

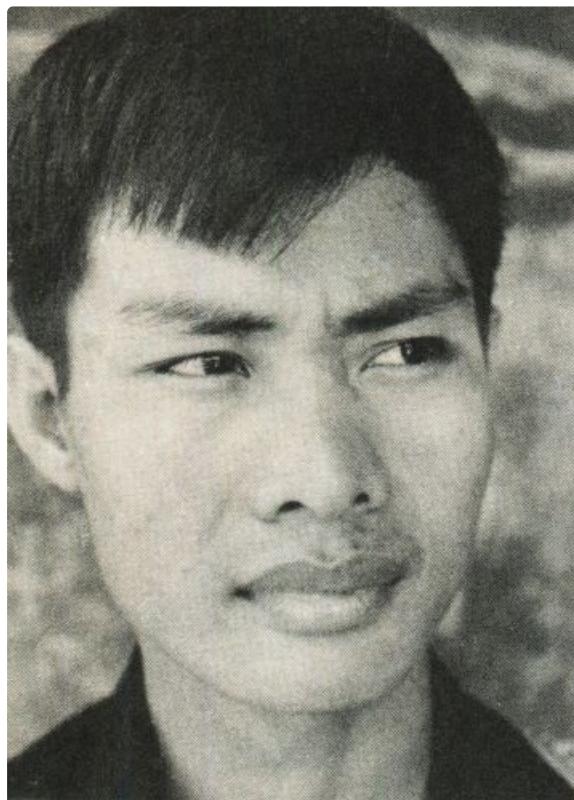
# Nguyen Lam – The Chosen One

Monday, March 24, 2025, 11:25

Among the famous members of the Young Artists Association in Saigon before 1975, painter Nguyen Lam and painter Ho Huu Thu pursued lacquer painting the longest and most successfully. However, painter Ho Huu Thu's path to lacquer painting was quite natural, as he was born, grew up, and studied at the fine arts school in Binh Duong, the cradle of lacquer painting in the South. Meanwhile, painter Nguyen Lam became famous with oil painting early on while still studying at the Saigon College of Fine Arts and came to lacquer painting as a salvation for his difficult life. Through different paths, both of them reached their destination in this material.

## Childhood in Can Tho

In the early 1940s, there was a family living in a house that was also a mechanical workshop on Nguyen Cong Tru Street, Can Tho City. The owner was good at lathes and could make many high-tech machine parts. His wife was a teacher before, then she became a market trader.



Painter Nguyen Lam



Nguyen

**Lam – Monument. Lacquer. 37x48cm**

Their son, little Lam Huynh Long, later painter Nguyen Lam, was born in 1941 in that peaceful town. Growing up, Long went to primary school a few kilometers from home. While in primary school, Long had to drop out because his father was forced by the colonial government to join the colonial army. He left Can Tho, took his wife and children and fled to Ca Mau, which was still wild at that time. He followed the resistance fighters and because of his metalworking skills, was assigned to be the director of the engineering workshop for weapons manufacturing.

A few years later, the situation was calmer so he brought his wife and children back to Can Tho. Little Long was ten years old at that time, had missed several years of primary school because he was away from home, and had to go back to school.

Every day on his way to school, the boy passed by the cinema, stopping many times to look at the panels depicting famous American actors. They were Liz Taylor, Richard Burton, Robert Taylor... Long vaguely realized that with just powdered paint and a few brushes, the painter could create such impressive paintings. Every day, the boy made an effort to arrive half an hour early, go to the cinema and stick his head through the iron gate to see the details of each painting clearly.

# ART EXHIBITION



Lam Huynh Long, who paints under the name Nguyen Lam, was born in 1941 in Can Tho. He is a graduate of the National School of Advanced Arts in Saigon. His chosen medium of expression is oil painting.

Nguyen Lam has received many awards in art: certificate of honor from the First International Art Exhibition in Saigon 1962; silver medal from the Spring Exhibition in 1962; bronze medal from the exhibition organized by the Directorate of Catholic Chaplains in 1965. He was selected by the National Art Committee to participate in the following International Art Exhibitions: Biennale de Paris in 1961; Kuala Lumpur in 1963; Biennale de Paris in 1963; Sao Paulo in 1967; New Delhi in 1967, New York in 1968.

Nguyen Lam is serving in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam and also teaches art at the VAA. His studio is at this address: 680/6 Vo Di Nguy, Phu Nhuan.

1970. (Lam)



Introduction to

OPENING CEREMONY:  
Friday, October 22, 6:15 p.m.

