

Jean Despujols: a Colonial Painter in Indochina  
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When Jean Despujols traveled to Indochina in the 1930s, he was following in the footsteps of several other French artists seeking inspiration on exotic shores. Other than the more famous Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) who traveled to Tahiti from 1891 to 1893, returned in 1901 and eventually died there in 1903, the list of artist travelers to Indochina include Louis Delaporte (1842-1925) who spent two years from 1866 to 1868 sailing to China via the Mekong and Jean Commaille (1868-1916) who arrived in Cambodia in 1898, became curator of the archaeological site of Angkor from 1908 until 1916 when he was brutally murdered by bandits.<sup>1</sup> As an artist traveler in 1937, Despujols came relatively late to the colony, decades after many had built their reputation on their depictions of the landscapes and people of the East. While Despujols' career spans longer than the time he spent in Asia, perhaps, like his compatriots, his stay there constitutes a significant portion of his working life. The proliferation of artists who embarked on the voyage overseas demonstrate that the desire for the experience of journeying to the Far East was as strong as the demand for images of the Orient back home in the Metropole. Still, it remained a privilege that was awarded only to a few that stood in sharp contrast to the status of the colonial subjects that they visited in the occupied territory.

Differences between Jean Despujols and his Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian counterparts are clear. There are differences of race and class, naturally, but the colonial context in which they worked created differences in the ways in

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<sup>1</sup> Nadine André-Pallois, *L'Indochine: lieu d'échange culturel ?*, Paris: EFEO, 1998

which they worked, the creative process behind their paintings and their behavior toward their subject matter. In this essay, I would like to decipher this colonial context from an art historical perspective; not so much to shed light on Despujols' artistic career, but rather to understand that the presence of French artists in Indochina was neither a neutral situation nor a case of, as Nadine Andre-Pallois has called it, a cultural exchange.<sup>2</sup> Rather, Despujols and his stay in Indochina should be used as a study for the paradoxical situation that colonialism presented in that there was both a wide gap between native and French artists in terms of background, education, training, perception of the world and artistic methods and a close proximity in terms of subject matter and geographical location. Although, Despujols' paintings can serve to illustrate the divide between the colonizer and the colonized, the foreigner and the native, and in this case too, the artist and his models, it can also be a model for how deceptively close colonial artists on both sides were.

Despujols' Indochina drawings merit close scrutiny in this regard and I propose to examine his drawings in light of this duality. While the binary opposition of colonizer to colonized seems fixed, there is a way to merge these two worlds by examining the context of colonial art education and the interactions between French artists and their subjects. By merging, I mean overlapping contexts, not a blurring of the two, for the worlds of French artists and the Indochinese remained far apart. I merely propose to use this opportunity to look at how Despujols' stay in Indochina intersected with the artistic world of the 1930s and how his drawings reflect both a

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

convergence with the mentality of the colonialist painter, in every sense of the word, and a contrast with the local artists' view of the Indochina environment.

That said, colonial painters from France and colonial painters from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia shared a similar style; a particular branch of academic painting characterized by detailed observations of natural subjects and true-to-life depictions of landscapes and the human figure. This combination of the French Beaux-Arts drawing style and the "exotic" scenery of tropical landscapes and native subjects has been labeled "Indo-European" in auction catalogues of the 1990s but should be qualified as "colonial."<sup>3</sup> Vietnamese artists that studied at the French founded Ecole des Beaux-Arts d'Indochine were preoccupied with similar subjects as their French counterparts, that is local scenery and portraits of the natives, but their relationship to that subject matter could not be more different. They did not approach their topics from an outside perspective. Local artists were painting their home while the French artists were painting a foreign land.

Moreover, the term colonial does not merely apply to the paintings produced by artists in Indochina. It also applies to the mentality of the French painters in question. This mentality is absent in the works made by the native artists. A Vietnamese painter, for example, would look at his or her subject with a sense of familiarity whereas a French painter would consider the object in question as foreign, or strange, alien and "other." This is where Despujols' diary becomes an important component in the interpretation of his work. In his writing, Despujols expresses fascination with the natives' physical features and described them at

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<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Christies' Southeast Asian Pictures, Sunday, 28 September 1997, Singapore, Lot 501-564

length both verbally and in his paintings. They interested him because of their “otherness.” In his view, they embodied or personified the stereotypical “Oriental,” or “Asian.”

