



The Combination of National Character with Western Fine Arts by Leading Artists of The Indochina School of Fine Arts

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Abstract

Original Research Article

The École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine (1925–1945) played a pivotal role in shaping modern Vietnamese art by creating a unique fusion of traditional Vietnamese cultural elements and Western fine arts techniques. This study examines both the cultural and artistic values emerging from this combination, highlighting how Vietnamese artists integrated national identity into a modern artistic language. Through qualitative historical and analytical methods, this research investigates key works by prominent artists such as Tô Ngọc Vân, Nguyễn Phan Chánh, Lê Phổ, Trần Văn Cẩn, and Nguyễn Gia Trí. The findings reveal that this fusion not only strengthened cultural self-awareness and national identity but also established new aesthetic paradigms, including innovative uses of medium, composition, and stylistic expression. Ultimately, the study underscores the enduring contribution of the École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine in fostering a modern Vietnamese art tradition that balances tradition and innovation.

Keywords: Artistic hybridity, cultural identity, Indochina School of Fine Arts, modern Vietnamese art, Western fine arts.

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Introduction

The establishment of the École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine (Indochina School of Fine Arts) in 1925 marked a decisive turning point in the history of modern Vietnamese art. As the first institutional framework to introduce Western academic art training into Vietnam, the school initiated a fundamental shift in artistic thinking, visual language, and creative practice (Bezacier, 1996; Chinh, 2008). More significantly, it became a site of cultural encounter where Western artistic principles were not merely transplanted but selectively absorbed and

reconfigured in dialogue with indigenous traditions and national consciousness. Artists trained at the Indochina School of Fine Arts did not passively imitate Western models. Instead, they actively engaged in a process of creative localization, integrating Western techniques such as linear perspective, anatomical realism, chiaroscuro, and academic composition with Vietnamese aesthetic sensibilities, traditional themes, and cultural values (Cung, 1993; Quan, 2004). This synthesis is clearly evident in the works of leading artists including *Mai Trung Thứ*, *Lê Phổ*, *Lê Thị Lựu*, *Vũ Cao Đàm*, *Nguyễn Phan Chánh*, *Tô Ngọc Vân*, *Nguyễn Gia Trí*, and



Trần Văn Cẩn, whose paintings embody both modern artistic form and deeply rooted national spirit. Rather than constituting a binary opposition between tradition and modernity or East and West, this artistic phenomenon represents a dynamic process of cultural hybridity. Western artistic methodologies were transformed into expressive tools for articulating Vietnamese identity, social life, and cultural memory. Traditional subject matters such as rural life, women, family intimacy, and landscapes along with indigenous materials like silk and lacquer, were revitalized through Western pictorial structures, resulting in a distinctive visual language that differed from both classical Eastern painting and European modernism (Bezacier, 2023; Chinh, 2008).

Previous scholarship on the Indochina School of Fine Arts has largely focused on historical overviews, individual artist monographs, or material-based studies, particularly on silk and lacquer painting (Cung, 1993; Chinh, 2008). While these studies provide valuable documentation and stylistic analysis, there remains a lack of comprehensive and systematic examination of the underlying mechanisms through which national character and Western visual art were synthesized at both formal and conceptual levels. The dialectical relationship between ethnic-cultural consciousness and Western artistic formalism has yet to be fully articulated within a unified analytical framework (Quan, 2004).

In the contemporary context of globalization and intensified cultural exchange, questions concerning the preservation and transformation of national identity within modern and contemporary art practices have become increasingly urgent. Revisiting the artistic legacy of the Indochina School of Fine Arts therefore holds not only historical significance but also contemporary relevance. By examining how early twentieth-century Vietnamese artists successfully negotiated cultural interaction without losing their national essence, this study offers meaningful insights for current artistic practices seeking to balance global influence with cultural specificity. This article aims to analyze the combination of national character

and Western fine art principles in the works of leading artists of the Indochina School of Fine Arts. Through formal analysis, contextual interpretation, and comparative approaches, the study seeks to clarify the aesthetic strategies, cultural meanings, and artistic values embedded in this synthesis. Ultimately, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of modern Vietnamese art and affirms its position within the broader discourse of modern Asian and global art history.