OPEN DAILY: 3:00 - 9:00 p.m.  
through Friday, October 29, 1970.

**VIETNAMESE-AMERICAN ASSOCIATION**  
55 MAC DINH CHI SAIGON TEL. 93771

**Nguyen Lam's solo exhibition in October 1970 at the Vietnam-America Association headquarters**



Painters Nguyen Trung (standing),

Nguyen Phuoc (left) and Nguyen Lam in 1962.

Like many students who like to draw from pictures, Long went home and searched through old newspapers to find illustrations to draw. Long liked the paintings of artist Hung Hoi, a very skilled illustrator with neat lines, the best of which were historical stories with people wearing hats and belts. Long drew from a few of his paintings in a spring newspaper, including one titled "Carrying a snake to bite the chicken at home" depicting King Le Chieu Thong asking for help from foreign powers to invade the country. At that time, in Saigon, there was a drawing contest for students in the whole South, with a panel of judges who were all prestigious people, headed by painting professor Le Van De, principal of Gia Dinh College of Fine Arts. Long submitted a few paintings, including one that imitated Hung Hoi's "Carrying a snake to bite the chicken at home" but was carefully colored with watercolors. When the results were out, the whole Can Tho province was in an uproar because Long alone won two prizes, a third prize and a first prize, beating the contestants from other provinces. It is a happy memory, the first step to create momentum for the future.

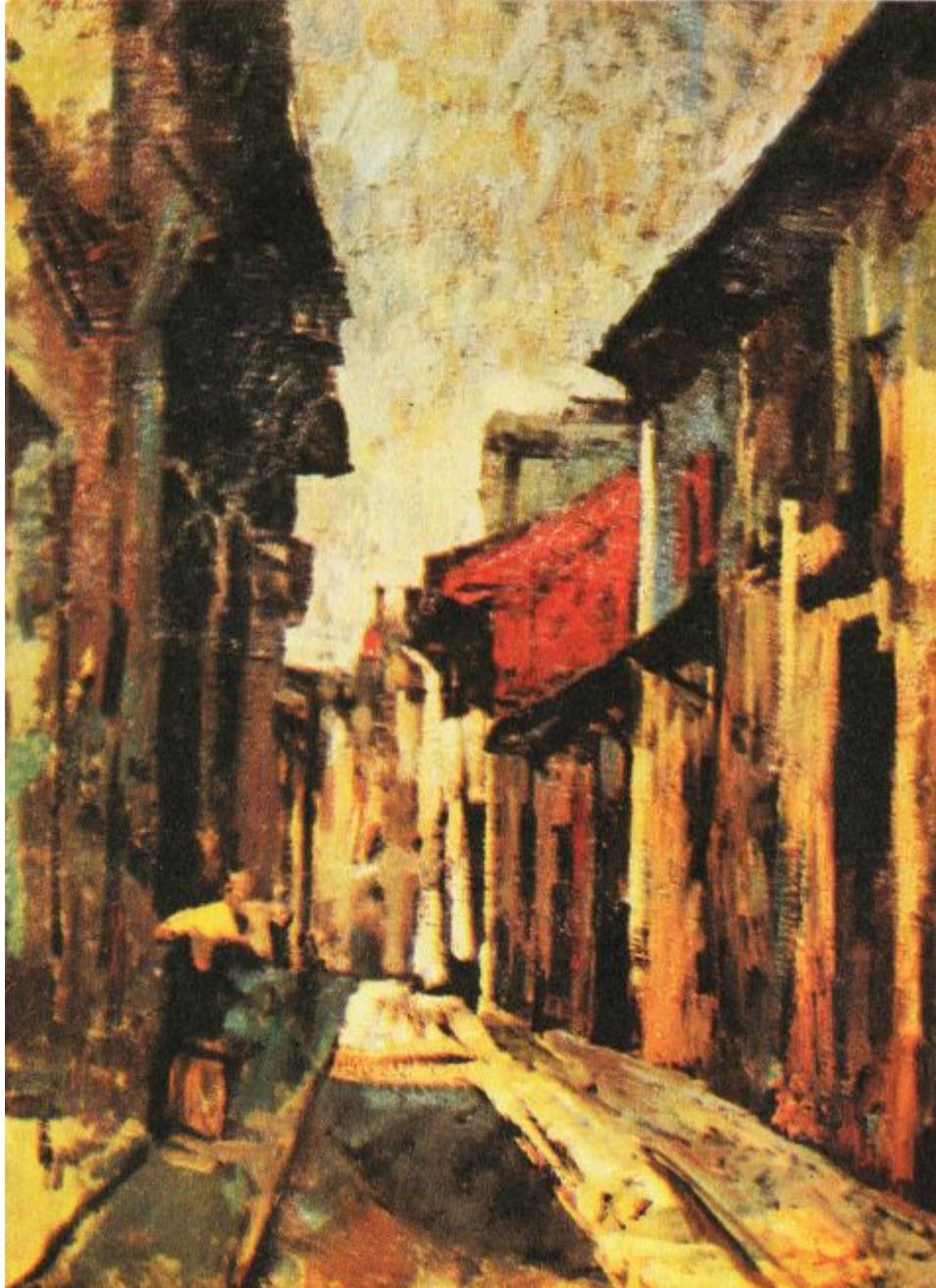
At the age of 15, Long had just finished the French elementary school program, too late compared to his friends. While thinking about going far away to study high school, Long met some old classmates, including friends who had studied for several years at Gia Dinh Art School. They often came back to visit every summer, dressed in white, smart as if they had returned from studying abroad. Seeing that Long was wondering about continuing his studies, they advised him to take the entrance exam to Gia

