

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.12426324

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL FACTORS SHAPING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FINE ARTS IN SOUTHERN VIETNAM IN THE 20TH CENTURY

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Received: 12/08/2025
Accepted: 19/02/2026

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the social and cultural factors shaping the development of fine arts in Southern Vietnam throughout the twentieth century. While previous scholarship has addressed the modernization of Vietnamese art in general, the regional specificity of Southern Vietnam—formed through colonial encounter, wartime division, post-reunification restructuring, and post-1986 Renovation (Doi Moi)—has not been systematically analyzed as an interconnected historical process. Employing a qualitative interdisciplinary approach grounded in art history and cultural studies, the research integrates historical contextualization, visual and formal analysis, comparative evaluation, and institutional interpretation. The findings demonstrate that Southern Vietnamese fine arts evolved through a dual artistic structure during national division, institutional consolidation after reunification, and accelerated diversification under market reform. The study highlights the role of professional associations, museum systems, and art education institutions in shaping artistic production and public engagement. By foregrounding regional dynamics within national and global frameworks, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of modernization and artistic hybridity in Vietnamese visual culture.

KEYWORDS: Southern Vietnamese fine arts; historical context; 20th-century Southern Vietnamese art; professional art associations

1. INTRODUCTION

Fine arts constitute a significant dimension of cultural life, functioning not only as esthetic expression but also as a medium through which societies articulate historical experience, ideological orientation, and cultural identity. In Vietnam, the development of modern fine arts has been closely connected to the processes of colonial encounter, revolutionary transformation, national reunification, and economic renovation (Nguyen Van Chien, 2001; Nguyen Luong Tieu Bach et al., 2005). Therefore, artistic production has evolved in parallel with shifts in political authority, institutional structures, and cultural policy.

Throughout the twentieth century, Southern Vietnam occupied a distinctive position within the national artistic landscape. As one of the earliest regions exposed to Western academic art under French colonial rule, Southern Vietnam experienced substantial esthetic transformation beginning in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The introduction of European artistic pedagogy, oil painting techniques, and academic realism significantly reshaped local artistic practice and education systems (Hanoi University of Fine Arts & Institute of Fine Arts, 2007).

During the national division (1954–1975), Southern Vietnam became a complex cultural environment characterized by the co-existence of Western modernist influences, American cultural presence, and revolutionary artistic production. Artists in urban centers, such as Saigon, engaged with abstraction, expressionism, and symbolism, whereas artists in liberated zones developed realist and documentary visual languages aligned with revolutionary objectives (Nguyen Van Chien, 2001). This duality generated a distinctive artistic condition shaped by ideological contrast, cultural negotiation, and institutional fragmentation.

In 1975, following national reunification, the artistic sphere in Southern Vietnam entered a new phase of structural reorganization. Socialist realist orientations from the North interacted with pre-existing modernist tendencies in the South, resulting in both adaptation and tension within artistic practice. The establishment of professional associations, museums, and formalized exhibition systems in Ho Chi Minh City played a central role in institutionalizing artistic production and shaping public reception (Nguyen Xuan Tien, 2009; Nguyen Xuan Tien, 2013; Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts Association, 2024).

The implementation of the Renovation (Doi Moi) policy in 1986 marked another decisive turning point.

Market-oriented reforms and expanding international exchange fostered diversification in artistic expression, increased private exhibition activity, and the growth of applied arts and design disciplines (Hanoi University of Fine Arts & Institute of Fine Arts, 2007; Huynh Van Muoi, 2024). Southern Vietnam, particularly Ho Chi Minh City, emerged as a dynamic center of experimentation, where traditional esthetics, socialist legacies, and global artistic trends intersected.

Despite these significant transformations, much of the existing scholarship has primarily approached the Southern Vietnamese fine arts within broader national narratives of Vietnamese art history (Nguyen Luong Tieu Bach et al., 2005). Regional specificity, particularly the interaction between colonial legacies, wartime division, post-reunification restructuring, and global integration, has not been sufficiently examined as a continuous and interconnected process. Therefore, a systematic regional analysis is necessary to clarify how social and cultural forces shaped artistic production in Southern Vietnam and how these artistic developments, in turn, contributed to Vietnamese society's broader transformations.

