Art is not the first thing that comes to mind when the name Vietnam is evoked. Indeed, in the American popular imagination, pictures of the Vietnamese countryside are more often associated with war than with painted landscapes. And yet in recent years, Vietnam has figured prominently in international art exhibitions in Australia, Japan, and Europe. Vietnamese artists have participated in triennials and biennials, from Rio to Brisbane, and have also been the subject of one-person shows in established galleries throughout Asia, especially Hong Kong and Singapore. In the United States, Vietnamese art is still relatively unknown, and what is known of it is likely to be the controversies surrounding it. The only major exhibition of Vietnamese art to tour American cities, in 1998 and 1999, was greeted with demonstrators in one of its three venues, in Orange County, California, where the largest population of U.S. immigrant Vietnamese live. The show was picketed, and local newspaper articles called for its closing.1 The Vietnamese community in Orange County protested the show's “Hanoi” bias, and other California residents, including many Vietnam War veterans, criticized the exhibition as “Communist Party propaganda.”

It is not surprising that Vietnamese art should become associated in America with war or communism, because a quarter of a century since the end of
“the Vietnam Conflict” has not erased the pain and loss of that tragic event. Paintings of Vietnam by Vietnamese artists are surely reminders of the war to those who fought in it. And it is not misguided to equate current art from Vietnam with propaganda and tragedy. As this book will show, art and politics in Vietnam are difficult to separate. Pierre Bourdieu once noted that artists are created in part by a society that values art as a product. In Vietnam this is evident, as artists there have long figured as producers of desired commodities, whether for imperial rulers, colonial collectors, state officials, or global tourists. The role that artists have played in shaping Vietnamese history and society, and conversely the role that society has played in art, however, is still largely misunderstood. Even in the current atmosphere of art markets and international exhibitions, artists in Vietnam have not received scholarly attention or interest beyond having their names affixed next to their work on a wall in a gallery or in a catalog entry. Neither is this surprising, considering that art, artists, and their communities are seen as peripheral to discourses on Vietnamese society.

Readers familiar with the textile, ceramic, and sculptural traditions of Southeast Asia may not recognize Vietnamese painting either. This does not mean that painting in Vietnam is any less synonymous with national and cultural identity. Protests over paintings from Hanoi aside, Vietnamese overseas often buy paintings to satisfy their longings for their homeland. Again, viewers may associate the themes depicted in Vietnamese paintings with the nation as a whole: water buffaloes, rice fields, and women in traditional dress are recognizable emblems of Vietnamese traditional culture (see pl. 1). Like the textiles of Sumba and the classical dances of Cambodia, Vietnamese paintings have also become objects of value in the global tourist trade. They appear in galleries often accompanied by brochures promoting international travel and the preservation of world culture. While oil painting appears to be a “Western” product when compared with indigenous ceramic, performance, and textile traditions, in the case of Vietnam, it is also inextricably linked to national culture. Although unique in media and form, Vietnamese painting does share a few common traits with the better-known artistic traditions of its Southeast Asian neighbors. For example, the bright colors favored by Vietnamese painters recall the batik dyes used by Indonesian textile makers. The simple outlines in most Vietnamese paintings resemble patterns in ceramics, and the dominant themes of farm animals and village festivals recall the secular sculptures of Burma, Thailand, and Indonesia. In other words, Vietnamese painting is quite at home amid the popular art of Southeast Asia despite its “foreign” origin and appeal.
RESEARCHING VIETNAMESE PAINTING

The purpose of this book is to help bridge the gap between what is assumed by outsiders about “Hanoi” art and the experiences of artists in Vietnam. It aims to provide an account of the history of modern Vietnamese painting by paying particular attention to individual artists who have contributed to the making of artistic communities in Hanoi since 1925, when an art school was created by the French colonial government. I emphasize communities, in the plural, because, as this book will show, artists do not form a single unified group. They have figured prominently in the public arena; they are known entities in intellectual circles; yet, little has been written about them. In researching art and artists, I had to take an ethnographic approach rather than following a conventional art history model in the classical sense. This was both for practical and methodological reasons. The practical reasons are straightforward: Vietnamese art history records are rare, thus it is much easier to interview living artists than to consult written documents. Besides listing painters in official registries of artists, very little effort has been made to maintain archives, either visual or textual, of artworks or art movements in Vietnam. Part of the issue is financial. Since the establishment of an independent Vietnamese state in 1945, very little money has been disbursed for cultural projects, and priorities have been the creation of museums and collective art projects rather than the support of individual artists’ needs. Similarly, foreign aid and humanitarian institutions providing assistance to Vietnam have rarely expressed concern for Vietnamese artists and have never supported projects to classify and document individual artists’ lifeworks. Although an institute for art history has been in Hanoi since 1961 maintaining exhibition catalogs and other literature on various Vietnamese artists, there have been no systematic recordings in catalogues raisonnés, artist biographies, or photographic files of artworks since Western-style oil painting made its way to Vietnam in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Thus, most of the research for this book was done through interviews and on-site field research. This does not mean that it is the first or only art history of Vietnam. Exhibition catalogs, brochures, artist directories, and compilations of artworks have been published both in and out of Vietnam. This may be, however, one of the few written narratives of artists’ lives over the course of the twentieth century apart from Vietnamese discourse and by an international academic.