Despujols’ diary serves other purposes. For one, it provides an accurate timeframe for specific paintings. It locates them in a sequence of events outlined by the legs of his journey. It also situates them geographically and authenticates their source. By revealing where, when and what he painted, he validates the context behind them. The diary also traces his ideas and feelings for his subjects before and after painting them. Lest one should consider the paintings to serve as simple illustrations of the Indochina scenery and its inhabitants, in which case knowledge of Despujols’ diary would be unnecessary to interpret and admire them, reading his journal is also window onto the artist’s psyche. In his diary, the artist reveals the mental steps required to pursue his chosen subject: women. In turn, reading his diary permanently alters the viewer’s perception of the drawings, for it betrays his inner and sometimes more sordid thoughts.

Still, in order to properly contextualize the paintings in the colonial environment, the artist’s own personal experience is only one part of the picture. It is helpful, therefore, to understand the background to his stay in the colony and to the milieu in which he found himself as an artist in a foreign land. Despujols’ amorous adventures with native women and his desire to capture their beauty in his paintings resemble the adventures of the European artists who sojourned in Bali such as Rudolf Bonnet (1895-1978) and Andrien-Jean Le Mayeur de Meprès (1880-1958), both of whom fled what they considered repressive socially conservative

backgrounds in Belgium and Holland and sailed in search of sexual liberation in the Orient. Not all artists journeying to Asia at the time were looking for transgressions, but their presence did impact the local art historical milieu, in some cases, a legacy that continues to this day.

### **Victor Tardieu and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts d'Indochine**

Art historically speaking, colonialism is somewhat marginal to our understanding of mainstream art movements from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The French artists who traveled to Indochina at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were not among the avant-garde of their time. Unlike the Impressionists, who challenged the norms of painterly aesthetics with their vigorous brushstrokes and plays with light, or the Fauvists whose bold colors shocked aesthetic sensibilities of the time, the recipients of the Prix d'Indochine, the grant that allowed them to travel to the colony, were members of the Academy and proponents of "official" art.<sup>4</sup> It was at the 1906 Colonial Exhibition in Marseille that a Colonial Association of French Artists (Société Coloniale des Artistes Français) was formed and later, in 1910, that the first Prix d'Indochine was discerned to a painter and member of the Association who would exhibit at the annual salon organized by the association. Victor Tardieu (1870-1937) was its recipient in 1920. Upon his arrival, he was commissioned to paint a mural in the amphitheater of the Université indochinoise in Hanoi. The mural featured a large central female figure, symbolizing the Metropole, flanked on one side by the mandarins of the court of Hue and on the other by the peoples of Indochina. The painting, which has since disappeared, stands as a metaphor for

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<sup>4</sup> Andre-Pallois, p.19

colonialism itself: Mother France watching over her “children,” pitting the “good” siblings, i.e., the compliant mandarins, against the unruly natives. A similar composition was created by Alfred Janniot (1889-1969) in the form of a bas-relief for the Musée des Colonies inaugurated at the 1931 Paris Colonial Exposition. In that work, a seated woman presides majestically above a body of water on which sail ships. To her right, figure plantation workers in the colonies of Asia. There are cotton, rubber, sugar, tobacco and coffee growers as well as rice farmers. To her left, are the members of African colonies with their ivory, nuts, cassava, coffee and tobacco crops. In this case, she reigns over the colonial economies, but the metaphor is similar: Mother France watching over her native children.