This study addresses this gap by examining the social and cultural factors that influenced the development of the fine arts in Southern Vietnam throughout the twentieth century. By integrating historical contextualization, visual analysis, and institutional examination, this study aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of modernization processes in Vietnamese art and to highlight the distinctive regional dynamics that have shaped the artistic heritage of Southern Vietnam.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. *Research design and theoretical framework*

This study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary research design grounded in art history and cultural studies. The research is analytical and interpretive in nature, examining how social, political, and cultural transformations shaped the development of the fine arts in Southern Vietnam throughout the twentieth century. Rather than employing quantitative measurement, this study emphasizes historical contextualization, visual interpretation, and critical cultural analysis.

The theoretical framework draws upon concepts of cultural modernization, postcolonial cultural interaction, and artistic hybridity, which have been identified as significant factors in the development of modern Vietnamese art (Nguyen Van Chien, 2001; Nguyen Luong Tieu Bach et al., 2005). Southern

Vietnamese fine arts are examined as a dynamic cultural field shaped by colonial encounters, wartime ideological division, socialist reconstruction, and global integration during the Doi Moi period. These theoretical perspectives guide the interpretation of stylistic change, institutional restructuring, and artistic identity shifts.

A diachronic approach is employed to trace transformations across major historical stages, including the colonial period, the 1954–1975 division, the post-1975 reunification, and the post-1986 renovation. Simultaneously, a regional case study prospective highlights characteristics specific to Southern Vietnam while situating them within national and international artistic developments.

2.2. Sources of data and selection criteria

The research is based on both primary and secondary sources.

The primary materials include paintings, sculptures, sketches, lacquer works, and applied artworks produced by Southern Vietnamese artists during the twentieth century. These works are preserved in museum collections, institutional archives, exhibition catalogues, and documented records.

- Artworks were selected according to the following criteria:
- Historical representativeness of the major socio-political phases.
- Stylistic significance in reflecting dominant or emerging artistic tendencies
- Recognition of institutions through exhibitions, museum collections, or professional association documentation.
- Capacity to illustrate regional characteristics or transitional developments in Vietnamese art.

Secondary sources include academic monographs, art historical studies, conference proceedings, artists' writings, and cultural policy documents, which provide contextual and interpretive support for the analysis.

2.3. Methods of analysis

Several complementary analytical methods are employed.

Historical analysis examines the relationship between artistic development and socio-political transformations, including colonial governance, wartime division, reunification, and economic renovation. This method clarifies how state policies, ideological orientations, and institutional systems influence artistic production.

Visual and formal analysis involves close

examination of selected artworks, focusing on composition, material, technique, symbolism, and stylistic orientation. This approach identifies continuities with traditional Vietnamese aesthetics as well as innovations influenced by Western artistic movements.

A comparative analysis explores differences and continuities across historical periods and sociopolitical contexts, particularly between liberated zones and urban centers (1954–1975) and between pre- and post-Doi Moi environments.

Contextual interpretation links artistic production to broader cultural exchange, institutional formation, professional organization, and audience reception.

2.4. Scope and limitations

This study focuses on Southern Vietnam as a distinct cultural and artistic region while recognizing its interaction with national and global artistic movements. Given its broad temporal scope, this research does not aim to provide an exhaustive catalogue of artists or works. Instead, representative examples are selected to illustrate significant transitions and socially influential artistic practices.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past decades, scholarship on Vietnamese fine arts has developed considerably, particularly in relation to the modernization process of the twentieth century. Foundational studies have documented the transition from traditional artistic practices to modern academic art under French colonial influence (Nguyen Luong Tieu Bach *et al.*, 2005). These works emphasize the role of institutionalized art education, especially the establishment of formal training systems that introduced European techniques, oil painting, and academic realism into Vietnamese artistic practice.

Subsequent research has focused on art's ideological and political dimensions during periods of revolutionary struggle and national division. Nguyen Van Chien (2001) highlighted the transformation of visual arts in response to wartime conditions and the ideological frameworks that shaped artistic production. Studies examining the period of art resistance underscore the documentary and mobilizing functions of sketches, propaganda imagery, and realist compositions created in liberated zones. These works stress the integration of art into political communication and the formation of revolutionary identity.