Research for this book entailed over three years of living and traveling in Vietnam, engaging in conversations with artists, and viewing and photo-
graphing artworks in artists’ studios, museums, and the homes of art collectors. Although effective for the purpose of writing a serious and substantive study of Vietnamese painting in the twentieth century, this method is by no means comprehensive. At present, no research on Vietnamese painting could be; too much has been lost. Paintings have been destroyed, and artists have died—the memory of their works buried with them. Recollections by official art historians are blurred by politics, and the details of the times and lives of famous artists recalled by the more marginalized, ostracized, or so-called unofficial artists and art historians have been skewed by fear of persecution, by brainwashing, or by alcohol-induced melancholy. Any history of modern Vietnamese painting is bound to be incomplete, but this does not mean it cannot be done at all. Art historians in Vietnam have been researching and writing about Vietnamese art since the establishment of their independent state in 1945.4 This situation—that is, the lack of cohesive historical sources—creates an interesting set of circumstances and poses problems intrinsic to the study of art. And this is why an ethnographic approach is useful. Rather than trying to reconstruct a history where historical data is scarce, this book studies the context in which art history is developing in Vietnam based on collective memories and on texts that are recalled and rewritten, spoken, or produced in other ways that stray from a classical Western art history model.

This is a model to which scholars of Asian art frequently refer. In his book on modernity in Asian art, John Clark proposes ways to rethink what modernity means and questions whether the terms by which it is defined in the West are necessarily applicable to the East.5 Similarly, students of Thai and Indonesian art have found that taking local thought and local cultural contexts into consideration provides an approach to Southeast Asian art that is more appropriate for the material at hand.6 An early pioneer in the study of Southeast Asian art who takes local views into consideration, Stanley O’Connor has stated: “Art in Southeast Asia cannot be removed from everyday experience.”7 Art in Southeast Asia has also increasingly become the focus of attention by anthropologists. A recent conference at Arizona State University on contemporary art in Southeast Asia gathered more anthropologists than art historians. This says as much about the state of anthropology as it does about Southeast Asian art. As Hildred Geertz stated during her keynote address, anthropology has come to accept art as a legitimate source of cultural and sociological study—a change from past decades.8

Vietnam thus provides the perfect setting in which to study how art and anthropology come together as proposed by George Marcus and Fred Myers in their anthology The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology.9 This
means studying the ways in which art is produced and the kind of language used to describe it rather than focusing on the formal or aesthetic qualities of art. As Marcus and Myers state: “Art continues to be the space in which difference, identity, and cultural value are being produced and contested.”10 To amplify, they state further:

“Aesthetic” recognitions may be autonomous discoveries, but they are also forms of power complexly linked to nationalism, commercial expansion, and gender politics. As we see increasingly with indigenous peoples around the world, traditionally the subject of anthropology’s quest, the tropes available for the formulation of their identities are those formulated in the (distant) art world. In this arena, not only are particular judgments of cultural value enunciated on ranges of human enterprise, but the very frameworks in which cultural activity is to be evaluated—authenticity, continuity, and so on—have been and are developed, contested, and reformulated within the increasingly diverse, overlapping spheres of participants in both art worlds and anthropology.11

As in other cultures, art in Vietnam is informed by all areas of local life, culture, and history. Studies of Vietnamese paintings produced by artists serving the nation-building process offer compelling glimpses of the effects of socialism and propaganda on the lives of Vietnamese people and bring to bear the ways in which history influences visual expression. As this present study will show indirectly, art in Vietnam has served nationalism and participated in government propaganda campaigns. But to limit this study to such representation would overlook not only several fundamental aspects of Vietnamese art but would also miss the opportunity to explore how an ethnographic approach can open new areas of study that combine art history and anthropology and create a bridge between cultural studies and sociology.