During his stay in Indochina, Tardieu produced paintings that illustrated daily life in the colony such as village scenes and rural landscapes. His paintings exemplify the Beaux-Arts style described above, characterized by keen observation of nature and realistic portrayals of people and landscape. Although his sketches were made *en plein air*, outdoors, some of his paintings, like the large mural for the University, do seem to carry more fictional elements, collated from studies made from nature. This was common to other painters in the colony as well. One painting, for example, created by Joseph Inguimberty (1896-1971) is representative of this semi-imaginary scenario. It depicts several figures seated on a large daybed in a grove by a riverbank flanked by what appear to be tribal figures wearing loincloths, an impossible juxtaposition in real life. The seated figures wear the long tunics known as *ao dai* proper to the mandarin class. The tribal figures are completely out of their context as they traditionally live in the highlands and would not interact

with the villagers, let alone high society. This kind of composition would appeal to patrons in the Metropole for it fed into their fantasies about the exotic East. This method of sketching from real life if only to rearrange reality and compose imaginary scenes is typical of European painters in Asia in the 1930s. Rudolf Bonnet and Adrien-Jean Le Mayeur de Meprès mentioned earlier, as well as Walter Spiess (1895-1942) drew on their observations of the local colorful scenery to compose their versions of the ideal exotic landscape and beautiful native.

Tardieu was reportedly so enamored with the Indochinese setting that he requested to stay.<sup>5</sup> He was soon invited to establish the colony's first art school. The *Ecole des Beaux-Arts d'Indochine* opened in 1925 with Tardieu as its first director. The school's curriculum followed the Paris Beaux-Arts model with an emphasis on life drawing and classical composition. With that model, Tardieu set out to turn Indochinese "artisans" into full-fledged "artists." Although the name of the school suggested a wider regional diversity of students, the majority was from Hanoi, the capitol, but a few French residents and a handful of students from Cambodia and Laos also enrolled in the course of the 20 years of its operation. After Tardieu passed away in 1937, his successor Evariste Jonchère (1892-1956) oversaw the curriculum but was more conservative in his outlook than Tardieu. Like his colleague in Cambodia, George Groslier (1887-1945) he had little faith that the native artists could be anything other than craftsmen.<sup>6</sup> As an artist, however,

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<sup>5</sup> André-Pallois, p. 111

<sup>6</sup> André-Pallois, p. 245. For an analysis of Groslier's influence on Cambodian art see Gabrielle Abbe, "La 'renovation des arts cambodgiens' George Groslier et le service des arts, 1917-1945," *Bulletin de l'Institut Pierre Renouvin*, 2008/1 No. 27, p. 61-76.

Jonchère was more of a modernist than Tardieu. Trained as a sculptor, his work in Indochina tended more toward Fauvism and Art Deco than Realism.

In the 1930s, the Ecole des Beaux-Arts d'Indochine was the site of fierce debates over the role of art in society. These discussions among students at the school mirrored those taking place among other indigenous intellectuals at the time. The 1930s was a period of radicalism. As scholars have described it, the 1930s were characterized by a desire to shed Vietnamese culture of its colonial past and a push for modernity.<sup>7</sup> The decade preceding the revolution was a period of liberalization in contrast to the 1940s when more conservative communist party leaders set Vietnamese culture on a path of socialist-realism. Intellectuals were simultaneously pushing for a break from Western occupation and seeking a desire to educate themselves in Western political thought. Education was key to their emancipation and, as the philosopher Frantz Fanon has argued, it was necessary for the colonized to learn the language of the colonizer to gain access to knowledge to overcome their inferiority vis-à-vis their oppressors.<sup>8</sup> In the art school, discussions arose in regards to the role of art in society with some arguing that art needed to serve society and others advocating art for art's sake. Two groups formed as a result. The Foyer de l'Art Annamite, FARTA, and the Coopération des Artistes Indochinois or CAI. These debates couldn't be more isolated from the conversations taking place in France

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<sup>7</sup> See Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992 and Kim Ngoc Bao Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam 1945-1965*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002, p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth (Les Damnés de la terre)* Grove Press, 1961

where, for example, the surrealists were calling for the end to colonialism and abstraction was on the rise.