Dinh Fine Arts School, an intermediate level training applied artists. Studying there for a few years would definitely help him earn a living later, especially since Long had started school late, pursuing literacy would be too long a journey. Recalling the drawing competition in elementary school, thinking he had some talent, Long asked his parents to let him take the exam as suggested by his friends.

On the exam day, Long went to Saigon to take the national exam in two subjects: drawing and decoration. After the exam, he returned home to wait for the results. On the first day of school, Long's mother quit her job at the market and took her son to catch the bus to Gia Dinh. Seeing her preparing all the things, Long wondered, and she said: "Prepare your things so that you can pass and go to school right away. If you fail... bring your things back!"



1996. Lacquer. 60x60cm



Nguyen Lam – Street II. Oil on

canvas

In front of the school hung a long list of successful candidates. Long squeezed in to look, believing that he would not be able to compete with hundreds of candidates from more than 60 provinces from Quang Tri onwards, so he only looked at the middle of the list down. There was no name. Long dejectedly turned back to tell his mother. She squeezed in to look but still did not see her son's name. The mother and son sat there dejectedly, not knowing what to do. The mother lamented: "I've worried about everything to go to school, now what can I do...!". After sitting for a while, the mother and son were about to turn back to the bus station to return to Can Tho, when a friend who lived nearby and was studying there came to ask. She blurted out: "My son failed, there's no name!" The other guy squeezed in to look again and confirmed that Long had passed, reaching second place, with a score of 16/20 points (later we learned that the first place, half a point higher than Long, was the son-in-law of Mr. K., the school's principal). The mother and son, due to lack of confidence, did not check the upper half of the list.

Knowing that he had passed the exam, his mother took Long to rent a house. When he entered school, he learned that the scholarship for the top seven students was 700 dong, while the rent was only 300

dong, the remaining 400 dong was enough for food and art supplies. Long refused to accept any more money from his mother every month.

Studying from 1956 to 1959, with only a few months left before the graduation exam at the Fine Arts School, Long decided to drop out of the exam to be in time for the entrance exam to the Saigon College of Fine Arts. At that time, he realized that he had to follow a creative path in painting, not just wanting to be a decorative painter to make a living. He passed the reserve exam but then someone dropped out so he switched to formal study.

## Two failed trips

In 1962, Lam Huynh Long, who had the stage name Nguyen Lam while still in school, had exhibited his works in galleries and sold his paintings. However, while still in school, he and other art students of the same generation always had thoughts about their creative path. The impacts from the strong development of world art read through foreign books and newspapers, from exchanges in the painting world, from the first international art exhibition at Tao Dan Park in early 1962 made them worry, thinking about generations of students following each other's lead, following each other, stepping on each other's toes without finding their own creative path. That was an issue that needed much debate and discussion, but the youth just wanted to change immediately. That year, when he was only 21 years old and already had a wife and children, Nguyen Lam decided to find a new horizon to learn. That was Paris. And he found a way... to cross the border there.



From left

to right: Architect Nguyen Van Quyen - Director of the Saigon Fine Arts Department, Nguyen Lam, Mrs. Nguyen Van Bong (wife of Professor Nguyen Van Bong) - Director of the Vietnam-US Association, Professor Bui Van Kinh - Director of the Saigon College of Fine Arts at the 1972 art award ceremony.



