express contemporary art. I am searching for myself through the work." With a strong personal preference for lacquer, Mai Hien was the first artist exhibiting abstract lacquer in Hanoi and Saigon. "There, a sister soul would find a harmonious wedding between things that seem incompatible:

tenderness and impetuosity
happiness and suffering
explosiveness and thoughtful contemplation."

"Perhaps this explains why Mai Hiên chooses lacquer to convey what she wants to express. Because in lacquer techniques, the elements and details of the work never fully show until the last phase; sometimes producing unexpected effects beyond the artist's volition. Mai Hiên always yearns for these surprises.

"Indeed, Mai Hiên has a particular love for lacquer. The more she works on this traditional medium, the more she finds it "multifarious, unwonted and full of surprises." With lacquer, she can indulge venturesomely in, and feel comfortable with diverse styles, from expressionist to abstract, and keeps up an infinite dialogue. Mai Hiên is perhaps the most prolific Vietnamese lacquer artist in abstract painting, developing new techniques to deal with this traditional material in a modern genre. The more she paints, the more she shakes off the influence from impressionism. I especially liked her series "Storm in Hanoi." I once ventured to dive into it, as deep as the very heart of the whirling storm, and there I found tormenting anguish, candid lust and unsaturated yearnings. I call that Silent tempest."

DUONG TUONG



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TRADITIONAL VIETNAMESE LAQUER

Lacquer is extracted from *Rhus vernicifera*, an Asian variety of a sumac tree, (Viet. *Son*), a plant native to Son Tay Province in the north of Vietnam. Lacquer trees have also been planted in the south, but the quality of the northern lacquer is held to be superior. Once the dark, thick liquid has been extracted it is processed and stored ready for use. After standing for a year, it is mixed with natural pigments that have been hand-ground with a mortar-and-pestle. Because of its viscosity, the lacquer is applied with a piece of wood rather than a brush. Lacquer painting is executed on a wooden panel covered with canvas, which is glued to the panel with the *son* itself. Next, the surface of the panel is primed with up to three coats of lacquer and allowed to rest for a few weeks. A design is then transferred on to the surface of the panel with black, brown or other colored lacquer – up to thirty coats.

An element that is unique to traditional Vietnamese lacquerwork is eggshells. These are crushed and sorted according to their tonal coloration, shape, and size. Then, using fine tweezers, thousands of these tiny fragments are arranged in the composition. Bach Nguyen uses eggshells to form shapes, patterns, and color fields of subtle rhythm within her overall design. The desired space is hollowed out and *son* is again used to glue the pieces into place. Once the design is completed, numerous additional layers of lacquer are applied.

When a painting is finished, it is then allowed to rest for a few weeks before being polished. This is done by wetting the surface and smoothing it with sandpaper to achieve a brilliant luster. The sanding of each of these coats is what gives the best lacquerwork its superb shine. Gold leaf is sometimes employed to enhance the brilliance. However, in the late 20th Century Vietnamese artists have had access to a wide range of pigments for lacquer painting, notably green and red. These have been incorporated into their work, resulting in a more varied and expressive, if less traditional effect.

The earliest known lacquer dates from the later Le period (1428-1802), when it was used on domestic furniture and inscribed wooden panels for Buddhist temples. During the French colonial period and especially with the establishment of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine de Hanoi in 1925, lacquerwork was encouraged and both the quality of the raw material and the technique improved. Many Vietnamese lacquer objects such as screens, paintings and pieces of furniture were exported to France, but lacquer furniture is inclined to crack when exposed to a drier atmosphere, so that, except for lacquer painting, the international market for lacquer is limited.