One element that is missing from other historical studies of Vietnamese imagery is the role that the artist plays in the construction of art history discourses in Vietnam.12 If we are to define what art means to the Vietnamese—what it means to be an artist in Vietnam and how art is viewed by its public, its audience and consumers—we need to understand the discourses surrounding art, which are everywhere in the Vietnamese art world. What informs this study is the kind of artistic discourse among artists themselves and how artists as professionals have created a community that is often fraught with differences of class and gender, and other sociopolitical categories. Unlike the idealized view of a homogenous society defined by the state, the art world is
one of individual trajectories. Artists do share commonalities, however, and take part in the Vietnamese equivalent to a “visual culture” as defined by Michael Baxendall in his study of fifteenth-century painters in Italy.\textsuperscript{13} Art in Vietnam is not removed from everyday experience, yet artists are a distinct social group, and they tend to view their own art differently from how the government or the public sees it. In Vietnam, art thus serves a variety of purposes and takes part in a variety of discourses surrounding ethnicity, nationalism, politics, and history.

In global terms artists in Vietnam are part of a community that can be defined as an “art world,” though not quite \textit{the} art world as it is known in New York and Paris. The art world of Hanoi is a real community as opposed to the imaginary community to which artists in the West feel they themselves belong.\textsuperscript{14} By real community, I mean that most artists actually know one another and are members of the artists’ union that was created in 1957 as one of the cultural organizations managed by the Ministry of Culture and the Fatherland Front of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.\textsuperscript{15} Since the establishment of the artists’ union, artists have been considered professionals by the government, and that has given them an identity and status in the eyes of the Vietnamese public. Naturally, and as this book will illustrate, artists’ identities have been transformed throughout history. Seen as artisans during the colonial period, following independence they became “workers” and are now labeled “Vietnamese artists” in the more anonymous global community. These relationships warrant closer scrutiny and are thus examined in the chapters of this book.

Subject to a form of racial discrimination by their French teachers during Vietnam’s colonial period, artists were not considered “real artists,” and, in the process of gaining equality, have become subject to the trend of categorizing and labeling Asian artists according to their ethnic origins. This study therefore attempts to join other studies of Asian art that critique the writing of its history in Western terms and suggest the need to rewrite it based on local ideas.\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{WRITING VIETNAMESE ART HISTORY}

Vietnam’s marginal status in Asian art history from the West—where it is a challenge to find reference to Vietnamese art in any Asian art history textbook—is part of a greater problem facing Western scholars of art history. That is, art history’s Eurocentricism, or Western-centered perspective. Art history as a field is a product of the European Enlightenment philosophy that sees scientific study as the basis for truth. The study of art history originated in an eighteenth-century world that saw a renewed interest in classical Greece and
Rome heightened by European colonial domination in Asia and Africa. Asian art for most of the twentieth century has either been viewed as inferior to Western art or been considered the product of mysterious exotic civilizations that bear no relations to the West. China and Japan have dominated Western scholarship of Asia partly because of their long and elaborate artistic traditions. They have also drawn the attention of art historians in the West because of the perception of superiority that their “civilizations” have held in the region. The artistic traditions of Southeast Asia, the Pacific Islands, Mesoamerica, and Africa have often been classified in museums as “primitive” art and studied by anthropologists interested in the art of so-called primitive societies. The notion of primitivism and the interest on the part of the West for primitive art has been the focus of research by anthropologists interested in art. Vietnamese art has never been labeled “primitive” or been exhibited as such in museums. Neither has it been considered part of the “great” artistic traditions of Asia, as India, China, and Japan, thus it has been poorly understood. Vietnamese art has for the most part been left in Western art history anthologies as essentially categoriless. This inability on the part of art historians to properly “label” Vietnamese art has also led to its marginalization. Indeed, it was not until the 1990s interest in Vietnamese painting in the art markets of Asia that Vietnamese art came to “exist” in art history books. This is also why the ethnographic method becomes useful. Vietnamese artists’ participation in international art exhibitions in particular and their relation to the outside world in general inform not only their work but also their identity as artists. The international art world often capitalizes on Vietnamese artists’ seemingly reclusive status by emphasizing the “naïve” and “folk” qualities of Vietnamese painting. Catalogs of Vietnamese art in Hong Kong have described Vietnamese art along the same lines as tourist brochures describe Vietnam as a country. Vietnamese landscapes, painted or otherwise, are called pristine, unspoiled, and pure. There is an aura of innocence affixed to Vietnamese art. Because it has not been part of international exhibition circuits for very long, it carries a quality of newness. But attached to that idea is the notion of its appeal as a product untainted by postmodernist anxiety and the suggestion, therefore, that Vietnamese art is more “authentic” than its more derivative, recycled, and jaded counterparts in Europe and America. Vietnamese paintings also seem to capture an idyllic view of Asia in contrast to the rapidly developing urban centers of Southeast Asia such as Bangkok, Jakarta, and Kuala Lumpur. This is somewhat different from art in Indonesia and Thailand, which has been seen by Westerners as too “European,” and yet also somewhat contradictory in that Vietnamese oil painting originated in colonial contact.
The interest in Vietnamese art by outsiders has also coincided with the interest in Vietnam for international investment. Again, Vietnam’s newcomer status has drawn to its shores potential developers hoping to be the first to capitalize on its returns.