THEORETICAL BASIS

National Character in Plastic Arts

National character in plastic arts refers to the set of relatively stable aesthetic, cultural, and symbolic qualities through which a nation's historical experience, worldview, and collective sensibility are visually articulated. Rather than being a fixed or prescriptive category, national character emerges organically from the cultural, social, and historical conditions in which artistic creation takes place. In the context of Vietnamese art, the consciousness of national character has deep roots, predating modern artistic institutions and manifesting from early stages of the formation of Vietnamese cultural identity (Quan, 2004).

Scholars of Vietnamese art emphasize that national character in visual art is not imposed as an external requirement but is inherently embedded in the creative process. As Quan (2004) argues, the awareness of national identity in plastic arts developed alongside the formation of Vietnamese cultural and spiritual traditions, gradually shaping distinctive modes of visual expression. Similarly, another study by An Hoa observes that traditional artisans did not deliberately pursue "national character" as a conceptual goal; instead, their works naturally embodied national qualities because they were deeply rooted in the lived realities, emotions, and collective memory of the community.

From a theoretical perspective, national character in plastic arts operates on both content and formal levels. In terms of content, it is expressed through subject matter, themes, symbols, and emotional atmospheres that reflect

a nation's historical experience, cultural values, customs, beliefs, and social life. In Vietnamese plastic arts, recurring themes such as rural landscapes, everyday life, family relationships, women, festivals, and spiritual practices serve as visual vehicles for articulating national consciousness. These themes are not merely descriptive but convey a distinctly Vietnamese sensibility shaped by centuries of agrarian culture and communal life (Quan, 2004).

Formally, national character is manifested through materials, techniques, visual structures, and modes of representation associated with local artistic traditions. In the Vietnamese context, this includes the use of indigenous materials such as silk and lacquer, the emphasis on expressive line over volumetric modeling, flattened pictorial space, rhythmic composition, and subtle color harmonies. These formal characteristics distinguish Vietnamese plastic arts from Western academic realism while preserving a continuity with pre-modern artistic practices. As Ngan (2002) and Y (2001) suggest, plastic arts fundamentally involve the organization of form, line, color, and spatial relationships, making formal choices a crucial site where national character becomes visually legible.

Importantly, national character in plastic arts is not static or resistant to change. It evolves through historical transformations and is continually reshaped through cultural exchange and interaction with external artistic traditions. In the modern period, particularly during the early twentieth century, Vietnamese plastic arts entered into a dynamic dialogue with Western artistic systems. This encounter did not erase national character but rather redefined it, allowing traditional sensibilities to be rearticulated through new visual languages and techniques. National character thus functions as a flexible and adaptive principle, capable of absorbing foreign influences while maintaining cultural specificity.

In this sense, national character should be understood as a dynamic process rather than a stylistic formula. It is constituted through the selective integration of inherited traditions and contemporary experiences, enabling artists to

negotiate between continuity and innovation. This understanding is particularly relevant to the art of the Indochina School of Fine Arts, where Vietnamese artists successfully transformed Western plastic principles into expressive tools for conveying indigenous cultural values. National character, therefore, serves as both the foundation and the guiding thread in the development of modern Vietnamese plastic arts.

Western Fine Arts and the Indochina Training Model

The introduction of Western fine arts into Vietnam during the early twentieth century was closely associated with the establishment of the École Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine (Indochina School of Fine Arts). Founded in 1924 under the colonial administration, the institution functioned as the primary conduit through which Western academic art principles, pedagogical methods, and aesthetic theories were transmitted into the cultural context of Indochina. Although not part of the French Grandes Écoles system, the school adopted a curriculum largely modeled on French academic art education, emphasizing systematic training in plastic principles and technical mastery (Bezacier, 1996; Chinh, 2008).

Western fine arts, as introduced at the Indochina School, were grounded in the traditions of European academic realism and modern artistic thought. Core components of the curriculum included life drawing, anatomy, linear perspective, chiaroscuro, composition, and color theory. These disciplines aimed to cultivate visual accuracy, spatial coherence, and structural clarity, which are qualities central to Western plastic art since the Renaissance. Instruction was conducted through a rigorous combination of theoretical lectures and studio-based practice, reinforcing the primacy of observation, disciplined technique, and analytical thinking in artistic creation (Cung, 1993).

