



From aesthetic object to dialogic subject in silk paintings by female artists in Ho Chi Minh City

MA Huỳnh Thị Kim Trâm

Ton Duc Thang University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Abstract

Throughout its leadership of the revolution, the Communist Party of Vietnam has consistently upheld the view that people are the center, the subject, and an important resource of development. The 13th National Party Congress emphasized the need to "arouse the aspiration to develop a prosperous and happy country" ^[1]. At the same time, it underscored the task of promoting Vietnamese cultural values and human strength in order to generate endogenous resources for national development, regarding these as an important driving force for sustainable development.

In this process, women have increasingly been provided with conditions to realize their potential and creative capacities. Resolution No. 11-NQ/TW of the Politburo emphasizes the need to "promote the role and enormous potential of women in the cause of industrialization, modernization, national construction and defense" ^[2]. These orientations have not only enabled women to participate more extensively in economic, political, and social life, but have also helped expand creative space in culture and the arts. The increasingly visible presence of female artists in contemporary fine arts, particularly in silk painting, may be regarded as an expression of the growing creative and cultural agency of women in the current context of renewal and international integration.

Keywords: Contemporary Vietnamese Art, cultural agency, female subjectivity, Vietnamese Silk Painting, women artists

Introduction

The 13th National Party Congress emphasized the need to promote Vietnamese cultural values and human strength in the cause of national construction and defense, as well as in international integration. This perspective further affirms the role of people as creative subjects and as an important driving force of cultural development. Alongside the process of renewal and international integration, the role of women in social life has been increasingly affirmed. In culture and the arts, policies aimed at promoting cultural values and human creativity have broadened the conditions for social actors to participate in cultural creation and enjoyment. This is clearly reflected in the growing number of female artists, the expansion of their creative scope, and the increasingly visible presence of women's voices in the visual arts.

Among the traditional media of Vietnamese fine arts, silk painting occupies a special position because of its capacity to delicately express inner life and emotional depth. Since the Renovation reforms of 1986, under the impact of economic, cultural, and social transformations, Vietnamese silk painting has undergone significant changes in subject matter, visual language, and artistic conception. These changes have taken place in a context in which the Party and the State have increasingly emphasized the building of a healthy cultural environment and the promotion of human creative capacity. Resolution No. 33-NQ/TW highlights the task of building a healthy cultural environment and strongly mobilizing all resources, especially the endogenous resources of Vietnamese culture and people. This also provides an important foundation for cultural creators, including female painters, to develop their professional capacities and artistic voices.

Notably, works by female artists in Ho Chi Minh City have contributed to the formation of new approaches to the representation of women. Whereas in many earlier works women often appeared as objects to be observed and

admired, associated with symbolic qualities, in many contemporary works they have become subjects of experience, emotion, and personal reflection. Through painting, women are not merely represented but directly participate in constructing artistic meaning from their own lives and experiences. The increasingly active participation of female artists is also consistent with the policy of promoting women's role, potential, and creativity in national construction and development ^[3].

From the perspective of cultural and human development, this article focuses on analyzing the shift from aesthetic object to dialogic subject in silk paintings by female artists in Ho Chi Minh City from 1986 to the present. In doing so, it contributes to identifying the role of women as subjects of cultural creativity in the contemporary context of renewal and international integration.

Among the traditional media of Vietnamese fine arts, silk painting occupies a special position because of its capacity to delicately express inner life and emotional depth. Since the Renovation reforms of 1986, under the impact of economic, cultural, and social transformations, Vietnamese silk painting has undergone considerable changes in both content and expressive language. These changes have unfolded in a context in which the Party and the State increasingly stress the need to promote the human role as subject and to encourage individual creativity in the process of cultural construction and development. In particular, Resolution No. 162/2024^[4]/QH15 on the investment policy for the National Target Program for Cultural Development for the 2025-2035 period clearly identifies the strategy of "promoting the soft power of Vietnamese culture" ^[4], regarding it as one of the important drivers of cultural development in the new period.