In his diary, Jean Despujols makes neither mention of the artistic world that he left behind in France, the kinds of artists that he admires back home, nor to his affinity with his Prix d'Indochine predecessors. His diary, however, does suggest that the colonial milieu is where he belonged. He hints that he had planned to establish an art school in Indochina himself, and was turned down only to find out later that Victor Tardieu had done so in his place. He expressed feeling robbed of that opportunity.<sup>9</sup> By the time he arrived in Hanoi, Tardieu had died, but he did meet Jonchère, Joseph Inguimberty and later, Groslier in Phnom Penh, as well as a few local artists, graduates of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts d'Indochine. Tardieu and Inguimberty, and later the Japanese Suzuki, have since been recorded in the annals of Vietnamese and Cambodian art respectively, as having initiated the onset of modernism and trained the first generation of national artists in the post-colonial period.<sup>10</sup> While Jonchère and Groslier are remembered as "traditionalists," the colonial period painters are seen as the forefathers of modern painting in Vietnam and Cambodia. Had Jean Despujols been selected as the founder of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts d'Indochine, circumstances both for him and the school would have

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<sup>9</sup> "M. Tardieu who robbed me in 1924 of the mission to establish the school of Fine Arts of Hanoi." Jean Despujols a.k.a Janjol, "Voyage d'un réfractaire en Indochine et autour du monde," unpublished manuscript, p.171, courtesy Meadows Museum, Shreveport, LA, translation by the author.

<sup>10</sup> Not much is known about the teacher Suzuki other than his leadership role at the Ecole des Arts Cambodgiens in the 1960s. See Ingrid Muan's PhD Dissertation "Citing Angkor: Cambodian Arts in the Age of Restoration 1918-2000," Columbia University, 2001.

perhaps been different. He would have remained longer in the colony, no doubt, but the curriculum and the fate of the school may have taken a different direction. What is certain, is that the name Jean Despujols would have been etched in the Vietnamese art history books instead of Victor Tardieu. As it is Despujols is remembered as one of the many artists, recipients of the Prix d'Indochine, that traveled throughout the territory, sketching the scenery albeit at a time when interest in the colony was waning.

In his diary, Despujols describes an outing he made with Inguimberty:

"I made two interesting outings with Inguimberty. First, in the village where he has installed his studio, 5 kilometers south of the city...We go visit the inhabitants. Behind the house is a green and yellow pond. Bamboos, lemon and banana trees. Such is the environment dear to Inguimberty's compositions. A giant canvas is propped under an eave: 6 x 2.5 m. Unbelievable! He is the only painter painting such monumental paintings. The logistics of such scale seem impossible: transportation of materials, building of a shelter, loss of time trying to gain perspective after each brushstroke, general fatigue of his models. But, is this really a giant "sketch?" It is more like a synthesis of pictorial values suggesting a naked reality."<sup>11</sup>

Despujols was impressed by Inguimberty's installation because of its scale, considering the difficulty of lugging such materials around. It suggested to him that Inguimberty had made Indochina his home in contrast to Despujols who was still on the move, and could only carry a sketchbook with him. Despujols is not sympathetic to Inguimberty and Tardieu's desires to remain permanently in the colony. His wonder in the face of Inguimberty's work suggests jealousy but also implies his own desire to remain firmly in France and not lose himself in the colonial environment.

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<sup>11</sup> Jean Despujols a.k.a Janjol, "Voyage d'un réfractaire en Indochine et autour du monde," unpublished manuscript, p.875, courtesy Meadows Museum, Shreveport, LA, translation by the author.

Tardieu and Inguimberty were certainly more entrenched in the local scene than he was.

From the perspective of local artists, two paths that mirrored the 1930s debates were created by the Indochina art school: the path that romanticized colonialism and the path of socialist-realism. The difference in opinion over the role of art at the school, divided the Vietnamese colonial period artists politically as well. And after independence, those who opposed the Communist party moved South or fled to France. This is the case with Mai Trung Thu (1906-1980) and Le Pho (1907-2001). Both continued their careers in France with paintings that reproduced some of the themes and styles that they developed at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts d'Indochine. For Mai Trung Thu, this included still lives with tea pots painted on silk and for Le Pho, impressionist type portraits of women in floral settings. The other painters who remained behind used their skills to create images that were subsequently interpreted as patriotic. The painter Nguyen Phan Chanh (1892-1984), equally skilled in silk painting, was known for his portraits of village women and children, dressed modestly in earth tones, capturing the humble spirit of the peasant class in contrast to the elegant upper class women portrayed by Le Pho and Mai Trung Thu.

