

Mai-Thu Inventing Tradition – A Vietnamese Painter in France

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Mai-Thu (1906-1980) is one of the pioneers of modern Vietnamese painting. Born in Indochina during the French Colonization, he studied at the Fine Arts College of Indochina in Hanoi, graduating in its first class in 1930. In addition to mastering classical Western techniques of drawing and oil painting, he was skilled in figurative painting on silk and in various styles of Chinese painting. Seeking a new artistic expression that would be specifically Vietnamese, he gradually perfected a visual language after permanently settling in France in 1937. Through encounters with master painters of the European tradition, particularly Renaissance painters, Mai-Thu performed a subtle synthesis between Western and Vietnamese motifs. His pared-down images respond to an ideal of gentleness and balance that led him to be considered the most traditional of Vietnamese artists. Yet this universe, constructed from various references, is unique to him. He invented an original style of painting that authentically expresses the essence of Vietnam.

Today, Mai-Thu is considered one of the major figures of modern painting in Vietnam, even though he spent more than half his life in France. His effective absence from the country of his birth and the impossibility of having access to his art until the end of the two wars in Vietnam explain why he was somewhat forgotten by Vietnamese art historians until the late twentieth century. Nor was he recognized in France during his lifetime by the official art world, and he always remained deliberately distant from Parisian avant-garde movements.

Since the 1990s, Mai-Thu has inspired increasing interest among collectors, including Vietnamese collectors in search of their artistic past. As the artist's popularity has continued to grow in recent years, his work is familiar to auction-goers but remains unfamiliar to the general public. Rarely exhibited except at auction, and then only briefly, Mai-Thu's paintings are also held in few museum collections. Today, the Almine Rech Gallery offers a representative group of thirty artworks from the personal collections of members of the artist's family. Through this selection, covering the period from 1941 to 1976 and reflecting the essential part of his French career, the artist's favorite themes and the development of his style will be highlighted.

Upon his arrival in France in 1937, Mai-Thu was soon caught up in the chaos of war. He volunteered as a soldier and was demobilized in 1940. The oldest artworks we know of that he made in France, all silk paintings, date from this period. Mai-Thu seems to have decided very early to abandon oil painting, which he practiced alternately with silk painting until 1937, the date of his arrival in France. From that time onward, he decided to emphasize his Asian identity through an artistic means of expression that was practiced by no French artists. He combined silk painting with themes that could stimulate Western interest in a fantasized Orient. Although he excelled in the art of the portrait, he stopped characterizing the faces of his figures. All the women that he depicts have the smooth beauty of a young Vietnamese woman, who tends toward allegory by her lack of unique features. In a similar fashion, the children can be identified by codified hairstyles — short for the boys, in a bob for the girls — and by their slightly rounder faces. The vibration of shadow and light, the perceptible depth seen in the oil paintings made in Vietnam was replaced by a supple, elegant line, sketching simplified forms emphasized by areas of solid color. Keeping in mind traditional Chinese painting, Mai-Thu uses its perspective with two points of view, where the figures in the foreground are seen at eye level, while the line of the horizon is lifted so high that it disappears from the frame. The various planes are stacked one above the other in a slightly archaic manner. Over the years, his style tended to increasing stylization, with the limbs becoming slender and the volume continuing to gradually dissolve.

Mai-Thu remained faithful to his themes, which he constantly repeated with infinite variations. Women are by far his favorite subject. He also evokes certain Vietnamese customs, such as the Lunar New Year festival, when children wear shimmering costumes and the houses are decorated with spring flowers. In the first half of the 1960s, he developed scenes of children playing various games, which met with great success among the public. During the same decade, Mai-Thu created a series of compositions inspired by masterpieces of Western art. *La Source*, painted in 1966, depicts two bathing women in an allegorical nudity absent from the Asian tradition, while the background opens onto a vast landscape with blue-toned mountains that is reminiscent of the Flemish Primitives. Mai-Thu also transposed into his style several famous paintings in the Louvre such as the *Portrait présumé de Gabrielle d'Estrées et de sa sœur la duchesse de Villars* and the *Grande Odalisque* by Ingres.

There was one exception to the timeless, refined Vietnam that Mai-Thu emphasized: his paintings, in a very restrained manner and with the same visual language, evoking the war that tore Vietnam apart for twenty-nine years (1946-1975). In 1963, when the monk Thích Quảng Đức immolated himself during the anti-Buddhist repression carried out by the president of the Republic of Vietnam, he painted *Les Enfants en prière* as a call for reconciliation. He would never sell this painting, just as he would never exhibit a large oil painting of a mother holding her dead child in front of a devastated plain that is still smoking. This somber Pietà, shown here for the first time, reveals the artist's personal suffering before the tragedy occurring in his birthplace.

Through his favorite themes — women, children, family, tradition — the exhibition includes some works with many characteristic elements of Mai-Thu's style, which developed upon his arrival in France and continued to evolve over the years. The artist was also very engaged for Peace as it appears in some paintings produced during the devastating period of Vietnam War until the end of it and the final reunification of North and South Vietnam (*La Rencontre*, 1974). By leaving his country, he was able, through measured and subtle borrowings from Western and Eastern traditions, to invent a new style that was so perfectly balanced and harmonious that it came to be perceived as traditional.

— Anne Fort, Heritage Conservator

Co-author of the exhibition catalogue *Mai-Thu, Echo d'un Vietnam Révé*, 2021

[*Mai-Thu, Echoes of a Dreamed Vietnam*, 2021]