

MEKONG

VIET CONG DRAWINGS & STORIES
1964-1975

Sherry Buchanan



ARTIST / THAI HA / PLACE / CA MAU, MEKONG DELTA, MILITARY REGION 3 / DATE / DECEMBER 1966.

INSCRIPTION / GUERRILLA WARFARE: A SURPRISE ATTACK.

WATERCOLOR ON PAPER / HO CHI MINH CITY FINE ARTS MUSEUM COLLECTION



DU KỊCH
DIỄN AN

TẬP XẠ KÍCH
CA MAU XII
1966

MEKONG DIARIES

VIET CONG DRAWINGS & STORIES 1964-1975

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This book showcases for the first time the collected drawings, letters, mementoes and stories of ten of Vietnam's most celebrated Viet Cong artists. American GIs decorated their hootches with Pop Art posters and rocked to the sounds of AFVN radio. Deep in the jungle, the Viet Cong took art classes and swooned to classical violin concerts. Art was part of recruits' basic military training. Their teachers, from the prestigious Hanoi College of Fine Arts, went to South Vietnam to make a pictorial record of the guerrilla war against U.S. and South Vietnamese forces. Lovers of French impressionism, Rubens and Delacroix, guerrilla artists were either military officers or civilians. On the dangerous three to eight month-long journey down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, they carried with them sketchbooks, watercolor sets, pastels, Chinese ink pens and magic markers. They lived clandestinely with the fighters, went on reconnaissance missions with them and into combat. They sketched as the spirit moved them: landscapes, hut and bunker interiors, portraits, activities at base camp, troops on the move, battles and the devastation of war. They were inspired by the landscapes of their childhood, the Mekong Delta, an area of outstanding beauty even in war, of rice paddies, giant palms and grandiose sunsets. They drew the interiors of their foxholes, soldiers at rest in hammocks, women with guns, children caught up in war and thousands of portraits, mementoes for the families of fallen soldiers. They recorded the historic battles of Con Thien, Operation Junction City and Khe Sanh. Their collective record of the nine-year conflict is an extraordinary historical and artistic document of a people at war. One hundred war artists served in the Mekong Delta, sixty-one died under fire.



QUA S



ARTIST / LE DUY UNG / PLACE / BAS SAC RIVER / DATE / 12 APRIL 1970.
WATERCOLOR ON PAPER / HCMC FINE ARTS MUSEUM COLLECTION.

INSCRIPTION / CROSSING BAS SAC RIVER. The Viet Cong used Bas Sac river, a tributary of the Mekong, to ferry soldiers and military supplies, as depicted here, from their bases in South Vietnam to their bases in Cambodia where they moved to evade the ferocity of U.S. bombing raids. A couple of weeks after Le Duy Ung drew this magnificent sunset, over ten thousand South Vietnamese and U.S. troops launched a major covert offensive into 'neutral' Cambodia to destroy Viet Cong headquarters. President Richard Nixon was later criticized for covering up the operation.

UX
G BAS-SAC
12-4-70

'If I had to go to another area for work, the troops protected me. If I had had to fight, I would be dead by now! I carried a gun to protect myself.



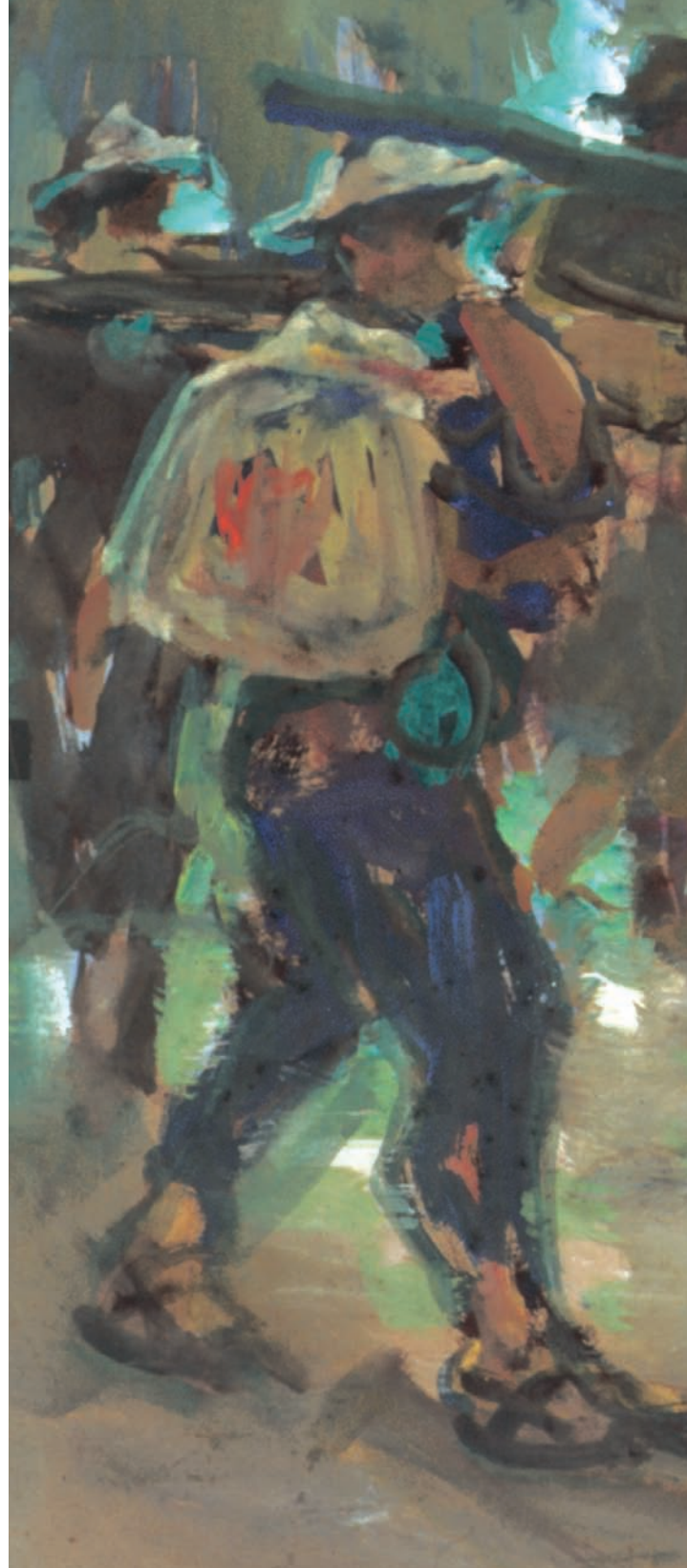
ARTIST / NGUYEN VAN TRU / PLACE / LONG AN, MILITARY REGION 2./ DATE / UNSPECIFIED / PASTEL AND INK ON PAPER/ PRIVATE COLLECTION.