Other scholars have examined the development of sculpture and monumental art, particularly in the post-1975 period. Nguyen Xuan Tien (2009; 2013)

analyzed the institutionalization of socialist realist esthetics and the contribution of sculptors to shaping public memory and national narratives. These studies demonstrate the influence of state cultural policy and centralized planning on artistic themes, materials, and exhibition systems during the early post-reunification era.

Research on the Renovation (Doi Moi) period has emphasized diversification, experimentation, and market-oriented transformation in Vietnamese fine arts (Hanoi University of Fine Arts & Institute of Fine Arts, 2007). The shift toward greater openness facilitated international exhibitions, private galleries, and interdisciplinary practices. Studies on applied arts and graphic design have illustrated the growing intersection between artistic creativity and economic modernization (Huynh Van Muoi, 2024). These developments reveal the expanding functional role of the fine arts within a rapidly transforming society.

Despite these significant contributions, existing scholarship has largely approached the fine arts in Southern Vietnam within broader national narratives. Many studies focus on the overall modernization of Vietnamese art or specific genres such as monumental sculpture, resistance art, or graphic design. Although these perspectives are valuable, they often treat Southern Vietnam as a component of national art history rather than as a distinct regional case shaped by particular historical and cultural dynamics.

Furthermore, limited attention has been paid to the continuous interaction between colonial legacies, wartime division, post-reunification restructuring, and global integration as interconnected processes influencing Southern Vietnamese art throughout the twentieth century. The relationship between institutional development, professional associations, art education systems, and shifting esthetic orientations in Southern Vietnam remains insufficiently synthesized within a comprehensive regional framework.

Therefore, a systematic analysis of the fine arts in Southern Vietnam as a regionally specific yet nationally interconnected field is necessary. By examining artistic production alongside institutional transformation and socio-political change, this study extends existing scholarship and contributes to a more integrated understanding of how social and cultural forces shaped the evolution of the fine arts in Southern Vietnam.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. 1954–1975: Division, ideology, and artistic duality

The period from 1954 to 1975 represents a decisive stage in the development of Southern Vietnamese

fine arts, shaped by political division, ideological confrontation, and intensified cultural exchange. Following the Geneva Accords, Southern Vietnam entered a distinct socio-political trajectory under the influence of the United States and the Republic of Vietnam government. This context generated a complex artistic environment characterized by institutional fragmentation and ideological contrast (Nguyen Van Chien, 2001).

In urban centers such as Saigon, exposure to Western artistic movements accelerated. During the mid-twentieth century, art schools and private studios facilitated engagement with abstraction, expressionism, symbolism, and other international modernist tendencies. This phase can be understood as a form of postcolonial esthetic negotiation, in which local artists selectively appropriated European and American visual languages while attempting to articulate individual identity and urban modernity. Rather than merely imitating Western models, many artists adapted formal experimentation to local subject matter, thereby producing hybrid aesthetic forms shaped by both global and regional influences

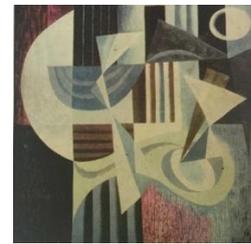


Figure 1. Ta Ty, *Boundary of Space*, oil on canvas, 1959



Figure 2. Do Quang Em, *Still Life*, oil on canvas, 1972



Figure 3. Ho Huu Thu, *Green Bud*, lacquer, 1972

Simultaneously, artistic production developed under markedly different conditions in liberated and revolutionary zones. The scarcity of materials, mobility across battlefields, and the urgency of political communication shaped artistic practice. Sketches, propaganda posters, and realist compositions became the dominant forms. As documented in studies of wartime visual culture (Nguyen Van Chien, 2001), these works functioned not only as artistic expression but also as documentary evidence and instruments of ideological mobilization. The integration of art into revolutionary struggle illustrates how esthetic production was embedded within broader political and social objectives.



Figure 4. Huynh Phuong Dong, Battle of Binh Gia, watercolor on paper, 1965.

The coexistence of these two artistic spheres—urban modernist experimentation and revolutionary realist production—created a distinctive dual structure within the fine arts of Southern Vietnam. This duality reflects the broader processes of cultural division during the Vietnam War. In urban environments, artistic practice often expressed themes of existential reflection, alienation, or individual experience, while in revolutionary contexts, art emphasized collective struggle, heroism, and national liberation.

