

GEMS OF HANOI A RETROSPECTIVE

Dao Hai Phong



PHONG
2005

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Dao Hai Phong

17 January – 14 February, 2015



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FOREWORD

Jørn Middelborg

Thavibu Gallery

Thavibu Gallery has the pleasure of presenting the current catalogue and exhibition, GEMS OF HANOI – A RETROSPECTIVE by DAO HAI PHONG, featuring oil paintings by the Vietnamese artist. The exhibition takes place in Bangkok, Thailand, on 17 January – 14 February 2015.

Gems of Hanoi highlights the art of Dao Hai Phong from the past decade in his first solo exhibition at Thavibu Gallery. Regarded as one of Vietnam's most successful painters to emerge after *Doi Moi*, Dao Hai Phong has exhibited extensively since 1993 in his native Vietnam as well as abroad. Highly regarded for his rendering of villages on the outskirts of Hanoi, his artistic journey has been one of memory and the preservation of the vanishing cultural geography of his youth. His use of glowing colours is reminiscent of sparkling gemstones while the rendering of textures on canvasses is translated into serene and lush vistas that emphasize the true nature of Vietnam. At the same time, the exhibition provides a portrait of what has been dear to him from his background and family.

Thavibu Gallery was fortunate to have been granted access to the artist's personal art collection, resulting in this visually seductive selection of 24 paintings for ***Gems of Hanoi***, which presents a retrospective of some of his best works over the last decade

Dao Hai Phong is 49 years old and one of Vietnam's most commercially successful painters. He graduated from the Hanoi Academy of Theatre and Cinema in 1987 and has taken part in several international exhibitions in Singapore, Japan, Hong Kong, the United Kingdom, Italy, Laos, Switzerland and the USA as well as in Vietnam. This is his first exhibition in Thailand.

The essay has been written by the art historian and independent curator, Shireen Naziree. I take this opportunity to thank Dao Hai Phong for his collaboration, and Shireen Naziree for her contribution. I also thank Ralph Kiggell for language editing and Nguyen Thu Hang for her assistance.

GEMS OF HANOI

Shireen Naziree

Art Historian and Independent Curator

*'Is painting not merely a reflection of my inner self, which surpasses the mastery of the brush?
Mastery of the brush is nothing. The colour and its lines contain your character and your message.'*

Marc Chagall, 1972

The radiant and glowing colours that permeate and highlight the paintings of Dao Hai Phong speak of a way in which form and brushstrokes determine how colour becomes innate. For Dao Hai Phong, his paintings are not merely a reflection of his inner self, they represent the social logic of life and what has become essential to his personal history. Colour and line embody his character, and his artist's message is one whereby his depictions of the Hanoi of his youth become an evocative visual journey in which the sparkles of his colours travel from gaze to gaze.

Dao Hai Phong was born in Hanoi in 1965, a time of enforced seclusion and critical political structuring in North Vietnam. Yet it was also an era when intellectual and moral forces bound cultural practitioners together, their symbolism heavily influenced by patriotism and especially the beauty of their land.

Emulating the success of his father, Dao Duc (b. 1928), the award-winning film maker and director of the first Vietnamese movie 'Share a River' (1959), Phong graduated in 1987 from Hanoi Academy of Theatre and Cinema where he studied film in the Art Film Design Department. For the following five years he worked as a set designer, eventually rising to the position of chief designer at the Vietnam Film Studio.

Though Phong did not pursue an academic art education, his talent as an artist was visible even as a young boy when his paintings were featured in a children's book, for which he was paid. Instead he attributes his father as his greatest art mentor and teacher. Ironically, Dao Duc



The Sacred Lake, 2007

had trained as a painter under To Ngoc Van, the noted artist who was principal at the art academy set up in North Vietnam's War Zone under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh. From his travels to the Soviet Union and Poland, Dao Duc would bring back to Hanoi books relating to film and photography as well as art books, from which Phong learnt the principles of aesthetics and the history of art. It was through these teachings that Phong was able to realize the importance of articulating standards of artistic sense and vision that determined the true value and sincerity of a good artist.