**Nguyen Lam – Vung Tau Stone Wharf. Oil on canvas**

He and painter Phuong Hung, a class above him and a fellow Can Tho native, planned a route to France. The plan was for the two to take a bus from Saigon to Vinh Te Canal in Chau Doc. There they would connect with someone to take them to the border, paying a fee. Once in Cambodia, they would be taken by molobécane to the capital city of Phnom Penh, waiting for a convenient time to go to Sihanoukville port to find a ship to France.

Before leaving, Nguyen Lam had prepared everything for his family. The family had more than a hundred of his paintings, which were still being sold continuously, so there was no financial concern. However, Nguyen Lam did not tell his family that he was looking for a way to learn painting in the West, which would take many years if he could go.

When they got to the border, they met the person who had arranged to help them cross the border, and they asked for 17,000 VND. Since the motorbike could only carry one person, Phuong Hung went first, promising to wait in Phnom Penh. Nguyen Lam stayed in Chau Doc, waiting for the second trip the following week. But after waiting for a long time, there was news that Phuong Hung had been arrested there, and the trip was canceled. Nguyen Lam had to return to Saigon to continue his studies.

The following year, the border crossing story was brought up again and heated up. This time, there was the participation of painter Nguyen Trung, who had studied one year above Nguyen Lam, and painter Nguyen Phuoc, who had studied the following year. Before that, they had organized an exhibition of paintings at the City Information Office at 165 Tu Do Street, sold the paintings, and had saved money for the trip. Painter Nguyen Trung had a list of foreign consuls and ambassadors who had bought paintings, hoping that they would help. They went down to Chau Doc again along the old route. This time, there were three people, but the car could only carry two. The other two painters

arranged a draw to see who would go later, and Nguyen Lam was the one chosen, so they had to wait for the next trip. The other two crossed the border and encountered a Cambodian military operation along the border when a Chinese official came to visit. Both were arrested for illegal entry. In detention, both were "reunited" with painter Phuong Hung, who was there from the previous year's border crossing. Nguyen Lam stayed at the boarding house, waiting week by week for a trip, but it took six months before he could return to continue his studies. The other two artists were imprisoned for 11 months and were released. Painter Phuong Hung then went to the war zone to work.



Nguyen Lam –

**Flood season. 1993. Oil on canvas. 95x120cm**



Nguyen

Lam – Undefined. 1995. Lacquer. 80x120cm

In 1965, Nguyen Lam graduated from the Saigon College of Fine Arts. He was part of a group of students who had exhibited and sold their paintings since they started studying, so they could take care of their family and not worry about money. In 1966, he joined the Young Artists Association. This organization became increasingly famous and operated well, promoting creative inspiration for its members. The association proposed that every year there must be an exhibition of new works, that they must always pay attention to finding new things in painting, and that only artists with national medals could join the association. Headquartered right in the center of Saigon, the association regularly organized exhibitions of paintings, always had customers, and sold many paintings, including Mr. Nguyen Ngoc Linh, director of Viet Tan Xa and Ngo Khac Tinh, Minister of Education. The members of the association also had another place to display paintings for free, the Continental Hotel owned by Mr. Philippe Franchini, an art lover. At that time, artist Nguyen Lam was in the army so he could not participate in many activities of the association, but he still created and hung paintings. Although the artists in the association were close-knit, they maintained their own personalities and independence in their creations. Almost everyone won medals and awards through exhibitions.

In 1970, painter Nguyen Lam was invited to teach painting at the Vietnam-US Association because he graduated from the College of Fine Arts and could teach the advanced painting class that was previously taught by two painters who graduated from the intermediate level. Teaching with him were famous painters such as Hieu De, Truong Thi Thinh, Tran Kim Hung, Nguyen Tri Minh, etc. until 1975.

### **The big step to lacquer**

After 1975, painter Nguyen Lam had to go to a re-education camp for three years. After that, he returned to work for an art company under the city's Department of Culture and Information. He continued to paint oil paintings, sending them to an artist to sell abroad to support his large family.