Because they have the potential of earning large sums of money for their art in a capitalist world, artists have played a key role in the development of Vietnam’s economy over the past decade. This aspect of Vietnamese art has been largely underplayed in articles about Vietnamese painters in the popular press and in art magazines. Understandably, interested galleries are in the business of selling paintings, not in reflecting on the effect of capitalism in Vietnam. Moreover, the art world not only believes in art for profit but also sustains itself on market speculations and the hype of certain artists over others while denying that an art market exists. Vietnamese artists have only recently joined the global capitalist art trade. This provides an interesting perspective on the art market in that it traces how a market for art develops. The market can be studied from a variety of perspectives, historical, economical, and sociological. This book takes into account all three. During the colonial period, artists worked for their French teachers and acquired a French clientele for their work. In the independence period, guidelines were developed for artists to work for the state and they were essentially the clients of the government. In the recent past, artists have been able to sell their works once again to a foreign clientele, but in some cases they have more freedom to choose to whom they sell their work as a consequence of more liberal economic policies on the part of the state. Art, in other words, has paralleled and reflected economic and social changes at various points of Vietnamese twentieth-century history.

Economists may see Vietnamese artists’ entrance into a capitalist art market as an inevitable path toward modernity and development. The concept of modernity as progress presents problems to Vietnamese artists for, as chapters 4 and 5 of this book explain, these artists often view themselves as “traditional modernists” or “modern traditionalists.” Their painting often reflects traditional concerns for village life and folk religion but are painted in a contemporary manner with bold washes of color and modernist styles. When they were sheltered from the international art world, artists desired to be part of it, but they also knew what their purpose was in their own country from the fact that they were discouraged from selling their work. They knew exactly who their patron was: the state—regardless of whether they decided to satisfy their patron’s wishes or not. When Vietnam entered a period of market reforms and artists were allowed to sell their work to foreigners, their patrons were less
obviously identifiable to them. Tourists were the first to buy Vietnamese paintings, but no two tourists were the same. When international dealers came around, the artists, having not traveled abroad themselves, had a difficult time telling the difference between one dealer and another. Cultural misunderstandings were inevitable, fears of being cheated were common, and confusion over whom to please, what to paint, and whom to trust was rampant. The result is that artists have created a product that seems somewhat generically “safe” to art critics abroad. Beautiful women, landscapes, and local motifs disguised under generous coats of paint in expressionistic styles are the most popular types of paintings sold in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City galleries today (see pl. 2).

The clientele for modern Vietnamese painting today is largely a foreign one. This presents a problem for many Vietnamese artists and not merely for nationalistic reasons. Certainly artists often feel that they have “sold out” to strangers, but they also feel something is lost in the process. The more that paintings are created for an outside audience, the more likely they will leave the country. The more these paintings leave the country, the more likely they will be forgotten and the less they will contribute to building local art traditions. Furthermore, this foreign patron-local client relationship eerily resembles the colonial paradigm of the previous century. As a result, some artists have begun boycotting international exhibitions in order to “reclaim” Vietnamese art’s national origins. The economic disparities between foreigners and locals are still strong. Few Vietnamese can afford to buy art. Neither is it in their cultural, class, or educational background to even attend art exhibitions. Shifting economic and social relations also mean that artists find themselves in a quandary as to whom to address their art. To whom does it speak? If their art has an appeal only to Westerners, how can they speak to their own community? Artists who cater to Western taste have also begun to see themselves as “slaves” to the global art trade and to yearn for a more genuine, locally produced identity. This is why analyzing the role of the artist becomes crucial and why a historical analysis of the evolution of painting must include an understanding of the shifting identities of artists themselves as they move from being subject to colonial patronage to becoming clients of the global market.

VIETNAMESE TWENTIETH-CENTURY ART HISTORY

This book follows a chronological scheme that is common in histories of twentieth-century Vietnam, employed by social and political historians, and its chapters are ordered according to the general trend in Vietnamese studies to periodize Vietnamese history through several major dates. That is, it chronicles