The city of Hanoi where Phong spent his early years was a very different one to the overcrowded modern metropolis it is today. It was a city filled with memories of both happiness and sadness. It was a city filled with a living history and serenity and regarded as the jewel of Indochina.

Dao Duc would take Phong on his bicycle to explore Hanoi's suburban villages while relating to him the stories of Hans Christian Andersen. For the young Phong, these fairy tales conjured up vivid imaginative spaces that he related to the peaceful Vietnamese countryside. He recalls childhood games amongst topaz-tinged autumn leaves, fascinated by the changing hues from yellows to garnet reds. The vibrant emerald and peridot greens of summer. The glowing beauty of these colours and the serenity of the countryside would become his lifelong artistic inspiration. From the quiet villages he had visited with his father he realized the sophistication of simplicity, which has provided Phong with a powerful stimulus for creativity.

Vietnam is a country that has never suffered from a lack of artistic sophistication despite decades of tumultuous political upheaval and a modern economic and social history marked by massive change that now defines the nation and particularly Hanoi, yet Phong has created a private world that reflects his inner experiences. While his paintings are totally Vietnamese in character there are undoubtedly links to the romanticism of the great European Impressionists, in the sense that his work contains a universality and independent humanism with which all cultures can identify.

Phong readily testifies his admiration for some of the great artists of the twentieth century from whose works he learnt valuable lessons.



Golden Dawn, 2004

'I admire Marc Chagall's beautiful soul. From Gustav Klimt, there is a continuing romance and delicacy in his art. From Paul Klee, there is a brevity and saturation of colour. From Henri Rousseau, there is certain innocence in the decorative. From Mark Rothko, I have learnt the value of minimalism, and the vividness of depth from Nicolas de Staël. From Francis Bacon, I have learnt not to fear any extremities, and as for Picasso, his art has taught me that there are no limitations in art.'

While it is evident that there are definite influences from all these artists, Phong remains powerfully independent and too elusive to be categorized.

Phong started painting the villages on the outskirts of Hanoi while still in college,, but it was only in 1992 that he had the courage, through much perseverance, to commit to becoming a full-time artist. This was a buoyant period for artists as Vietnam opened up to the international marketplace following its *Doi Moi* policy in 1986, which also brought artists and their work to the attention of a broader international audience. This resulted in Phong's first international showing as a participant in the exhibition *The Art of Vietnam* in London in 1994.

The symbolic narrative of a serene and ethereal pastoral is part of a poetic repertoire in keeping with this world of past and present fused into a galaxy of gems. Such an attribute does not denote a flight by Phong from reality or a refusal to negotiate the difficulties of war and the suppression of his youth. It is his very independence that has allowed Phong to produce a genre of art that, though conformist, is filled with individualism through the splendour of colour.

Gems of Hanoi highlights works from Dao Hai Phong's art practice of the past decade with many of the works from the artist's personal collection.

Phong paints with a presence that is filled with experience and depth. *Sunset over the Village* (2003) is a calm face, assured of itself within a surreal or dreamlike definition that draws the eye to the changing light of the sky – an experience filled with creative enchantment.

Similarly, in *Golden Dawn* (2004)



Blue Sky, 2004

Phong employs colours redolent of aquamarine, corals and hues of topaz strung into a quiet village at dawn; the morning light of the quiet countryside serving as an accompaniment to a world of purity. This land of gold and emerald fields, magnified by a glowing palette has continued to inform all his later works. For the artist, colour has an incandescence that illuminates the canvas. By submitting totally to the visual, he has brought forth the emotional as well as capturing both the brutal radiance of the light and its extreme softness. This is most visual in the painting *Myself* (2005), where space becomes one of personal experience and solace. He regards such a space as a necessity, untouched by any outside influences for the development of his artistic being. And it is Phong's hope that each individual who studies his work may find such a space within himself or herself.

As colour arouses emotion, the organization Phong imposes on his landscapes reinforces the symbolic significance of his work. This is despite the motifs; forming part of the history and personal culture of the painter, their effect and meaning is easily understood. *Blue Sky* (2004) reflects dreams that Phong has pursued, memories of his childhood and his native land with objects of his imagination – such as the voluminous trees – which constitute his iconography.

