

EXHIBITIONS, FEATURES, INTERNATIONAL SHOWS · NAIMA MORELLI · FEBRUARY 28, 2025

From Modern to Contemporary, Vietnamese Art Makes Waves in Paris



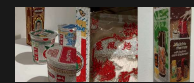
I'm in the first room of the **Musée Cernuschi** in Paris, and three figures are looking intensely at me from behind their frames. The first is a realistic self-portrait. The young man against an ochre background has dishevelled hair, prominent teeth, and a cigarette dangling from his full lips. His white blouse is unbuttoned, his brow lifted with bratty insouciance.

The second figure, the one in the middle, looks much sterner. Against an intense petrol blue background, the artist has depicted himself in a scholarly, dignified manner. He has a self-assured stare, with his head slightly tipped forward, looking through his round glasses, a foulard wrapped around his neck.

In the third self-portrait, there is a sophisticated man at his suavest. The lifted brow, sceptical stare, and cigarette are still there, much like in the first picture. He is indeed the same man. Now, however, he is wearing a suit and his hair is well-combed, making him look less like a young rascal and more like a movie star. Stylistically, this third painting is similar to the second, resembling illustration in its flatness and possessing an unparalleled elegance.

This triptych of self-portraits by Mai-Thu and Lê Phô welcomes visitors to the exhibition *Lê Phô, Mai-Thu, Vu Cao Dam: Pioneers of modern Vietnamese art in France*. The show, which opened in October last year during Paris Art Week, is France's first major retrospective of these three influential Vietnamese modern artists.

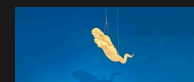
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Exhibition view of Lê Phô, Mai-Thu, Vu Cao Dam: *Pioneers of modern Vietnamese art in France*. Image courtesy of Musée Cernuschi.

Elsewhere across Paris, contemporary Vietnamese artists have also been making their presence felt, represented by galleries such as Galerie BAO and A2Z Art Gallery and showing at art fairs like Asia Now (Europe's only fair focused on Asian artists). Taken together, these various presentations point towards a cultural conversation between the two countries that stretches back to colonial times.

Three Vietnamese artists in Paris

Featuring 150 works, including still lifes, portraits, and landscapes, the *Pioneers* exhibition at the Musée Cernuschi traces the intermingled lives and practices of **Lê Phô** (1907–2001), **Mai-Thu** (1906–1980), and **Vu Cao Dam** (1908–2000). These three artists played key roles in the development of what is sometimes known as the Indochine style — a modern art movement blending Vietnamese and Western aesthetics.

For today's European public, the term "Indochina" may evoke romantic landscapes like those of Marguerite Duras' *The Lover*, a French-language novel detailing the story of a poor young French girl who falls in love with a wealthy, opium-addicted Chinese man. Conversely, to international tourists, "Paris" may spark images of elegant women reading books and smoking in cafes.

But when it comes to the art emerging from the encounter of France and Vietnam, these stereotypical images are — if not quite contradicted — expanded and enlivened. This is not a space for mere exoticism, but rather for an exploration of the nuanced cultural interactions between the two countries. And before we examine how these interactions manifest in the present, we should go back to their beginnings.

Installation view (left to right): Lê Phô, *Women in the Garden* (1969), oil on canvas; and *The Letter*, oil on canvas. Images by author unless stated otherwise.

We can trace these histories to the late 19th century, when Vietnam was under French colonial rule. The colonial administration established educational institutions in Vietnam, including the Hanoi School of Fine Arts, which opened in 1925 (the *Pioneers* exhibition commemorates this centenary).

The school was a collaborative effort between French painter Victor Tardieu and Vietnamese artist Nam Son. Tardieu aimed to bring Western artistic techniques to Vietnam, while Nam Son ensured that the rich cultural heritage of Vietnam remained central to the curriculum. Thus, students — including Lê Phô, Mai-Thu, and Vu Cao Dam — learnt about European techniques of oil painting and life drawing alongside traditional Vietnamese aesthetics and materials like lacquer and silk painting.

Left to right: Mai-Thu, Vu Cao Dam, and Lê Phô at Vu Cao Dam's exhibition in 1946. Image courtesy of Musée Cernuschi. © Alain Le Kim Archives.

This meeting of Western and Eastern traditions led to the creation of what became known as the Indochinese style, laying the foundation for modern Vietnamese art. These developments were not merely emulations of European art, but a reinvention of Vietnamese art through the lens of modernity.

During the 1930s, Lê Phô, Mai-Thu, and Vu Cao Dam moved to France, where they continued to develop their artistic practices. Their careers were thus shaped by both their Vietnamese roots and their overseas experiences. *Lê Phô, Mai-Thu, Vu Cao Dam: Pioneers of modern Vietnamese art in France* takes a chronological, biographical approach to each of these three artists, telling a story from early work to fully developed practice.

Lê Phô's work, for instance, evolved from romantic depictions of Vietnamese landscapes and daily life to bold, colourful post-Impressionist paintings in his later years. Placed side by side, the two 1937 oil paintings *La Redonne* and *Les Col des Nuages* are masterful portrayals of French and Vietnamese landscapes respectively, filtered through the same tranquil, airy sensitivity.

Installation view (left to right): Lê Phô, *La Redonne* (1937), oil on hardboard; and *Le col des Nuages (Đèo Hải Vân)* (1937), oil on canvas.