It is tempting to pit the indigenous artists against the French and claim that the local artists' portrayals of their own kind was somehow more "authentic," but authenticity is relative. Certainly, the French artists, Despujols included, intended to capture "authentic" Indochina which was the reason for traveling there in the first place. But, realism in art, as art historians know, does not equal "the real," for all art

is a representation and loaded with bias and prejudice. Vietnamese art historians argue that Nguyen Phan Chanh's images of villagers is more "genuine" than the stylized and idealized portraits of bourgeois women made by Le Pho and Mai Trung Thu. Both allude to different social groups but they also reveal a different perspective on Vietnamese society. Despujols sought to capture native "types" with accuracy and detail, but he also held a particular view on those types that inevitably fell into "stereotypes."

### **Jean Despujols' Portraits of Indochina**

Before examining Despujols' Indochina portraits, it is helpful to look at the social milieu and historical context behind his work. Despujols studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts of Bordeaux and in 1914, on the eve of the First World War, was awarded the prestigious Prix de Rome but was mobilized shortly after and was called to the Front. He was finally able to take up his residency at the Villa Medici in 1919 where he spent four years before accepting a teaching post at the American Beaux-Arts Academy in Fontainebleau from 1924 to 1936.<sup>12</sup> Instead of aligning himself or identifying with the avant-garde, he exhibited with the organizations of neo-classical painters. In 1936, he was selected by the Association of French Colonial Artists to travel to Indochina. His stay lasted 20 months during which he realized over 360 paintings while roaming the colony, painting the landscape and portraits of women. At a time when French surrealists were manifesting their opposition to colonialism, Despujols and the Prix d'Indochine artists remained true

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<sup>12</sup> André-Pallois, p. 148.

to their neo-classical style of realism and yearned to join the association of colonial painters.

Despujols' landscapes owe to his Beaux-Arts education. His painting titled "The Gods are Gone: The Tiger Holds Court at Their Temple," captures, like a snapshot, the moment when a tiger passed into his frame of view. The artist placed his easel and, consequently, the perspective of the viewer as if he were hiding behind the trees and observing the large feline walk by nonchalantly, unaware of the presence of a human being. The drawing is executed in remarkable realistic detail and shows his technique of observation, although it is an unlikely scenario. His diary does recount his encounter with a tiger, yet, in this case, it is doubtful that the tiger remained in the picture long. He gives the illusion of an immediate impression as his sight functions somewhat photographically, catching the shadows cast by the trees onto the temple and the predator's casual entry onto the scene in the blink of an eye. The artist also emphasized the thickness of the forest by projecting the trunk of the large banyan tree in the foreground while the branches recede into the background.

The naturalistic details present in his landscapes are also reflected in his portraits of women. His diary gives verbal descriptions of anatomical details such as shapes of eyes, contours of eyebrows, flesh tones, hair color, texture and clothing. When matched with his paintings, one can see the painstaking precision with which he rendered the physiognomy of the people of Indochina. His diary, that he titled "Voyage d'un réfractaire en Indochine et autour du monde" (Travels of a Rebel to Indochina and around the World) traces his itinerary and provides a detailed blow by blow account of the artist's activities during his stay in the colony. The original

diary, written in French, is prefaced three times: one dated to 1939, the other to 1944 and the third to 1948. These prefaces explain the delay in publishing the diary and the context behind some of his statements in regards to Indochina. These comments are important in understanding his point of view as a romantic. “Oh Indochina,” he exclaims, “your women!”<sup>13</sup> The first chapter, following the preface, titled “Disgusts,” asserts his perspective as a so-called rebel. In this text, contrary to his fellow surrealists, for example, he unabashedly proclaims himself to be an anti-semitic and confesses to his hatred of the Jewish race. While his anti-semitic rant may seem at odds with the reverence, awe and admiration he seems to lavish on Indochinese women, and considering the German Nazi party prejudice against the Asian race as primitive and degenerate, they are consistent with the ways in which the colonizers simultaneously romanticized the idyllic traditional lifestyle of the natives and felt contempt for their backward ways. The cultural clash between natives and colonials became popular topics of literature in mid and late 20<sup>th</sup> century France, evidence of a kind of colonial nostalgia.<sup>14</sup>

That the artist kept a journal is perhaps not unusual, but such information rarely stands the test of time and art historians seldom have the good fortune of being privy to the precise whereabouts of artists when they produce their works. While most artists do keep records of their creations, they often appear in the form of ledgers or logbooks rather than the kind of extensive personal narrative of the

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<sup>13</sup> Jean Despujols a.k.a Janjol, “Voyage d’un réfractaire en Indochine et autour du monde,” unpublished manuscript, p.xi, courtesy Meadows Museum, Shreveport, LA, translation by the author.