One day in 1980, something unexpected happened that would affect his future creative path. He was cycling on Pham Hong Thai Street when he met an acquaintance. That was the famous lacquer painter Truong Van Thanh, co-founder of Thanh & Le lacquer company, the predecessor of the notorious Thanh Le fine arts company before 1971. At that time, Mr. Truong Van Thanh was cooperating to help the city's Foreign Trade Department produce lacquer paintings for export to capitalist countries. Mr. Thanh invited Nguyen Lam to go with him to meet Mr. Ba Nen, a person from the Department in charge of this work. After asking each other, Mr. Ba Nen suggested that Nguyen Lam work with him to make lacquer paintings to export to France, Germany, and Belgium. The thing is, the Director of the Foreign Trade Department at that time, Mr. Muoi Phi, went on a business trip to France and met a French-Vietnamese man named Ali Sa-le. Mr. Sa-le lived in Saigon before 1975, was close friends with painter Nguyen Trung, and later, when he went to France, he became the owner of the Maison du Vietnam gallery. He was also a buyer of paintings from Vietnam that Nguyen Lam had sold through a previous artist. Mr. Sale told Mr. Muoi Phi that the last time he returned to Vietnam, he tried to contact famous artists in Saigon but could not. He did not know that some of those artists had gone to re-education camps, some were working as sidewalk barbers, selling old books, etc. Sale said: "I know there are many young and talented artists over there. Go back and find them, encourage them to paint again, remember to paint lacquer paintings, pack them in boxes and send them over, I will buy all of them!" Mr. Ba Nen suggested that Nguyen Lam organize a group of artists as Mr. Sale wanted, and said that the Department of Foreign Trade would take care of all the costs and materials for making the paintings. Nguyen Lam gathered a number of famous artists before 1975, but because they were not familiar with making lacquer paintings and their expression was not suitable, some of them did not continue to participate. Finally, there were seven people left to carry out this project: Nguyen Sien, Nguyen Lam, Ho Huu Thu, Hieu De, Van Den, Nghieu De and Do Quang Em. Except for artist Nguyen Sien, who was a lacquer painting teacher at the former College of Fine Arts, most of the remaining artists had long painted with oil paint. They switched to lacquer painting to adapt to the new job. At that time, the whole country's economy was still difficult, but this group of artists, thanks to selling their works at high prices and being able to set their own prices, had a fairly good income. Artist Nguyen Lam remembers that at that time, he had money to buy another house for two taels of gold, comfortably raising nine children, two mothers on both sides and half a dozen grandchildren. The project lasted until around 1986, when it was stopped due to the difficulties of the Foreign Trade Department's business, so the artists returned to freely creating in their own direction. Artists Nguyen Lam and Ho Huu Thu were destined to work with lacquer, turning it into their main genre of painting.



From left to right: Painter Nguyen Gia Tri, painter Thanh Hang (wife of doctor Than Trong Minh taking care of Mr. Tri's health), painter Nguyen Lam, painter Ho Huu Thu



Nguyen Lam – Music accompaniment. Oil on canvas

Looking back at the artistic path

Painter Nguyen Lam studied art when the country had transformed from a colony to an independent nation. From the moment he entered Gia Dinh Fine Arts School, he quickly realized that he did not study painting to get a degree or a job to support himself, so he dared to skip the upcoming Fine Arts School graduation exam to take the exam to enter the Fine Arts College, following the path of artistic creation. When he was in his final year of Fine Arts College, he did not hesitate to drop out to find a vast and risky artistic horizon in a foreign land, just to learn new trends in creation. When he needed to change his creative direction from the oil painting material that had made him successful and famous to lacquer, he followed and succeeded, becoming one of the few top painters in the South in creating lacquer paintings today, and was invited by the French Consulate, the General Library and several art collectors to restore lacquer paintings by the famous painter Nguyen Gia Tri. He won many awards at a very young age, exhibiting in several countries around the world. It can be said that his life was fulfilled in art, although when he was a student, he did not aspire to follow the path of art, but art chose him, step by step.

In his creations, Nguyen Lam always thought of a new direction, initially focusing on expression, then turning to abstraction and achieving success. He succeeded in combining the classic and splendid look of lacquer paintings with abstract art, knowing how to control colors, using traditional materials and personal techniques to express abstract art, recreating virtual images of the real world. He led seven out of nine children to follow the path of painting, six of whom graduated from the University of Fine Arts. At the age of nearly eighty, he still painted every day, creating many large lacquer paintings. He felt happy when all his children and grandchildren lived together in three houses next to each other in an alley in Phu Nhuan. What painter Nguyen Lam achieved in life and art lies in his personality, an art lover, fond of creativity, always going to the end in creation and focused like a master craftsman.

**Pham Cong Luan**

(\*) Article published in Fine Arts Magazine No. 325-326, January-February 2020.

## News in the same category



### **Paintings of artist Nguyen Huyen in the collection of Mr. Ngo Sy Kien**

Painter Nguyen Huyen's full name is Nguyen Duc Huyen (May 2, 1915 - July 12, 1994), originally from Tu The village, Tri Qua commune, Thuan Thanh, Bac Ninh. Mentioning Nguyen Huyen is mentioning the talent of...