This divergence was not merely stylistic but also institutional. Urban art institutions operated within market-oriented and Western-influenced systems, whereas revolutionary art was organized through political and propaganda structures. The resulting artistic landscape reveals how fine arts in Southern Vietnam were shaped simultaneously by global cultural circulation and localized ideological commitment.

This period represents an accelerated but uneven transformation from the perspective of cultural modernization. Modernist experimentation in urban areas signaled integration into global artistic currents, while revolutionary realism reinforced national identity and political solidarity. The tension between these orientations demonstrates the

complexity of artistic identity formation under conditions of war and division.

The long-term impact of this period extended beyond stylistic innovation. Artistic production during 1954–1975 shaped public perception, contributed to ideological discourse, and influenced institutional restructuring after the UN. The coexistence of modernist and realist traditions later informed artistic negotiations in the post-1975 period, when previously divided artistic communities were brought into a unified national framework.

4.2. The period 1975–1986: Reunification, institutional integration, and the socialist orientation

Following national reunification in 1975, the fine arts in Southern Vietnam entered a phase of structural reorganization and ideological integration. The convergence of artists trained under different political and educational systems created a complex artistic environment. Artists educated in Hanoi and other socialist contexts joined those trained in Saigon and abroad, bringing divergent esthetic orientations and professional experiences into a newly unified institutional framework.

During this period, cultural policy emphasized socialist realism as a guiding artistic orientation. As observed in studies of post-reunification visual culture (Nguyen Xuan Tien, 2009), artistic production was expected to reflect themes aligned with socialist reconstruction, collective labor, national unity, and postwar recovery. This orientation did not eliminate stylistic diversity but established normative expectations regarding subject matter and ideological function.

Institutionalization of professional organizations played a central role in shaping artistic practice. The formation and consolidation of fine art associations, exhibition systems, and state-supported cultural institutions structured opportunities for artistic production and public display. The reorganization of art institutions in Southern Vietnam, particularly in Ho Chi Minh City, facilitated integration into the national cultural system (Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts Association, 2024). These institutional transformations illustrate how artistic development during this period was closely linked to centralized planning and cultural administration.

From a stylistic perspective, many artists who had previously engaged with modernist experimentation adapted to the prevailing realist orientation. Some scholars continued to explore symbolic or impressionistic elements within officially accepted frameworks, while others focused more directly on

documentary and commemorative themes. Monumental sculptures and public artworks have become particularly significant, contributing to the construction of collective memory and national narratives (Nguyen Xuan Tien, 2009; 2013). This period can be understood as one of negotiated continuity rather than abrupt rupture. Although socialist realism dominated official discourse, the coexistence of artists from diverse educational backgrounds allowed for subtle variations in form and technique. The interaction between inherited modernist tendencies and state-directed esthetic expectations produced a layered artistic landscape.

From the perspective of cultural modernization, 1975–1986 represents a stage of consolidation rather than experimentation. Artistic production was embedded within broader efforts under a centrally planned system to reconstruct economic and social life. The fine arts functioned not only as esthetic expression but also as a means of reinforcing political cohesion and national identity during the postwar recovery period.

Simultaneously, the structural limitations of centralized cultural administration gradually generated diversification pressures. Economic challenges and evolving social conditions contributed to the emergence of new discussions about artistic autonomy and international engagement by the mid-1980s. These developments laid the groundwork for the transformations that would become more visible during the Doi



Figure 5. Le Van De, *Within the Family*, silk painting



Figure 6. Nguyen Hai, *Thanh Gong*, bronze sculpture, 1972



Figure 7. Le Thi Kim Bach, *For the Peace of the Nation*, lacquer, 1999.

4.3. Post-1986: Renovation, market transformation, and artistic diversification after 1986

The introduction of the Renovation (Doi Moi) policy in 1986 marked a fundamental turning point in the development of Vietnamese fine arts. Economic liberalization, expanding international exchange, and the gradual shift toward a market-oriented system significantly altered artistic production's institutional and creative conditions. These transformations were especially visible in Southern Vietnam, particularly in Ho Chi Minh City, due to the region's long-standing exposure to foreign cultural influences and its role as a major economic center (Hanoi University of Fine Arts & Institute of Fine Arts, 2007).