<sup>14</sup> See for example, Jean Hougron, *Les Asiates*, Paris: Domat, 1954 and Erwan Bergot, *Sud-Lointain*, Paris: Presse de la Cite, 1990

sorts that Despujols produced. While his comments can serve to contextualize the time and place in which his drawings were executed, they mostly reveal aspects of his personality. His penchant for detail is obvious in his diligent recording of every scene, subject and encounter during his stay. This close scrutiny is echoed in his sketches that also flawlessly transcribe every one of his subject's minute traits. Was he an obsessive observer or simply meticulous? His diary also discloses his love of women. Although he appears to believe himself to be romantic, not so much in the melancholy or nostalgic sense, but rather in his lust for them. One may call him a skirt chaser, a flirt or, more aggressively, a pursuer.

His diary discloses more than his impressions of the locals, however, it tells us how close he came to his subjects and the emotional investment he placed on his artistic and amorous impulses. His diary records the intense impression that the landscape and the people of Indochina made on him. The sections on the temple of Angkor Wat are particularly indicative of his admiration of the beauty and grandeur of the 11<sup>th</sup> century monument. But, they are also testament to what he considers the arduous and sometimes perilous task of capturing the scenery in his art. Like an adventurer or an explorer, he recounts the sweat and tears caused by the journey and its rewards. Like any hardy traveler, the discomforts of the journey are erased by the pleasure of arriving at destination and the discovery of a bountiful treasure and his case, a gem to paint:

“It is 10 am and in spite of the sunshade, huge drops of sweat are dripping down my neck. I've been working on this tempera for two days: the stung Siem Reap at the Conservation (op. 40). A pink sky into which blends the airy foliage of the bamboos. Twin coconut trees raise their long trunks and open out at different heights; Paul and Virginia! Some areca trees. A shivering dam. A noria. And the tawny translucent water. The noria sings nearby. And at each plunge of the bamboo

tubes, the kindly, soothing, refreshing gurgle; and the plop emphasizing like a hiccup the height of satisfaction...Meanwhile Angkor Wat has recaptured us.”<sup>15</sup>

Despujols provides pages of details of the contours of the sculptures adorning the temples at Angkor, the Apsara, the sound of birds and the frequent presence of menacing wildlife accentuating the atmosphere of gander in the tropics and the perils of being an artist in the jungle.

The women that become his models are described in equal detail. And, although his meetings with them were not as risky as tramping through the forest to sketch an abandoned temple, the sense of adventure was equally palpable. At times, he encounters these women in their native habitat as he journeys through the landscape:

“While following the Prek (river) we cross an emerald green rach, and suddenly arrive below the houses...The little girls, wearing a heart-shaped piece of metal covering the pubic area and tied on with a string...Finally, here is Tega, presented by her family, timid, confused, and simply a beautiful fifteen-year-old. Her eyes are huge and black, her forehead rounded, her nose straight, her lips full but not excessively so, her face oval without heaviness. In sum, almost a Caucasian beauty. Tega smiles at me. Oh, so nicely! I paint under a veranda from which one may descend by a makeshift ladder.”<sup>16</sup>

He often shares the names of his models illustrating how well acquainted he became with them, sometimes quite intimately, although he was not necessarily emotionally close to them. Their physical features are always recounted in full detail as if he were painting them with his eyes.

