

Elegance as a refuge for the pains of life

The meaning of beauty in the works of Nguyen Thanh Binh (1954)



Afternoon, 130x100cm, oil on canvas, 2023. Nguyen Thanh Binh

Early youth

This exhibition in the Vietnam Art House in The Hague presents an important number of works of the Vietnamese painter Nguyen Thanh Binh. Born in 1954, Binh's life was deeply influenced by the political and military events of the decolonisation and war in Vietnam. In 1954 the French army, fighting to keep Vietnam as a colony, was defeated by Vietnam communist and patriotic troops near the town of Dien Bien Phu,

and was forced to leave the country. Since the Cold War was at its peak, the USA took over the French efforts to keep Vietnam in the western 'camp'. As is well known, this resulted in a cruel and devastating war. It divided the country into a communist North and an anti-communist South. This demanded painful choices from many Vietnamese. Binh's family originated from the South, his grandparents were wealthy and well educated. However, they supported the upheaval against the French. Binh's father made his career as an ambassador for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, founded by Ho Chi Minh. Although Binh himself, after his art study in Hanoi, felt no motivation to go to the front and fight the south Vietnamese troops, that were struggling after the US-army left the country in 1973, his mother urged him to join the army, feeling it as the only right thing to do for a son born into a family of North Vietnamese officials. Binh saw many of his comrades perish but survived the war miraculously himself. The war made him feel the senselessness of it all and he got into conflict with his superiors regularly. Evidently, this period in his life has had a lifelong influence on his thoughts and his artistic work.



Mr Nguyen Thanh Ha, former Vietnam Democratic Republic's ambassador to Hungary and Czechoslovakia, welcomed president during visit to Prague, 1957. Source: artist's family archive/ Vietnam New Agency.



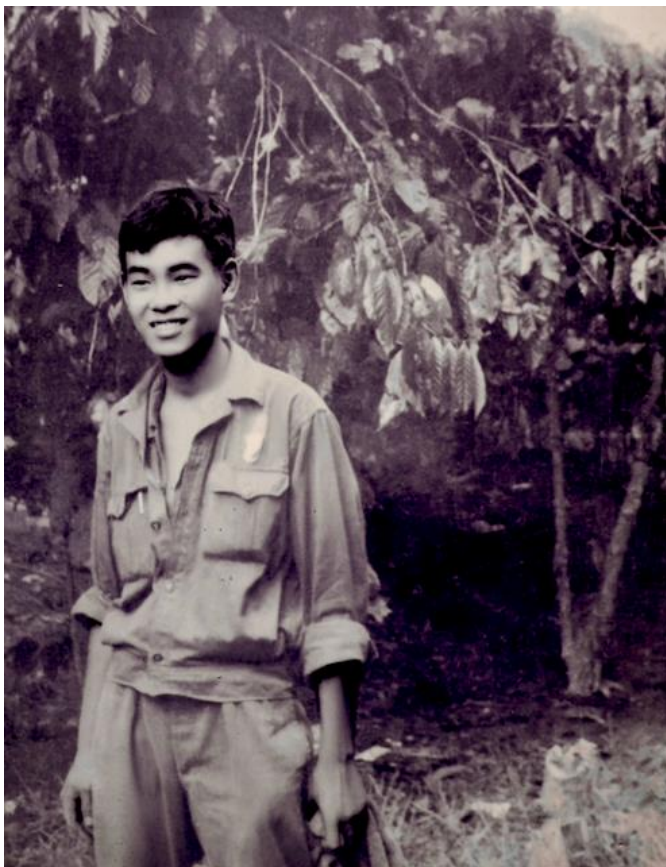
Mr Nguyen Thanh Binh had more opportunities to meet Vietnam Democratic Republic's president Ho Chi Minh, 1957 Prague. Source: artist's family archive/ Vietnam New Agency

East and West in Vietnamese art

As was the case for most artists in post-war Vietnam, for Binh life as a painter was hard. The country was poor, an international economic boycott made things worse. The political restrictions for artists were severe: no critical painting was allowed. Binh however chose not to devote his talents to the propagandistic artworks that were demanded from artists. Instead, he slowly developed a style of his own and confined his subject matter to seemingly innocent topics: flowers and plants, women and schoolgirls, still life, dancers and musicians. We will return to these topics later on and first take a closer look at the elements that form his style. Binh himself tells us several things about his work. He is inspired by the Japanese *haiku* tradition: transmitting a message in a very constricted poem. It is an art of leaving out all superficiality. Translating this to painting, it means a search for maximal expression with minimal means.

From 1965 till 1972 Binh studied at the Vietnam Fine Arts College in Hanoi. From 1972 till 1978 he served in the army, after which he returned to his school. From 1978

he enlisted Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts University, from which he graduated in 1983. Here he specialised in oil painting. Oil painting was practically unknown in Vietnam till the French came in the 19th century and founded the *École des Beaux Arts de l'Indochine* in Hanoi in the early twenties of the 20th century. Interestingly, the French built up an art education system that combined western styles and techniques with – at the same time - a keen interest in stimulating students to learn from their ancestral traditions. While the French had long left, the reputation of the *École* remained unscathed and Vietnamese teachers that were formed by the French educated generations of painters well into the postwar period. In fact this formed a typical characteristic of Vietnamese art: the combination of influences from the East and the West. From the West oil painting was integrated in Vietnam art, as were topics like the (female) nude and landscapes. From the East came the concentrated study of flowers and plants, the depiction of traditionally and elegantly dressed women and children. The astonishing economy of means in the artistic renderings is also an eastern legacy, with obvious links to calligraphy. These ingredients offer a charming art, to which many art lovers respond.



Mr Nguyen Thanh Binh, in army uniform, March 1975, Buon Me Thuat/ highland). Source: artist's archive



Mr Nguyen Thanh Binh in his studio, Ho Chi Minh City. Source: artist's archive

Elegance and beauty

Superficially, the work of Nguyen Thanh Binh fits exactly the above description that accounts for a large part of Vietnamese art as the foreigner knows it. Elegance, charm, beauty, subdued and soft colours, traditional topics with no political clues, with an unmistakable scent of the East and an opening to the western spectator. It is the 'why' of Binh's choice to paint what he paints and how he paints it, that makes his work stand out. His chosen subject matter comes from his own life: his wife, his daughter (a ballerina), the love for the traditions of his country and for music. For Binh, the ordinary beauty of these themes is far from ordinary: they form a refuge for the traumatic cruelties he experienced in his younger years. Elegance, harmony and beauty, as he is happy to be able to see despite his personal pains, are his ways to express the longing for a better world. In that one may say that elegance, harmony and beauty are far more than a refuge. They form a stronghold in a world full of disharmony and violence. A world we all know. This explains the recognition of the valour of beauty all over the globe. It is a consolation as well as a promise.



Public Holliday, 100x100cm, oil on canvas, 2026. Nguyen Thanh Binh

Drs. Erik Lips

A Historian and Art Historian, Erik Lips was Curator for Museum No Hero from 2020 till 2025.