During this period, artistic practice diversified in both form and content. The loosening of centralized control over exhibition systems and the expansion of private galleries enabled artists to experiment more freely with materials, themes, and stylistic approaches. Abstract painting, conceptual tendencies, installation practices, and mixed-media experimentation gradually entered the artistic landscape alongside realist and traditional forms. This diversification reflects a shift from ideologically guided production toward pluralistic esthetic exploration.



Figure 8. Nguyen Trung Tin, *Beside a Historic Site*, oil painting

The Doi Moi period represents a stage of accelerated integration into global artistic networks from the perspective of cultural modernization. International exhibitions, artist exchanges, and cross-cultural collaborations expanded significantly. Southern Vietnamese artists participated in overseas exhibitions and engaged with global art markets, contributing to Vietnamese art's repositioning within broader international discourse (Hanoi University of Fine Arts & Institute of Fine Arts, 2007).

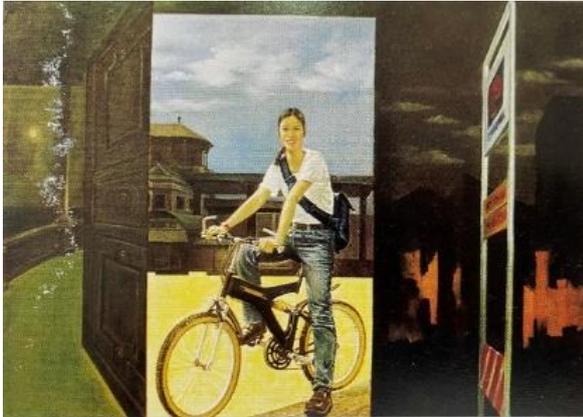


Figure 9. Pham Do Dong, *Within the Heart of the City*, oil painting, 2000

The role of professional associations and art education systems also evolved at the institutional level. Universities and specialized institutions in Ho Chi Minh City expanded their programs in graphic design, industrial design, fashion, and applied arts. This development illustrates the increasing intersection between artistic creativity and economic modernization (Huynh Van Muoi, 2024). The growth of applied arts demonstrates how fine arts in Southern Vietnam adapted to market demands while maintaining esthetic innovation.

The expansion of public exhibitions and cultural events further reshaped the relationship between art and society. Artistic production was no longer confined to state-sponsored exhibition halls but extended into private galleries, commercial spaces, and urban cultural environments. This transformation reflects a broader reconfiguration of cultural authority in which artists, curators, collectors, and private enterprises began to play more active roles in shaping artistic visibility.

At the same time, the legacy of earlier periods remained influential. Elements of socialist realist training, pre-1975 modernist experimentation, and traditional esthetic sensibilities continued to inform artistic production. Rather than replacing previous artistic models, the Doi Moi period generated a layered and hybrid visual culture. Thus, the fine arts in

Southern Vietnam demonstrate a process of cumulative transformation, where historical inheritances interact with global currents and market forces.



Figure 10. Nguyen Gia Tri, *Young Woman in the Garden*, lacquer

From a regional perspective, the artistic dynamism of Southern Vietnam during this period reflects its socio-economic environment. The position of Ho Chi Minh City as a commercial and cultural hub fostered experimentation and attracted artists from across the country. The region emerged as a negotiation space between tradition and innovation, national identity, and global integration.

In this sense, the post-1986 transformation cannot be understood solely as an economic reform. This represents a broader cultural shift in which artistic autonomy, institutional diversification, and international engagement reshaped the structure of the fine arts in Southern Vietnam. The interaction between market mechanisms and creative freedom continues to define the artistic landscape of the region in the contemporary period.

4.4. Professional associations, institutional networks, and public cultural spaces

Professional associations and cultural institutions have played a decisive role in shaping the development of the fine arts in Southern Vietnam. Beyond individual artistic production, the organization of exhibition systems, training structures, and professional networks significantly influenced artistic visibility, evaluation, and public reception.