One could easily make a comparison between a portrait of a young girl made by the artist Tran Van Can, (1910-1994) now hanging in the Vietnam Museum of Fine Arts, and one of Despujols’ portraits. The title of Tran Van Can’s painting, “Em

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<sup>15</sup> English translation of Jean Despujols’ journal “Travels of a Rebel,” p. 242-244.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 320

Thuy,” or “Sister Thuy,” already suggests a familiarity with the subject, a young girl who may have been a relative of the artist. The girl sits comfortably in a chair. Her gaze is fixed straight ahead as if looking at her interlocutor, the painter. Her hair is clipped back and she wears a plain white blouse that covers her chest and arms. There is nothing sexual about it. In contrast, Despujols’ painting titled “Yeu,” depicts a young woman with her head tilted to the side and lips slightly open. She is also dressed modestly in a white blouse, but the pose and the expression on the girl’s face suggests a subtle sensuality that is absent in Tran Van Can’s portrait of Thuy. Perhaps because of the attention to details, the almost photographic touch of Despujols brush, as opposed to Tran Van Can’s looser play with colors and strokes, there is a physicality to the portrait, a palpability that emanates sexuality.

Through his diary, like the archaeologists who searched for lost artifacts in the wilderness, Despujols becomes an acquirer of prized riches in the form of women. They become items of conquest, both for his paintings and his own sexual exploits. The wilder the beast, the more pleasing the capture. There are countless passages alluding to his taming of the prey. At the end of his description of the session, he includes the name of the girl and the classification number, as if itemizing his catch:

“It is going to be hard, I can tell. For I’ve seen Knem working. And posing is not her strong point. I try to enter her life little by little. And I occupy myself painting a few watercolors...I have her lie down...The second sitting was better, but she’s still not used to it...I’ve very happy now about Knem. Like my girlfriends at Angkor, she calls me “papa.” This name is both sweet and painful to my heart. And we kiss. I dress her up...her lips are open just enough to let pass her breath. All is fire, ardent yet contained. And Knem is all the more beautiful because she is not pretty. How can one not love her? (Knem, oil, p. 115.)”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 330

Although there are references to beauty, he more often than not describes the women as repulsive. His desire for them seems to emanate more out of disgust, like the title of his introduction, than love:

“Nam is a bit of a repleat and amusing *con-gai* (girl). She is 17 years old. A vegetable farmer. I kept her until the morning. Simply because she is devilish little animal. All ass and tits with a thick hood of black hair. As the true *nhaque* (country bumpkin) and primitive that she is, ignoring the restrictions imposed on a girl of her race that dictate that she must never lose herself to the carnal touch of a man. I kept her because I want to paint her... Nam poses. Her head, that she leans to the left, is wrapped in a black scarf tied under the chin. She looks like a shy and sad little peasant. I find her perfect as is. (Nam, painting op. 236.)”<sup>18</sup>

The detailed anatomical descriptions are reminiscent of the kind of racial stereotyping used by colonial ethnographers. Despujols is not interested in classificatory systems per se but his paintings provide ample evidence of the sense of entitlement as well as the racist and chauvinist mindset of colonial artists. In his book on colonial Cambodia, Gregor Muller describes the liberties that colonial officials took with local women. “Hoads of rowdy soldiers regularly accosted women in the streets, trying to grab and kiss them.”<sup>19</sup> This was not the behavior of local men who were, in many respects, as subjugated as the women. Though To Ngoc Van emulated his teachers in removing his shirt, he did not go as far as chase after his models. This is evident in a recent publication of To Ngoc Van’s drawings

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<sup>18</sup> Jean Despujols a.k.a Janjol, “Voyage d’un réfractaire en Indochine et autour du monde,” unpublished manuscript, p.xi, courtesy Meadows Museum, Shreveport, LA, translation by the author. P. 934

<sup>19</sup> Gregor Muller, *Colonial Cambodia’s “Bad Frenchmen,”* London: Routledge, 2006, p. 140

that included entries from To Ngoc Van's own diary.<sup>20</sup> Although, the Vietnamese painter sketched many women models, some nude, none of the entries include such personal impressions of the women that he drew, nor is there any indication that he took liberties to seduce the women. In contrast, Despujols' diary is rife with entries that allude to his rampant sexual adventures with local women, including his models. Here is one example:

"After passing Bac-Giang, we land on a work site teeming with women...Most are young with sienna toned skin, round and firm arms and legs, their breasts sticking to their *cai-yim*, Such fruit! O health, o nature! Life and sensuality in one. Such a plethora of women makes a man's passion explode. Passion for what? For riding these bipeds, to eat them whole...Like a wolf in a sheep's meadow, men such as myself, have eyes bigger than the mouth, rejoicing in anticipation...Woman is naturally joyous in servitude, in the harem, the convent and the studio, she is everywhere the same...After this fertile plain, we cross the hills that separate the Red River from the Tso-Kiang."<sup>21</sup>

The passage also conflates the local women with the local scenery, dehumanizing the women while anthropomorphizing the landscape, suggesting that he considered women part of the ecology and not individuals in their own right. They are there, ripe for the picking, like fruit, for his pleasure.