Trees have had particular significance within his oeuvre as they represent 'life' and strength, enduring the ravages of nature and time. In the absence of the figurative, these trees often serve as iconic anchors, their symbolic narrative becoming part of his poetic repertoire, in keeping with his world of a romantic past.

He also imagines that every tree gracing the entrance of a village has its own tale to tell. The prominence of a backdrop of trees to the solitary figure in the foreground in *A Ceremonial Village* (2005) is a rarity as Phong articulates that trees are representative of the cycle of life. And it is within this cycle of life that he honors the role of the Vietnamese woman, particularly those who toil the fields of rural Vietnam. *Season of the Harvest* (2005) represents women who harbour dreams for bountiful harvests that ensure the fruitful continuity of life.



Gentle Street, 2002

At the heart of Phong's unique world is the past, which he relives through a whirlwind of images and complex fictions despite the apparent simplicity with which they are rendered. He admires Bui Xuan Phai's depictions of Hanoi, captured with heart and soul and

resisting the tensions of history. Thus Phong's versions of Hanoi have become symbols of a paradise lost and perpetually recreated. As much as he has been familiar with the luminous beauty of the countryside, he has been witness, as a son of Hanoi, both to the culture that has given his city its humanism and the changing face of modernization.

Phong has constantly been reminded of this ideology, which has inspired him to create a number of paintings on the picturesque streets of Hanoi and her surrounding villages over the years, from *Gentle Street* (2002) to *The Old Street* (2010). Through his paintings, Phong has created a place of recollection and peace that has been accessible to many, initiating dialogues and rekindling memories for his spectators. This he believes is where his aesthetic breaks through its autocracy and gains its freedom to humanity.



Red Sunset, 2010

For Phong, the beauty of the Vietnamese landscape allows his imagination to wander and, through his paintings, to unite distant dreams. Churches form part of Phong's familiar language. Whether imposing and grand as in *Old Church* (2009) or humble as in *Red Sunset* (2010), he has modulated an artistic language of his own to describe them, paring the excesses of their original French Vietnamese style. The end graphic is an ethereal expression of his divinity and one he hopes that arouses similar feelings in his viewers.

Working chiefly with oils, he paints, scrapes and daubs, creating textures. His recent painterly handling has been more relaxed but remains sensuous as he continues to render his ideas in a spontaneous fashion. *Yellow Sunset* (2013) and *Blue Fog Season* (2013) reveal the increased importance of colour as a medium of expression. In these works, as well as *Welcome the Thunderstorm* (2013), the colours that light up his skies show an urge to render the overwhelming profusion of light. A calmer quality is revealed in works such as *In Winter* (2014), though there remains a chromatic harmony of colours. The turquoise and sapphire blues in *By the Lake* (2010) attest to the power of his expression.

Dao Hai Phong's work deals with so many personal reflections of his own life that it has the depth to appeal to a large sector of the public. It is a creative diary filled with the sensuous beauty of gemstones. It is from this diary that he draws his inspiration as he merges his dreams with a traditional poem that describes his artistic journey.

*'I rode alone
towards the dawn,
along the pureness of the morning
in the streets
past the early sunshine on the sidewalks
how intimate they were
how they stung me
as if I could see my own childhood
where the trees were brightened by young leaves
I saw the depth of the blue sky
in the bottom of the river
my sadness was reflected
on the surface of the water
I saw the dark soil
where the seasons
hid the ripening fruit'*

(Nguyen Bao Chan)