During the day, I wore civilian clothes and carried a small hand gun. At night, I had an AK-47.' NGUYEN VAN TRU



'I call this painting *SPRINGTIME FLOWERS ON A STRETCHER*. It was during the Tet Offensive. Someone had given a bouquet of bright yellow flowers to a wounded soldier, as he was being carried in a hammock to a jungle clinic. My wife, whom I hadn't seen in five years, was a medic on the frontline—it made me think of her.' HUYNH PHUONG DONG

ARTIST / HUYNH PHUONG DONG / PLACE / UNSPECIFIED / DATE / 1968.
WATERCOLOR ON PAPER/ HCMC FINE ARTS MUSEUM COLLECTION.









ARTIST HUYNH PHUONG DONG'S 'WARTIME' WATERCOLOR SET

'I squeezed the paint out of the tubes directly onto the paper. I added the black outline later. I painted this image at the cross-point on the Saigon River where it splits in two—it was an important link between the liberated areas of Tay Ninh and the Iron Triangle, close to Saigon. The river was about five hundred meters across and very deep. I carried my watercolor box with me. It was a kid's paint box. I wrapped my drawings and materials in a plastic cover, very tight. I used the plastic bag as a float to get across the river. I wore my special 'wet suit', made of thin nylon, so it dried quickly!' HUYNH PHUONG DONG

ARTIST / HUYNH PHUONG DONG / PLACE / SAIGON RIVER / DATE / 19 APRIL 1968.

INSCRIPTION / SOLDIERS CROSSING THE SAIGON RIVER AT NIGHT.

WATERCOLOR AND INK ON PAPER / HCMC FINE ARTS MUSEUM COLLECTION.

MEKONG DIARIES

Viet Cong Drawings and Stories, 1964-1975

By Sherry Buchanan

**“IF WE WERE ALL ARTISTS, THERE
WOULD BE NO WAR.”**

Nguyen Thu, war artist

In May 1965, Vice President Hubert Humphrey declared that “the Viet Cong has committed the most unbelievable acts of terrorism the world has ever known.” And throughout the long conflict in Vietnam, Americans similarly demonized the North Vietnamese fighters as reds, gooks, and fanatical killers. Offering a radically different view of these supposedly savage soldiers, *Mekong Diaries* presents never-before-published drawings, poems, letters, and oral histories by ten of the most celebrated Viet Cong war artists.

These guerilla artists, some military officers and some civilians, lived clandestinely with the fighters, moving camp alongside them, going on reconnaissance missions, and carrying their sketchbooks, ink, and watercolors into combat. Trained by professors from the Hanoi Institute of Fine Arts who journeyed down the perilous Ho Chi Minh Trail to ensure a pictorial history of the war, they recorded battles and events from Operation Junction City to Khe Sanh to the Tet Offensive. They also sketched as the spirit moved them, rendering breathtaking landscapes,

hut and bunker interiors, activities at base camps, troops on the move, portraits for the families of fallen soldiers, and the unimaginable devastation that the conflict left in its wake.

Their collective record—which Sherry Buchanan skillfully compiles here—is an extraordinary historical and artistic document of people at war. As such, it serves as a powerful response to the self-centeredness of American accounts of Vietnam, filling a profound gap in our national memory by taking us into the misunderstood worlds of those whom we once counted among our worst enemies.

Sherry Buchanan is an independent scholar, author, and publisher of Asian and Vietnamese contemporary art, history, and culture. Her most recent book is *Vietnam Zippos*. A former features editor at the *Wall Street Journal*, she has served as a columnist for the *International Herald Tribune* in Brussels, Paris, London, and Hong Kong. She remains active in children’s charities in Vietnam.

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