The Indochina training model was distinctive in its hybrid pedagogical orientation. While rooted in Western academic norms, it did not seek to entirely replace indigenous artistic traditions. Under the leadership of Victor Tardieu and later Évariste Jonchère, the school encouraged

students to explore local subjects, materials, and cultural themes as legitimate foundations for artistic expression. This pedagogical openness allowed Vietnamese students to internalize Western plastic principles while maintaining a connection to their own cultural environment. As a result, Western fine arts were not transmitted as a closed system but as a flexible framework adaptable to local artistic sensibilities (Bezacier, 2023).

A crucial aspect of the Indochina training model was its emphasis on practice-based learning in close contact with lived reality. Particularly during periods of historical disruption and wartime relocation (1940–1945), students worked in rural and natural settings across Sơn Tây, Phú Lý, and Đà Lạt provinces. This experience fostered an artistic vision grounded in everyday life and the Vietnamese landscape, reinforcing the integration of Western techniques with national themes. The encounter between academic training and direct engagement with local environments contributed significantly to the emergence of a distinctive visual language in modern Vietnamese art (Chinh, 2008).

The influence of Western fine arts is evident not only in technique but also in conceptual approaches to artistic creation. The Indochina School introduced a modern understanding of the artist as an individual creative subject, capable of intellectual reflection and personal expression. This contrasted with pre-modern craft-based traditions and enabled Vietnamese artists to engage with modern artistic discourse. However, this individualism did not lead to cultural alienation; instead, it facilitated new ways of rearticulating collective identity through modern forms. Western plastic principles thus became instruments for redefining, rather than diminishing, national character (Quan, 2004).

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative, historical-analytical approach to examine the cultural and artistic contributions of the École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine (1925–1945) in Vietnam. The study focuses on understanding how Vietnamese artists combined traditional cultural

elements with Western fine arts techniques to form a unique modern Vietnamese aesthetic.

For data collection method, the primary sources include original artworks of notable artists trained at the École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine such as *Tô Ngọc Vân*, *Nguyễn Phan Chánh*, *Lê Phổ*, *Trần Văn Cẩn*, and *Nguyễn Gia Trí*. These works were analyzed in terms of subject matter, composition, technique, and material. Archival documents, exhibition catalogs, and contemporaneous critiques were also consulted to provide historical context. Besides, secondary sources consist of scholarly books, journals, and critical essays on Vietnamese art history and cultural studies. Key references include research by Bezacier (1996, 2023), Chinh (2003, 2008), and Cung (1993), which provide both historical background and critical perspectives on the fusion of Western and Vietnamese artistic elements.

The study applies a comparative and interpretive framework, focusing on two main dimensions: (1) Cultural Value: Examining how the integration of national identity and Western techniques reflects broader cultural, social, and historical dynamics in colonial and early modern Vietnam; (2) Artistic Value: Assessing how the technical, stylistic, and material innovations of École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine artists contributed to the development of modern Vietnamese visual arts.

Artworks are analyzed through formal analysis (line, color, composition, perspective, technique) and contextual analysis (cultural symbolism, historical setting, artistic intention). This dual approach allows the research to capture both the aesthetic and cultural significance of the artworks.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

National Character in Selected Works by Leading Artists of the Indochina School of Fine Arts

The articulation of national character in the works of artists trained at the Indochina School of Fine Arts represents one of the most distinctive achievements of modern Vietnamese art in the early twentieth century. Rather than

passively imitating Western artistic models, these artists selectively appropriated Western plastic principles and transformed them into expressive means for conveying Vietnamese cultural identity. National character in their works is manifested through subject matter, visual language, materials, and emotional sensibility, forming a localized modernity rooted in indigenous experience.

One of the most evident expressions of national character lies in the choice of themes. Artists such as *Nguyễn Phan Chánh*, *Mai Trung Thứ*, *Lê Thị Lựu*, and *Lê Phổ* consistently depicted scenes drawn from Vietnamese everyday life, including rural labor, domestic interiors, women, children, and familial relationships. These subjects reflect the social fabric and spiritual values of Vietnamese society rather than Western historical or mythological narratives. For example, *Nguyễn Phan Chánh*'s silk paintings portray peasants, village women, and scenes of daily labor with a quiet dignity, emphasizing emotional restraint and human intimacy characteristic of Vietnamese cultural sensibility.