PLATES



Yellow Sunset, 2013 | Oil on canvas | 133 x 80 cm



Blue Fog Season, 2013 | Oil on canvas | 134 x 100 cm



A Time to Remember, 2013 | Oil on canvas | 133 x 80 cm



A Welcome Thunderstorm, 2013 | Oil on canvas | 135 x 120 cm



The Red Tree, 2011 | Oil on canvas | 120 x 100 cm



Under the Moonlight, 2014 | Oil on canvas | 100 x 95 cm



A Ceremonial Village, 2005 | Oil on canvas | 60 x 50 cm



Enjoying a Rest, 2010 | Oil on canvas | 60 x 50 cm



By the Lake, 2010 | Oil on canvas | 60 x 50 cm



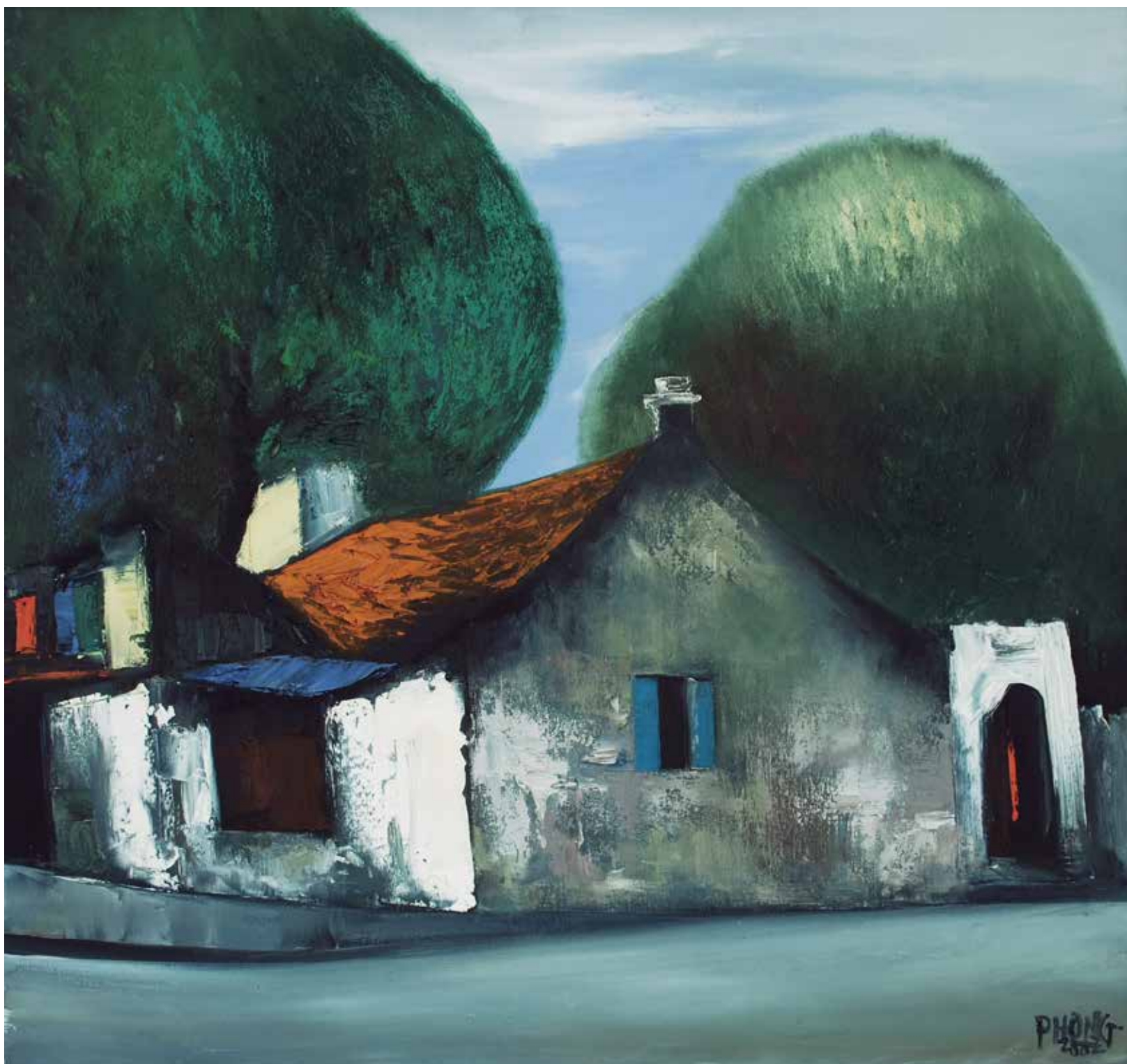
Red Sunset, 2010 | Oil on canvas | 95 x 90 cm