## Conclusion

In many ways, Despujols epitomizes the definition of a colonial painter. As the recipient of the prestigious Prix d'Indochine, he traveled to Indochina and produced hundreds of sketches of colonial subjects, the native inhabitants of the

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<sup>20</sup> Phan Cam Thuong, *To Ngoc Van: Tam Guong Phan Chieu Xa Hoi Viet Nam 1906-1954* (To Ngoc Van: A mirror onto Vietnamese Society 1906-1954) Drawings from the collection of Tira Vanichtheeranont, Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Tri Thuc, 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Jean Despujols a.k.a Janjol, "Voyage d'un réfractaire en Indochine et autour du monde," unpublished manuscript, p. 912, courtesy Meadows Museum, Shreveport, LA, translation by the author.

colony in fulfillment of the missionizing goals of the colonial administration. But, perhaps the term colonial may be a slight misnomer. If one were to compare the indigenous artists who studied painting at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts d'Indochine to the French artists such as Despujols, that can also be labeled "colonial," one comes up with a different meaning to the term. For Vietnamese art historians, the term colonial designates a particular time in history when artists studied under the French colonial education system. They interpreted the content of their work as patriotic and folded them into the narrative of national art history: in essence, they were anti-colonial. Meaning that, artists who painted in what could be interpreted as a European style of realist oil painting were as Vietnamese as the so-called traditional folk painters. This definition of a colonial art would not apply to Despujols whose paintings can in no way be inserted into a narrative of Vietnamese art history. Part of the distinction would be to apply a more nuanced definition. The distinction could be one of the colonizer versus the colonized. But, even that distinction would give more power to the French artists as if giving them an agency in the process of colonization.

Despujols' sketches of Indochina are revealing of a particular colonial mindset but they are also the artistic output of a single individual painter and should not necessarily be evaluated according to the associations one may have with the whole colonial enterprise. He was a skilled observer and translated his vision into paintings and portraits of the people of Indochina that are testament to a time period when such portraits were in high demand. As Panivong Norindr has described it, Indochina fulfilled a fantasy for the French, a kind of paradise where

life was simple and followed the laws of nature.<sup>22</sup> There remains in the French popular imagination, a kind of nostalgia for the colony, one that is completely detached from the political, economic and historic context of colonialism, an imaginary kind of colonialism where the natives are happy and content, living off the land, in lush and colorful settings. The reality of colonial oppression is omitted entirely from the picture that Despujols paints but his diary does reveal the chauvinist attitudes that were rampant at the time. For this reason, Despujols' paintings serve as relics of a past that is often idealized and fantasized on both sides of the colonial border. Although, his drawings can easily be seen as a kind of text that illustrates colonial discourse, a discourse that created racial and sexual difference in order to justify colonial rule, they can also stand as illustrations for a travel diary. Despujols can be seen as the embodiment of the notion of the artist-traveler, albeit during a time of colonialism.

The drawings of Despujols' Vietnamese counterpart, the artist To Ngoc Van, the first director of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts d'Indochine after it has closed its doors, who also kept a diary that traced the background to his sketches, are another kind of colonial discourse, but one that justified the anti-colonial position, the revolutionary nationalist forces that gave power to, rather than dis-empowerment of, the natives. Since To Ngoc Van is native to Indochina, one could never interpret his drawings as travel logs, but they also manifest a documentary impulse. Both diaries show that the construction of a colonial discourse starts with images that tell stories about people on both sides of the margins of difference.

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<sup>22</sup> Panivong Norindr, *Phatasmatic Indochina*, Duke University Press, 1996.