The establishment and consolidation of the Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts Association marked an important stage in institutional stabilization after reunification. By coordinating exhibitions, facilitating professional exchange, and supporting artists' participation in national and international events, the association contributed to the integration of Southern Vietnamese artists into the broader national cultural framework (Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts Association, 2024). Institutional platforms provided not only administrative support but also

mechanisms of esthetic evaluation and professional recognition.

Museums and public exhibition spaces further strengthen the structural foundation of artistic production. For example, the Ho Chi Minh City Museum of Fine Arts functioned as a site of preservation, historical representation, and cultural education. Through collection strategies and curated exhibitions, such institutions shaped narratives about regional artistic identity and historical continuity. The institutionalization of art within museum systems reflects the broader modernization of cultural administration in postwar Vietnam.

During the Doi Moi period, the role of professional associations evolved in response to economic liberalization and market expansion. While state-supported organizations continued to operate, private galleries and independent exhibition initiatives emerged as influential actors within the artistic ecosystem. This diversification altered traditional hierarchies of cultural authority and expanded artists' opportunities to reach new audiences. The increasing interaction among public institutions, private enterprises, and international cultural organizations demonstrates the transformation of artistic infrastructure under market-oriented reforms.

The expansion of applied arts and graphic design programs within Southern Vietnamese universities further illustrates the integration of artistic production into economic and urban development (Huynh Van Muoi, 2024). Educational institutions became sites where esthetic training intersected with industrial design, advertising, and cultural industries. This shift reflects a broader redefinition of the social function of the fine arts, extending beyond ideological representation toward participation in creative economies.

From a regional perspective, the institutional adaptability of Southern Vietnam has contributed to its position as a dynamic artistic center. The economic vitality of Ho Chi Minh City facilitated the emergence of hybrid cultural spaces in which exhibitions, commercial galleries, public art events, and interdisciplinary festivals coexisted. These developments demonstrate that stylistic innovation and evolving institutional and organizational frameworks have shaped artistic growth in Southern Vietnam.

The relationship among artists, professional associations, state institutions, and market actors constitutes a structural network through which artistic meaning is produced and circulated. Therefore, the fine arts in Southern Vietnam have evolved within an interconnected system that links creative agency,

institutional regulation, public engagement, and economic transformation. This systemic perspective reinforces the argument that artistic development cannot be understood solely through stylistic analysis but must be examined within broader socio-cultural and institutional contexts.

5. CONCLUSION

The development of the fine arts in Southern Vietnam during the twentieth century reflects a complex interaction between historical transformation, institutional restructuring, and cultural exchange. Rather than evolving along a linear trajectory, overlapping influences, including colonial academic training, wartime ideological division, post-reunification socialist integration, and post-1986 market-oriented reform, shaped Southern Vietnamese art. Each historical stage generated distinct artistic responses, institutional configurations, and esthetic orientations.

The national division period (1954–1975) produced a dual artistic structure characterized by the co-existence of revolutionary realist production and urban modernist experimentation. Following reunification, institutional consolidation and socialist cultural policy reshaped artistic practice, integrating Southern artists into a national framework while preserving stylistic diversity. The Renovation (Doi Moi) period ushered in accelerated diversification, international engagement, and market-driven transformation, positioning Southern Vietnam – particularly Ho Chi Minh City – as a dynamic center of artistic experimentation and institutional adaptation.

This study demonstrates that the evolution of the Southern Vietnamese fine arts cannot be understood solely through stylistic analysis. Instead, artistic production must be examined in relation to sociopolitical conditions, professional associations, museum systems, art education structures, and shifting economic frameworks. By integrating historical analysis, visual interpretation, and institutional examination, this study provides a comprehensive regional perspective that complements broader narratives of Vietnamese art history.

The findings highlight Southern Vietnam as a cultural negotiation space, where tradition and modernity, national identity and global integration, ideological continuity, and creative autonomy intersect across successive historical periods. The artistic landscape of the region reveals processes of hybridity and adaptation that contribute significantly to the modernization of Vietnamese fine arts as a whole.

This study offers a more nuanced understanding

of twentieth-century Vietnamese art and underscores the importance of institutional and socio-cultural analysis in art historical research by foregrounding regional specificity within national and international contexts. Southern Vietnamese fine arts emerge not only as a regional variant of national development

but also as an active contributor to the transformation of modern Vietnamese visual culture.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Not applicable

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