



THE ARTS

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ART ORGANIZERS: Painters William Short (left) and C. David Thomas, and writer Lois Tarlow pose with a group of combat artists' paintings, which will be shown next year in an exhibition titled 'As Seen by Both Sides.'



Art From a War

First peacetime exchange features paintings by Vietnamese and Americans

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THE stiff backing crackles, and a chip of paint falls to the floor as C. David Thomas presses open a tightly rolled canvas. He grimaces, then sighs. "This is exactly the problem," he says. "Much of the work is on paper that has a very high acid content or canvas that is disintegrating as we watch it. This could be house paint for all we know."

The painting had been hand-carried from Hanoi. It is one of about 40 works by Vietnamese artists to be included in the first exchange of art between the two countries since United States combat troops left Vietnam. Many of the artists on both sides are veterans of that war, and all use the war as a subject in their work.

Due to the ongoing American trade embargo on Vietnam, such works cannot be purchased or shipped. Mr. Thomas and two co-organizers headed back to Hanoi this month to collect additional works for the exhibition entitled "As Seen by Both Sides." It is scheduled to open at Boston University in January 1991 and will travel for two to three years in the US and Vietnam.

The Vietnamese works have never been seen by an American audience, although several have traveled in communist countries. They depict a quieter side of the war than the images of violence and destruction most familiar to Americans. Paintings, woodcuts, pencil sketches, and collages show troops on the move, at rest, around

campfires with musical instruments; villagers supplying food or supporting movement of troops; city dwellers quietly enduring bombing attacks.

While charged with political content, violence is not explicit in these works, and Americans are rarely portrayed.

Many of the Vietnamese works were produced by soldiers in the field to boost the morale of troops. Paintings and sketches were often realized under combat conditions with materials at hand — newsprint, cardboard, magazine covers — and carried around for years by combat artists operating far from home.

"Most of the work was stored very poorly," says Thomas. "If they were lucky, they had a portfolio made out of cardboard, but most likely work was just rolled, with edges and corners exposed — not out of a lack of respect for the work but out of [necessity]."

The critical themes of self-doubt or regret beginning to appear in Vietnamese novels, short stories, and films about the war are little in evidence in these works. But many artists in the exhibit infuse heroic clichés, such as comrade soldiers on a hill gazing off into the distance, with a deeper emotional range.

Nguyen Tho Tuong's recent "Eyes of War," for example, projects a vision — and method of showing it — that are highly personal. The painting was completed in 1989 on the basis of the young northern artist's memories of B-52 bombings in Hanoi during the war. It depicts a woman soldier of heroic proportions protecting a village from American bombers overhead. In tunnels underneath her outstretched arms, a mother comforts a child, and a young woman studies by lamplight. The huddled figures, nurturing and studying, represent the future of Vietnam, the artist said in an interview with organizers.

"We didn't see the eyes at first," says Thomas. "We were convinced the outstretched arms and bleeding palms represented a crucifix. But the artist insists this is not the case. He didn't have Christian symbols in mind."

Huynh Phuog Dong's vivid scene of the battle of Junction City was painted on rice paper using bits of green tree branches, chewed off at the ends to serve as a brush and dipped in pure paint. As an artist with the Vietcong operating out of Saigon, Mr. Dong had access to paint supplies, and his work is better preserved. The artist, now re-

tired, has hundreds of sketchbooks of pencil drawings of everyday life and battle scenes during the war, organizers say.

Thomas first conceived the idea for the joint exhibit on a visit to Vietnam in 1987 sponsored by the US Indochina Reconciliation Project and the William Joiner Foundation. He had been an Army engineer in Vietnam during the war, but part of his assignment was to document war as a combat artist. He returned on sabbatical leave from Emmanuel College to do paintings, prints, and to "work as an artist."

"I decided I wanted to help the Vietnamese. I could see the damage we caused, the pain and suffering we inflicted and that they needed help. . . . I'm an artist. That's the skill I had. That's what I could use."

Because there is no significant museum or gallery system in Vietnam, Thomas and co-organizers Lois Tarlow and William Short began their search for Vietnamese combat art through the Ministry of Culture and official artists associations. More than 50 were selected through official channels, but 150 more found us by "word of mouth," says Thomas.

"There was no attempt by the government to limit artists we saw," says Thomas, "just difficulties in communicating with artists." In Hanoi, he said, "artists walk and have no telephone. In Ho Chi Minh City, communication was easier: At least some artists had motorcycles and telephones. We were even on television in Ho Chi Minh City."

Suggestions that artists adhere to the political line of the state are clearly not a concern in the graphic, disturbing, and thoughtful American works for this exhibition. They range from scorching protest art to deeply sad, introspective works.

The imagery in Michael Aschenbrenner's watercolor walls reflects his experience in the 101st Airborne Division. He spent months on patrol in the jungle and was wounded in a parachute jump during the Tet Offensive in June 1968. M-16 rifles were omnipresent, he says.

The dog, which accompanied patrols to signal ambushes, and the box (a cartridge container used to carry personal possessions — writing paper, letters, a pen) were objects of highest value. Since Vietnam, he says, "the idea of being protected is a constant thought."

"My work reminds you of what you want to forget," he says.