In formal terms, national character is conveyed through the adaptation of traditional visual aesthetics within a modern framework. While trained in Western academic principles such as perspective, anatomy, and composition, many Indochina artists favored flattened pictorial space, rhythmic linearity, and subtle tonal transitions over dramatic spatial illusion. This approach resonates with pre-modern Vietnamese visual traditions, including folk paintings and decorative arts. In the silk paintings of *Mai Trung Thứ* and *Lê Thị Lựu*, the dominance of line, the softness of color, and the emphasis on surface harmony reflect an aesthetic continuity with East Asian artistic traditions while remaining structurally informed by Western composition.

Material choice also plays a crucial role in expressing national character. The use of indigenous materials such as silk and lacquer became a defining feature of Indochina art. Silk painting, in particular, was elevated from a traditional craft-associated medium to a modern artistic form. *Nguyễn Phan Chánh*'s innovative use of silk combined Western realism with the

material's inherent qualities of translucency and softness, creating works that are both modern and deeply Vietnamese. Similarly, *Nguyễn Gia Trí*'s development of lacquer painting transformed a traditional decorative technique into a monumental modern art form, embedding national material culture within contemporary artistic discourse.

Emotional tone and worldview further distinguish the national character of these works. Unlike Western academic painting, which often emphasizes dramatic narratives or heroic individualism, Indochina artists tended to express introspection, serenity, and poetic contemplation. The figures in the works of *Lê Phổ* or *Vũ Cao Đàm* often appear introspective and timeless, conveying a sense of quiet endurance rather than overt emotional expression. This restrained emotional register aligns with Vietnamese philosophical traditions influenced by Confucianism and Buddhism, where harmony, moderation, and inner balance are highly valued.

Importantly, national character in these works should not be understood as a rejection of Western influence. On the contrary, it emerged through a process of creative negotiation. Western plastic principles provided structural clarity, spatial coherence, and professional discipline, while Vietnamese cultural values shaped content, mood, and visual rhythm. This synthesis enabled artists to modernize Vietnamese art without severing its cultural roots. As a result, national character functioned as a guiding principle that oriented artistic innovation toward cultural continuity.

In sum, the works of leading artists from the Indochina School of Fine Arts demonstrate that national character in modern Vietnamese art was neither static nor essentialist. It was a dynamic construct, formed through selective adaptation and creative transformation of Western artistic languages. Through their works, these artists established a modern visual identity that was both internationally intelligible and culturally specific, laying the foundation for the development of Vietnamese modern art in the twentieth century.

The Influence of Western Visual Arts in Selected Works of Leading Indochina School Artists

Artists of the Indochina School of Fine Arts were trained in a system deeply influenced by French academic art, which emphasized realism, perspective, and anatomy. This exposure to Western methods significantly shaped their techniques, even as they continued to express Vietnamese cultural identity. Many artists adopted Western approaches to light and shadow, realistic human proportions, and the depiction of three-dimensional space. In rural scenes and portraits, the careful attention to natural light and spatial depth reflects this Western influence, while silk paintings maintained traditional delicacy yet incorporated a sense of realism.

Western art also affected the way artists composed their works. Principles such as triangular or diagonal arrangements, balance between foreground and background, and proportional harmony were frequently applied. Portraits, for instance, often displayed structured compositions and perspective, creating realistic space while still focusing on distinctly Vietnamese subjects. This careful organization enhanced both the technical quality and the visual impact of the artworks.

Exposure to Western methods encouraged experimentation with new materials and techniques. Oil on canvas became more common, and traditional media like silk and lacquer were treated with Western-inspired approaches, including layering, tonal modulation, and attention to texture. These innovations allowed artists to modernize their practice technically while preserving national cultural identity.

Despite adopting Western techniques, Indochina School artists did not simply copy European styles. They synthesized realism with Vietnamese aesthetics, simplifying forms, preserving traditional brush rhythms, and emphasizing atmosphere over strict accuracy. This fusion created a unique style that combined technical sophistication with cultural specificity,

resulting in art that was both modern and rooted in local tradition.

Western influence also expanded the conceptual possibilities for these artists. Emphasis on individual expression, observation of light, and secular subject matter encouraged depictions of daily life, domestic scenes, and personal emotion - subjects less common in traditional Vietnamese painting. Through this integration, modern Vietnamese art emerged, blending Western techniques with national identity to create works that were both contemporary and culturally resonant.

RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS AND CONCLUSION

Cultural Values from the Combination of National Identity and Western Visual Arts through Leading Artists of the Indochina School of Fine Arts

The establishment of the École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine in 1925 marked a pivotal moment in the history of Vietnamese art and culture. The school not only trained the first generation of modern Vietnamese painters but also served as a cultural crossroads where Eastern artistic traditions met Western academic art. In this context, the notion of "national identity" became central, guiding not only aesthetic choices but also shaping a sense of cultural self-awareness during a period of colonial influence and modernization.

The integration of national identity with Western visual art was more than a technical adoption; it was a profound process of cultural transformation. Vietnamese artists reinterpreted traditional aesthetic systems within a new visual language, producing works that reflected both technical sophistication and a deep-rooted sense of Vietnamese cultural consciousness. This cultural synthesis enabled artists to preserve their heritage while engaging with global artistic innovations, creating a modern Vietnamese art that was simultaneously local and cosmopolitan.

One of the key cultural contributions of this integration was the reinforcement of national self-esteem. In a colonial context, art became a subtle but powerful medium of cultural assertion.

By incorporating traditional subjects, motifs, and values into Western artistic frameworks, Vietnamese painters transformed Western techniques into tools for expressing their own cultural identity. Works by artists such as *Tô Ngọc Vân*, *Nguyễn Phan Chánh*, *Lê Phổ*, and

Nguyễn Gia Trí not only demonstrate mastery of Western painting techniques but also celebrate Vietnamese life, landscapes, attire, and human spirit, offering a visual affirmation of Vietnamese identity.



Figure 1: Young Woman in the Spring Garden, Lacquer Painting, Nguyễn Gia Trí

Moreover, this fusion of Eastern and Western elements facilitated the preservation and revitalization of traditional Vietnamese art forms. Artists studied folk painting, lacquer, silk painting, and ceramics, adapting these cultural expressions to contemporary visual language. For instance, *Nguyễn Gia Trí* elevated lacquer painting to a high art form, *Nguyễn Phan Chánh* revitalized silk painting with new expressive possibilities, and *Lê Phổ* incorporated traditional color palettes and materials into oil painting. This process can be understood as a form of “heritage reconstruction,” where traditional values are infused with modern techniques, ensuring their continuity and relevance in a rapidly changing cultural context.

Ultimately, the cultural value of combining national identity with Western visual arts lies in its ability to create a uniquely Vietnamese modern art. It fostered a sense of pride, self-awareness, and cultural resilience, demonstrating that Vietnamese artists could integrate global artistic innovations without losing their heritage. This foundation not only shaped the modern aesthetics of the period but

also set a precedent for future generations, establishing a framework where tradition and modernity coexist creatively.

Artistic Values from the Combination of National Identity and Western Visual Arts through Leading Artists of the Indochina School of Fine Arts

Beyond cultural significance, the integration of national identity with Western visual arts produced profound artistic values, shaping the distinctive character of modern Vietnamese painting. One of the most important contributions lies in the transformation of visual language. Artists trained at the École des Beaux-Arts de l’Indochine absorbed Western principles such as human proportions, perspective, light and shadow, and compositional structure. Yet, rather than adopting European realism uncritically, they adapted these techniques to resonate with Eastern sensibilities, resulting in a hybrid aesthetic that balanced realism with traditional Vietnamese visual perception.

This artistic synthesis is evident in the works of painters like *Tô Ngọc Vân* and *Trần Văn Cẩn*. In

Tô Ngọc Vân's *Young Girl with Lily*, the composition and use of light reflect Western academic training, yet the overall impression conveys tranquility and subtle stylization, characteristic of Eastern aesthetics. Similarly, *Trần Văn Cẩn's* woodcut *Hair Washing*

combines modern printmaking techniques with flat, rhythmic patterns reminiscent of traditional Đông Hồ and Hàng Trống folk prints. These examples demonstrate how Western methods were transformed into vehicles for uniquely Vietnamese artistic expression.

