
Le Cong Thanh and The Question of The Human Condition

By Nguyen Quan, Ho Chi Minh City, October 2003

The esthetic qualities of Vietnam art pose a great enigma: in the past, sculpture has generally been the best media to express it. However, in modern times, since the beginning of the 20th century, this art form has become but a shadow of its former self. On the other hand, painting, which is not per say a Vietnamese artistic tradition, has blossomed. There are many important cultural, political and social reasons for this: the religion break and the " ancient " traditional education, the revolution, unremitting war, contact with the colonial Eastern culture, the birth of middle class intellectuals, or pupils and students and of city dwellers, public servants of the new society... This enigma does however demonstrate the importance of a new sculptor in the context of the 20th century, Le Cong Thanh.



Le Cong Thanh was part of the emeritus of South Vietnam †. A graduate of the Hanoi Art School in 1962 and having studied abroad, this young sculptor represented, without a doubt, hope for the new revolutionary sculpture movement. From his very first exhibits in the early 1970s and despite his young age, Le Cong Thanh was deemed an icon and treated like an elder of the village.

Indeed Le Cong Thanh realized very early on how to seize and appropriate himself all that everyone was aspiring to under the banner of "nationalism and modernism"; alongside Nguyen Hai, a more sentimental and popular artist, whereas he was more rational, erudite and "occidental". The path towards a new stage of sculpture was hence paved, richer and more characteristic than the incongruous, academic, grossly realistic sculptures quickly made at the Fine Arts College of Vietnam under the French influence.

His works, such as *Suy Van simulant la folie*, *La jeune fille enroulant le fil à coudre*, *La mère en manque de bétel...* immediately give to the public the familiar sensation of villages, of the earth and the woods, the ambiance of the Dinh 𠄎, the pagodas of the sunny and windy high plains. His generation rediscovered the expressive sensuality of the art of the high plains, the elegant and mysterious sensuality of the art of Champa, and the gushing inspiration defying the rigid canons of the sculpture of the Đình and of the statues streaked in bright colors of the North Vietnamese pagodas.



Le Cong Thanh enriched his works in a gentle and accurate manner with the echoes of modern international sculpture, unfamiliar to the public and more or less banned in Vietnam in those days. He created volumes oscillating between closures and openings, links, virtual topological spaces, games in volumes and forms, the invisible and the visible... It seems to him that the confrontation, the contradiction between East and West is but a conventional artifice belonging to the dogmatic researcher. There are no exaggerated differences between the East and the West, because man has been the same since the dawn of time, regardless of the place. Otherwise, how would we be able to coexist?

Le Cong Thanh tried for a brief period to express himself through projects dealing with public monuments going in two directions. On one hand, he adopted a modern approach towards the beauty of forms, as in the case of "Statue pour place publique", made from new materials and a new technique called socialist realism, in concrete. On the other hand, he adopted an illustrative style like in the case of *Núi Thành*, which he created for his homeland. He quickly abandoned this work, which he thought could never reproduce the beauty of the place (in the cultural and concrete context of that time).



He transformed himself into an alchemist, locked up in a mysterious theosophical space; his usual way of discovering the pure gold of volumes from the sand and dust of the world. We are left with the impression that he sculpts with the veneration and natural abilities of the artists of the high plains creating symbols of life and death, of this earthly existence and that of the heavens through sculpting a mere piece of wood. More precisely, Le Cong Thanh is a mystical and a genius (of Champa?), faithfully sculpting a complete temple with female and male bodies in a trance, jubilant, in pain, torn between two beams of light: that of the flesh and that of philosophy. He has sculpted, chiseled, contemplated, closed his eyes and meditated while murmuring, chanting incomprehensible words like magical invocations, but also like the monologue of a character in a tragedy.



We easily recognize his sculpture from afar, like we recognize a different central region of Vietnam as soon as we come across the Col des Nuages. The backs, stomachs, buttocks, navels, thighs, breasts or round eggs, heads and necks (gat ngo) like crosses, thin moons, bird wings tied up with threads of silk or powerful steel cables...On this background, the sharp indentations of a razor blade marking the (ký hiệu dinh vi).

More importantly, the battle between the attraction and the repulsion of scattered volumes creating a united whole. These invisible forces, this tension hides in the empty spaces, inching its way between volumes, masses and shadows, encircling them. The sensuality, elevated to a symbolic level of extreme delicacy and the purity, the extremely severe choice of each line, each volume, each (bieu chat) give to Le Cong Thanh's statues the familiarity of an elegant knik-knack and the overwhelming solemnity of a place of worship that captivates us, plunges us in a world of expectations and modesty. The works, like their names, Nue, Le baiser, La femme couchée, La femme assise, L'amour, Femme nue assise, Femme nue couchée... repeat themselves infinitely, recreating, wave after wave, a work of art that is born of the experimentation and the meditation on the human condition to create the sculpture's style.

It is surely not language which expresses it, but rather these experiments and this meditation, the use of creativity as a means of this experiment and this meditation on the human condition, very rare in our art which is tending less and less to reflect reality, that has permitted him to create a personal space for his art. To kid him, Le Cong Thanh's friends call him the Vietnamese Henry Moore, which is partly true, for two reasons: he has received a lot from the outside world, but it has opened the door to our culture. I would nevertheless like to say that solely the question that he addresses to the human condition can allow the work to reach the heart of the esthetic quality of every fruit of the tree of life.

From the cultural magazine 'The Thao & Van Hoa', Vietnam, November 2003

†. In 1954, in accordance with the Geneva Accords putting an end to war between Vietnam and France, the members of the opposing Viet Minh in South-Vietnam merged with the North-Vietnamese to separate the warring parties.

‡. Common houses of Vietnamese villages.

Source: http://hoamaiparis.com/A_ThanhEN.htm