

## The changing face of progress: Bui Trang Chuoc's *Thac Ba Hydropower Plant*

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*Thac Ba Hydropower Plant*. Bui Trang Chuoc (1975)

When I first saw Bui Trang Chuoc's *Thac Ba Hydropower Plant*, I was not ready for it. Vietnamese lacquer art typically features serene and picturesque landscapes—mountains, lakes, fields, and lotus ponds that capture the natural beauty of the Vietnamese countryside. Yet this large lacquer painting from 1975, showing the country's first hydroelectric dam nestled in cloudy mountains, boldly presents the contrary: an artistic celebration of industrial development.

The artist stands among Vietnam's most influential etchers and painters, though his path differed from his contemporaries. A graduate with honors from the Indochina College of Fine Arts in 1941, he received rigorous training that merged Asian and European traditions. Unlike fellow alumni Le Pho (1930) and Gia Tri (1936) who made their names on international markets, Bui Trang Chuoc (1915-1992) devoted himself to graphic design and state commissions. His enduring legacy lies in designing Vietnam's national emblem, stamps, and the banknotes still in use today.

The *Thac Ba Hydropower Plant* showcases the painter's uniqueness when it comes to traditional Vietnamese lacquer art. His mastery of the medium is evident in the large panoramic format (43 x 120 cm), where he achieves dramatic contrasts through traditional techniques. The dark water surface is created through multiple layers of black lacquer polished to a deep, reflective sheen, while the luminous sky emerges through a meticulous process of applying and sanding away silver leaf beneath translucent layers. The power

plant's concrete and steel structures stand proudly in white and grey—achieved by embedding eggshell and tin powder into the surface—against the deep black water. The surrounding mountains showcase the signature effects of Vietnamese lacquer art: vibrant greens created by oxidized copper dust and radiant golds produced by layering gold leaf between coats of transparent amber lacquer.

This wasn't his first industrial landscape—his earlier works *Ha Long Bay* (1960) and *Thai Nguyen Iron and Steel Complex* (1970) similarly placed construction and industry at their core. His experience in stamp and medal design shows in the meticulous attention to detail—note how precisely he depicted the electrical towers and transmission lines stretching across the composition, or the intricate concrete structure of the dam itself.

The timing and subject of this 1975 painting carries special significance. Completed the same year as Vietnam's reunification, *Thac Ba Hydropower Plant* symbolizes international cooperation and resilience. The plant itself, inaugurated in 1971, was built with technical and financial assistance from the Soviet Union, during a period when the independence war severely limited Vietnam's development options. In this light, the bold industrial subject matter takes on additional meaning: the black waters of the artificial lake and the towering concrete dam stand as monuments to Vietnam's determination to modernize. The white clouds floating against the dark sky might be read as symbols of hope and achievement.

This work is not only a masterpiece of traditional craftsmanship with national significance but also a reflection of its era's zeitgeist. It embodies the 20th century's technological optimism and belief in humanity's ability to domesticate nature. For centuries, Vietnamese artists had followed Chinese tradition, painting tiny human figures dwarfed by majestic mountains and endless valleys. The early 20th century's Art Nouveau movement briefly celebrated nature as a guide for human creation before giving way to Art Deco and Modernism's glorification of industrial progress. After 1930, Socialist Realism became dominant in socialist countries, envisioning technology as a means of societal transformation, with nature viewed as a resource for collective progress.

Bui Trang Chuoc's work seamlessly merges his modernist education from the Indochina College of Fine Arts with the influence of Socialist Realism. By breaking from the traditional lacquer style that celebrated rural natural beauty, *Thac Ba Hydropower Plant* fully embraces this optimistic vision of industrial development.



*Golden hour on the Thac Ba Lake (Source: Thac Ba Hydropower, JSC)*



*Thac Ba hydroelectric dam at a dangerously high level in 2024. Photo: Chinhphu.vn*

Looking at the painting today, after a dam's near-failure in September 2024, we see it with different eyes. The crisis was dramatic: record-breaking rains in Ha Giang, Lao Cai, Tuyen Quang, and Yen Bai provinces caused water inflow to reach a historic level of 5,600m<sup>3</sup>/s - nearly double the dam's flood discharge capacity. The water level rose rapidly to 59.9m, approaching the emergency threshold of 61m. More than 11,000 people had to evacuate.

The event adds a new layer of complexity to the painting's interpretation. What was once purely a symbol of progress now carries deeper interrogations about vulnerability and responsibility. As an expert in climate change and energy systems, I can't look at the blackness in *Thac Ba Hydropower Plant* without thinking about environmental concerns. The painting marks the pivotal moment of the 1970s environmental awakening, celebrating technological achievement while prompting reflection on development sustainability.

To me, *Thac Ba Hydropower Plant* represents both triumph and challenge. The project created Vietnam's largest artificial lake (235 km<sup>2</sup>), home to over 1,300 islands and a thriving ecosystem supporting local fisheries and tourism. Yet the 2024 crisis demonstrated that controlling nature is far more complex than the painting's optimistic vision suggests. The cloudy mountains that Bui Trang Chuoc rendered so carefully now appear more ominous, representing watersheds capable of unleashing devastating floods.

Half a century later, this painting still speaks to us about how our vision of progress has evolved. Modern environmental art and community projects, such as those along the Red River banks in Phuc Tan, demonstrate how artistic engagement with development has evolved—maintaining social commitment while incorporating ecological awareness. Viewed today, Bui Trang Chuoc's masterful rendering of this industrial landscape suggests that true progress comes not from dominating nature, but from understanding it.