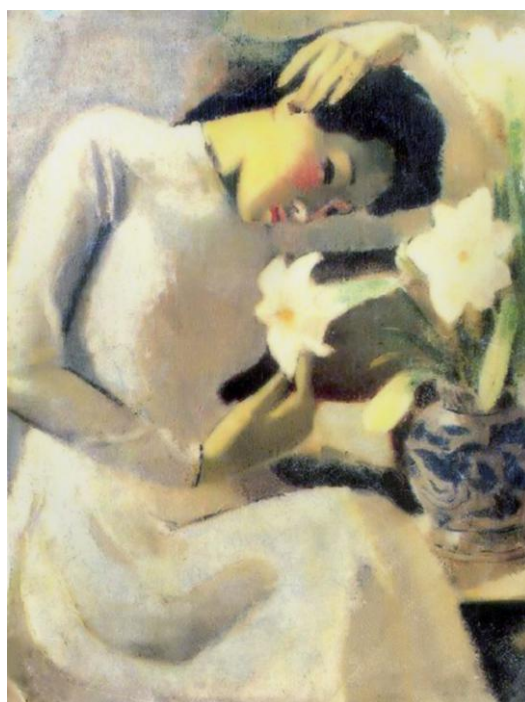


Figure 2: Young Girl with Lily, Oil Painting, Tô Ngọc Vân

Material innovation is another significant artistic contribution. Vietnamese painters experimented with oil paint, silk, and lacquer, adapting these media to express local identity. Oil painting, a European medium, was infused with softness and emotional depth reflecting Eastern aesthetics. Silk painting, traditionally decorative, was reimagined as a medium capable of nuanced expression, as seen in works by *Mai Trung Thứ* and *Lê Thị Lựu*. Meanwhile, lacquer, a deeply Vietnamese medium, was elevated to fine art by Nguyễn Gia Trí, harmonizing traditional techniques with Western compositional principles. Together, these innovations established the material foundations of modern Vietnamese painting.

Stylistically, the École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine encouraged diversity in artistic

expression. Artists explored a wide range of styles, from romantic and lyrical (*Mai Trung Thứ*, *Lê Phổ*) to humanist realism (*Tô Ngọc Vân*, *Trần Văn Cẩn*), symbolic and philosophical (*Nguyễn Gia Trí*), and impressionistic or decorative (*Vũ Cao Đàm*, *Lê Thị Lựu*). Despite stylistic differences, these works shared a common focus on Vietnamese life, beauty, and ethical values, placing human experience at the center of artistic creation.

Ultimately, the greatest artistic value of this period was the establishment of a modern Vietnamese art with a distinct identity. It was not a mere imitation of Western styles but a creative collaboration between two artistic civilizations. Vietnamese visual arts became professionalized, with systematic training, theoretical foundations, and disciplined artistic methods, laying the

groundwork for a modern, internationally engaged, yet culturally rooted Vietnamese art.

Conclusion

The establishment and development of the École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine (1925–1945) represents a pivotal chapter in the history of modern Vietnamese art. By serving as a bridge between Eastern traditional aesthetics and Western academic visual arts, the school fostered a unique cultural and artistic synthesis. This synthesis was not a simple blending of styles, but a deliberate and creative adaptation, through which Vietnamese artists reinterpreted their national identity within modern artistic frameworks. Culturally, the integration of national identity and Western techniques reinforced a sense of pride and self-awareness among Vietnamese artists. By depicting local life, landscapes, traditions, and people with tools and methods drawn from Western art, these artists preserved and revitalized Vietnamese heritage while asserting it in a modern context. Their works reflected both the spirit of their homeland and a capacity for dialogue with global art movements, demonstrating that cultural identity can coexist with modernization and international influence. Artistically, the fusion of Eastern and Western methods produced a modern Vietnamese visual language characterized by innovative use of materials, techniques, and stylistic diversity. Oil painting, silk, and lacquer were transformed into vehicles of expression that were both technically sophisticated and culturally resonant. Artists explored realism, impressionism, romanticism, and symbolic representation, yet always anchored their works in Vietnamese life and values. This period laid the foundation for a professionalized, academically trained, and culturally rooted Vietnamese art, capable of evolving while maintaining its distinctive identity. In conclusion, the École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine exemplifies the enduring value of cross-cultural artistic exchange. By harmonizing national identity with Western visual arts, its

artists not only shaped modern Vietnamese painting but also demonstrated how tradition and innovation can coexist. Their legacy provides a model for contemporary art: integration without assimilation, modernization without erasing cultural roots, and creativity informed by both heritage and global perspective. This achievement remains a testament to the resilience, adaptability, and enduring creativity of Vietnamese culture in the face of historical and cultural challenges.

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