The Old Church, 2009 | Oil on canvas | 95 x 90 cm



Sunset over the Village, 2003 | Oil on canvas | 95 x 90 cm



Gentle Street, 2002 | Oil on canvas | 95 x 90 cm



Myself, 2005 | Oil on canvas | 95 x 90 cm



Season of the Harvest, 2005 | Oil on canvas | 95 x 90 cm



The White Gate, 2004 | Oil on canvas | 95 x 90 cm



Cheo Village, 2005 | Oil on canvas | 95 x 90 cm



Late Evening, 2011 | Oil on canvas | 95 x 90 cm



The Old Street, 2010 | Oil on canvas | 95 x 90 cm



Blue Sky, 2004 | Oil on canvas | 95 x 90 cm



Golden Dawn, 2004 | Oil on canvas | 100 x 80 cm



The Sacred Lake, 2007 | Oil on canvas | 100 x 80 cm



In Winter, 2014 | Oil on canvas | 100 x 80 cm



Approaching Autumn, 2011 | Oil on canvas | 100 x 80 cm

CHRONOLOGY



DAO HAI PHONG

1965: Born in Hanoi, Vietnam

1987: Graduated from the Hanoi Academy of Theatre and Cinema

Selected Art Exhibitions

Solo Exhibitions

- 2015 *Gems of Hanoi – A Retrospective by Dao Hai Phong* at Thavibu Gallery – Bangkok, **Thailand**
- 2007 Solo Exhibition at Red Sea Gallery - **Singapore**
- 2006 Solo Exhibition at Ryder Street Gallery – London, **United Kingdom**
- 2005 *The Magic of Dao Hai Phong* at HKFINEART.COM Gallery – **Hong Kong**
- 2003 Solo exhibition at Kee Club, HKFINEART.COM Gallery - **Hong Kong**
- 2001 Solo Exhibition at KIM 3 Gallery - New York, **USA**
- 2000 Solo Exhibition at Vinh Loi Gallery – HCMC
- 1999 *Twilight Moment* at Plum Blossoms Gallery - **Hong Kong** and **Singapore**
Peaceful Season at Apricot Gallery, Hanoi

Group Exhibitions

- 2013 *Friends* at Vietnam Fine Arts Museum, Hanoi
- 2012 *Exhibition* at Indian Council for Cultural Relations - Darjeeling, **India**
- 2011 *Balance* at Hotel D'Opera, Hanoi
- 2010 *Group Exhibition* at Apricot Gallery - London, **United Kingdom**
- 2009 *A Peaceful Place* at Toriizaka Art - Tokyo, **Japan**
- 2007 *Group Exhibition* – Seoul, **Korea**
- 2003 *Phong and Binh*, two man exhibition at HKFINEART.COM Gallery – **Hong Kong**
- 2002 *Group Exhibition* at Max Mara – Florida, **USA**
To the New Season - Hanoi
- 2001 *Separate Paths* at Dragon Gallery – Hanoi
Vietnamese Contemporary Fine Arts at Wilfrid Israel Museum – Hazorea, **Israel**
- 1999 *Pure and Piercing Colour* at Rich and Famous Gallery, Rudolf & Sybille Kubli - Rapperswil.
Switzerland
- 1998 *Hanoi Art Exhibition* at Exhibition Hall of Vietnam Art Association, Hanoi
- 1997 *Past and Present* at Nam Son Gallery, Hanoi
A Glimpse about Hanoi at Duc Minh Gallery, Ho Chi Minh City
View of Contemporary Art - Vientiane, **Laos**
A View from Others at Dong Son Gallery, Hanoi
A Winding River, The journey of contemporary art in Vietnam at Meridian International Centre - Washington DC, **USA**
- 1996 *Three Contemporary Vietnamese Artists* at LKF Gallery - **Hong Kong**
Independent in Hanoi at Nam Son Gallery, Hanoi

- 1995 *After Dark, Landscape of Light* at Hoa Sen Gallery, Hanoi
- 1994 *The Art of Vietnam* at Roy Miles Gallery - London, **United Kingdom**
Vietnamese Art Festival at LKF Gallery - **Hong Kong**
- 1993 *Hanoi Memories* at Vietnam Art Association, Hanoi.
Old Streets of Hanoi - Hanoi



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