

**A
vietnamese
painter
in
rome**

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"The Microcosm of Pham Tang" (*Giornal d'Italia* — Rome), "Magic Without Limits" (*Le Peuple — Bruxelles*), "Unique Art" (*Los Angeles Herald Examiner*), "The Intertwined Paths of Asian Meditation" (*Neue Zeit* — Graz), "Images like the Wings of a Butterfly" (*Koelner Stadt — Anzeiger*), "The Dance of Peace at the 9th Biennial of Sao Paulo (*Goonal de Brasil*), etc. Twenty years ago, this original artistic talent was hailed in those words by Italian, Belgian, American, Austrian, German, Brazilian journals greeting an original artistic discourse.

G.C. Argan, President of the International Association of Art Critics, thus present the man and his works :

"For many years Pham Tang has been working in Rome and has been known and appreciated in Italian artistic circles for his amiable discretion character, his seriousness in pictorial research and the delicacy of his poetry. He keeps to a cult of old traditions of Far Eastern art : for him painting is a spiritual accomplishment and the hand which

performs a spiritual act must be extremely light and sensitive."

Pham Tang was born in 1928 in the district of Yen Mo (Ninh Binh province), in one of the many villages of the Red River Delta. Its humble bamboo hedge, its slender areca palms, the sounds of its pagoda's bell in the twilight, the pleasant smell of its grapefruit blossoms were later to haunt his dreams as he travelled in the world. He studied painting and architecture at the College of Fine Arts of Indochina (Hanoi). Fifteen years later he attended the Accademia de belle arti di Roma graduating with two diplomas: Pittora (painting, 1961) and Decoracione (Decoration, 1964) and acquiring profound knowledge of sculpture and scenography as well. In 1967 he was awarded a First Prize by UNESCO, in Rome.

I would like to point to an essential aspect of the work and thought of Pham Tang, whom I recently met in Paris after about thirty years' separation: *the conciliation of opposites in order to achieve an indivisible whole*. This reminds one of Pascal, the author of *Les Pensées*, who said somewhere that one should not stay at

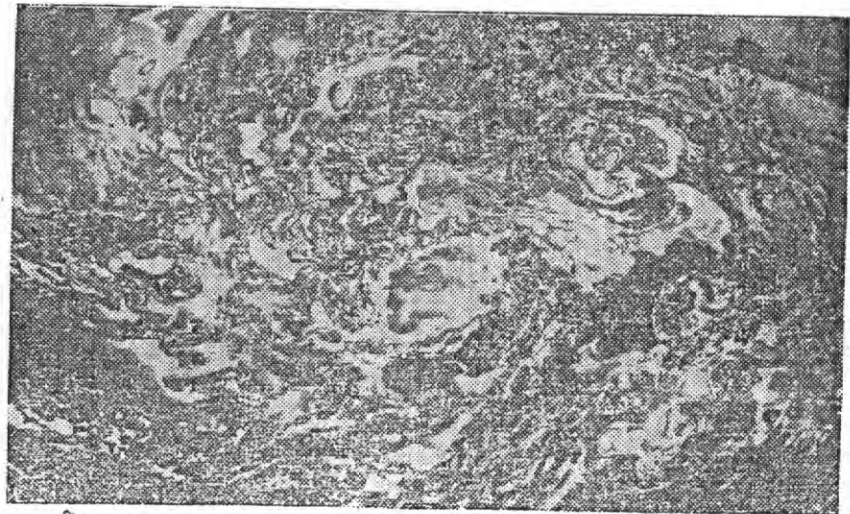
either of two poles but must join them together and fill the space between them.

Pham Tang has, in his own way, got out of the impasse in which Western art has been finding itself in the industrial and technocratic era. He settles the "figurative-abstract" conflict by conciliating dream with reality, decoration with realism, the concrete with the abstract, man with nature, microcosm with macrocosm.

"Oriental in the conception, technique and spirit which permeate his work, Western in the stream of modernism which he has joined. Pham Tang takes a strange bet by aiming at two civilizations — thus at two orders of sensibility. He surmounts the obstacle with disconcerting ease. At the same time he gives a lesson on humility and sensibility to those who, in the West, rely on violence, coarseness, brutal effect because they no longer believe in the powers of the *esprit de finesse* (Allain Germez — *Spécial* — Bruxelles 4 December 1968).

It is the cosmic sense that lies at the heart of Pham Tang's works. His art does not debouch in the

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refined geometric construction of a Mondrian or a Malevitch, in which they believe the cosmic sense will join a rational, objective will.

I must admit without false shame that during my first visit to the modern Musée National d'Art moderne Beaubourg, in Paris, I felt out of my depth, seized with a strange "distanciation effect" (*Verfremdung*) between the object and the subject. But I felt nothing of the sort when facing one of Pham Tang's works. One gets into it spontaneously, one merges into it, one no longer distinguishes the object from the subject; one recreates according to one's social and inner self.

For Pham Tang, the beginning was the rhythm. The cosmos is rhythm, that is to say motion. Clouds in the sky, waves on the sea, the myriads of galaxies, days and seasons, lines in finger prints, elements floating in blood plasma, the atom and its electrons, the singing of birds, leaves with their cells, crystals with their orderly structure, all in the microcosm and macrocosm follow a rhythm. By means of a kind of aesthetic asceticism, the artist has to merge into matter and grasp its soul in order to recreate its rhythm.

Inspired by a double magic-vegetable and mineral-the work develops-patiently, minutely and slowly.

"I seek, Pham Tang said, not only communion with nature, but also communion with the viewer. I want the viewer and the artist to be one and the same. That's why I do not enclose my pictures in frames. When the frame no longer exists the painting becomes an area without bounds. One can enter it as one pleases, move freely about, take a direct part in the creation of a new universe.

This is not possible with an Occidental painting of a horse. Leonardo da Vinci painted Mona Lisa, Césanne, Mount Sainte-Victoire, Malevitch the White Soucre, when doing so, they imposed and set limits, leaving out all that is not Mona Lisa, the Mountain, the Square. A Western painting is closed, but an Oriental one always seeks to remain open. For my part, I'd like people to approach my paintings like a little butterfly, to grasp the spirit of flowers, pebbles, etc."

His decorative paintings, mosaics of bits of eggshell embedded in lacquer, bubble over with life. They convey images that are figurative and yet abstract, of constellations of crackled porcelain, without morphological fixation and yet done from visual transmutations of nature. One could imagine fireworks of flowers, subtle kaleidoscopic compositions, visions from electronic microscopes, nebulae carried away in gyratory movements. If one studies the details with a magnifying-glass one will see perfect tiny universes. As a whole the work creates an impression of peace, and serenity. We are far from the dryness, or torment of geometrical construction, of kinetic art, of "matterism", "blottism", etc.

In quest of the absolute like the Italian poet Ungaretti, Pham Tang aspires to "grasp the inexpressible nothing", to rediscover nature through the original memoryless rhythm, to create an art of the non-temporal.

"I seek, he declares, neither the concrete nor the abstract: my painting is meditation in materials and colours, a meditation with my head, my heart and my hands all together, similar to that of a Yoga or Zen expert.

We wish that the artist would return to that creative and active meditation and take up his palette again after a long passive meditation of ten years.