Unlike Lê Phô and Vu Cao Dam, Mai-Thu remained committed to painting on silk for most of his career, capturing idealised scenes of Vietnamese life in a meticulous and poetic style. Also placed side by side, two still life paintings, both of fruit, represent the various degrees of flattening and stylisation he used to depict reality.

Installation view (top to bottom): Mai-Thu, *Still Life with Apples, Grapes, and Peaches*

(1958), colour on silk; and *Still Life with Apples* (1959), colour on silk.

Influenced by modernist artists like Marc Chagall, his neighbour in the Saint-Paul-de-Vence village in Paris, Vu Cao Dam integrated surreal and lyrical elements into his sculptures and paintings, which often depicted peaceful figures in traditional Vietnamese garb. In the exhibition, a canvas — standing out because of its comparatively cruder, less refined effects — represents the havoc of the Vietnam War.

Besides tracing the practices of the three artists over time, *Pioneers* also highlighted the shared motifs and inspirations that connected them. One recurring theme was *The Tale of Kieu*, a classical Vietnamese poem that celebrates Confucian virtues and endurance amidst adversity.

Illustrating this poem, Lê Phô, Mai-Thu, and Vu Cao Dam maintained strong links to their Vietnamese identities while engaging with global modern artistic forms. Whether working with silk, lacquer, or oil, they seamlessly blended Vietnamese tradition and Western influences in their respective oeuvres.

Vietnam and France in the contemporary art realm

Other than the Musée Cernuschi show, Paris Art Week last October also included a number of contemporary Vietnamese art presentations — giving us a sense of the legacy of these early pioneers.

Works by Vietnamese artist Bao Vuong at the art fair Asia Now.

Founded in 2015, the art fair **Asia Now** has become a key platform for Vietnamese artists in Paris. Over the years, the fair has reflected the diversity and dynamism of the Vietnamese art scene through the presence of both Vietnamese as well as Paris-based, Vietnamese-owned galleries.

For example, **Galerie BAO** presented works by **Trương Công Tùng**, evidencing the continued use of traditional lacquer painting for contemporary expression. Since 2020, the artist has been creating a series of small lacquer works entitled *The shadow in the garden*. A meditation on the four seasons and the natural elements, the works also include disturbing hidden images like guns and remnants of grenades.

Galerie BAO's booth also included another contemporary spin on tradition: **Nguyễn Duy Mạnh's** *Wandering Souls, Lost Spirits* series. Here, ceramic vessels were laid out as if for a banquet, but bloodied and cut up like pieces of meat.

Installation view of works from Nguyễn Duy Mạnh's *Wandering Souls, Lost Spirits* series

(2017-present), ceramic.

“The process of practicing artistic ideas goes hand in hand with my reawakening to the reality of cultural and spiritual life,” said the artist, speaking of the meaning behind these haunting pieces. “In it, the collapse of the value system and the transition to material life occur as an evolution that includes human tragedies.”

This was one of the most attention-grabbing and photographed series of artworks at the fair, and almost immediately sold out.

In fact, Galerie BAO was only recently founded, and emerges from Galerie BAQ (2023–2024), a space co-founded by curators **Lê Thiên-Bảo** and **Quinnie Tan**. Though short-lived, Galerie BAQ played an important role in bringing Vietnamese contemporary art to the attention of the Parisian art scene.

Detail view of the *Wandering Souls, Lost Spirits* series.

The gallery focused on the multilayered histories of Vietnam, showcasing artists that reimagined traditions and sometimes challenged dominant ideologies. After Galerie BAQ’s closure, its founders pursued independent ventures, continuing to champion Vietnamese art in Paris.

Lê went on to establish Galerie BAO, which remains committed to showcasing works by contemporary, primarily Vietnamese artists. Tan now operates **15 Beautreillis**, a space dedicated to collaborative and experimental projects. Both initiatives highlight the adaptability and resilience of Vietnamese art, artists, and art professionals in the ever-changing cultural landscape of Paris.

Another gallery that represents Vietnamese artists (as well as other international artists) in Paris is **A2Z Gallery**, which was also present at Asia Now. Founded in 2009, the three-storey space in the Saint-Germain-des-Prés district has actively promoted Vietnamese artists, fostering cultural exchanges between Asia and France. The gallery frequently features works that address themes of migration, memory, and identity, offering a nuanced perspective on Vietnam’s history and diaspora.

One standout artist represented by A2Z is **Bao Vuong**, whose series *The Crossing* emerges from his family’s journey fleeing Vietnam just after the war and relocating to France. The large, monochrome seascapes suggest themes of resilience and embracing the unknown, but also feelings of longing and anguish.


Installation view of a work from Bao Vuong’s series *The Crossing* at Asia Now.

Whether it's the black waves of Bao Vuong's art or the stares of the pioneering artists in the Musée Cernuschi show, these works by Vietnamese artists powerfully draw us in. We walk away from each work having shared part of its story – be it a perilous journey at sea, a narrative of diaspora, or a love song to a home country.

Lê Phô, Mai-Thu, Vu Cao Dam: Pioneers of modern Vietnamese art in France *runs at the Musée Cernuschi till 9 March 2025. Find out more at cernuschi.paris.fr.*

Header image: Installation view (left to right): Mai-Thu, Self-Portrait with a Cigarette (1927), oil on hardboard. Lê Phô, Self-Portrait (1938), colour on silk. Mai-Thu, Self-Portrait with a Cigarette (1940).

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