In this context, works by female artists in Ho Chi Minh City have contributed to new approaches to the representation of women. Whereas women in many earlier works often appeared as objects to be observed and admired, in many

contemporary works they have become subjects of self-expression, self-dialogue, and the construction of artistic meaning from their own lived experiences. This shift reflects not only changes in artistic conceptions but also the expansion of women's role in cultural and artistic life, from being represented to directly participating in the creation, preservation, and transmission of cultural values through art. It is also an expression of the growing cultural agency of women in contemporary life, consistent with current orientations toward promoting human resources and the creativity of cultural actors.

From the perspective of culture and human development, this article analyzes the shift from aesthetic object to dialogic subject in silk paintings by female artists in Ho Chi Minh City from 1986 to the present, thereby contributing to the recognition of women as subjects of cultural creativity in the context of renewal and international integration.

The Transformation of Women's Status as Creative Subjects in The Context of Đổi Mới

1. Renovation and the Expansion of Artistic Creative Space

The Renovation reforms launched in 1986 not only brought about profound economic and social transformations but also expanded the space for cultural and artistic activities. From the perspective of promoting people as the center, subject, and resource of development, Vietnam's cultural and artistic life gradually became more diverse in themes, modes of expression, and creative conceptions. Resolution No. 80-NQ/TW dated January 7, 2026^[5], of the Politburo on the development of Vietnamese culture identifies the task of recognizing "people as the foundation, an important endogenous resource, a great driving force, a pillar, and a regulatory system for the country's rapid and sustainable development"^[5]. This provides an important basis for encouraging artistic creation in increasingly diverse directions while promoting the initiative and creative capacities of cultural actors. In such an environment, individual creativity is valued, helping to form artistic voices with distinctive identities.

For female painters, the transformations of social life after Renovation created favorable conditions for deeper participation in professional and artistic activities. Whereas many earlier works about women were created mainly from an external perspective, an increasing number of works are now formed from women's own experiences, emotions, and reflections. This shift not only reflects changes in artistic conceptions but is also closely associated with the rising social status of women during the renewal period. Resolution No. 11-NQ/TW dated April 27, 2007^[2], of the Politburo emphasizes the need to "promote the role and enormous potential of women in the cause of industrialization, modernization, national construction and defense"^[6]. In the visual arts, this is reflected in the fact that women are no longer merely objects of representation but have gradually become creative subjects, speaking subjects, and subjects who construct artistic meaning from their own experiences. This transformation in creative consciousness reflects the expansion of the right to participate in cultural life and also demonstrates the increasingly visible role of women as subjects of cultural creativity in contemporary society.

2. From the Observed Image to the Dialogic Subject

In the history of Vietnamese silk painting, women have often been portrayed as symbols of beauty, gentleness, virtue, or the traditional values of national culture. These images have contributed to the distinctive identity of Vietnamese silk painting, yet they have largely positioned women as objects of observation.

Since Renovation, together with the development of social life and the growing role of women in culture and the arts, many female painters have approached female imagery from an insider's perspective. This has given rise to themes associated with personal memory, inner life, social condition, family affection, and gendered experiences. Women are no longer merely aesthetic objects; they have gradually become creative subjects, speaking subjects, and subjects who construct artistic meaning. This shift reflects women's increasingly pronounced self-awareness of their position, identity, and voice in contemporary life.

This change is not confined to the visual arts but is also linked to the broader process of promoting the role of people as subjects in social life. Resolution No. 33-NQ/TW identifies the task of "building comprehensively developed Vietnamese people"^[7]. In the current period, Resolution No. 80-NQ/TW continues to emphasize the need to "maximize the values and strength of Vietnamese culture and people in the new era"^[8]. In Ho Chi Minh's thought, democracy is a condition for stimulating human creativity; he stated: "Only with democracy can cadres and the masses put forward initiatives. When those initiatives are praised, those people become more enthusiastic, and others follow their example"^[9]. From the perspective of artistic creation, the growing voice of female painters can be viewed as an expression of the expansion of the right to participate in cultural life and the right to individual self-expression. In fine arts, this is reflected in female artists' increasing autonomy in selecting subjects, visual languages, and modes of expression suited to their worldviews and personal experiences. Through this process, women appear in artworks not only as artistic images but also as cultural subjects directly participating in the creation, preservation, and transmission of community cultural values.

Manifestations of the Shift in Women's Silk Painting in Ho Chi Minh City

The country's renewal process has not only transformed economic and social life but has also expanded creative space and the capacity of social actors to participate in cultural life. The orientation toward promoting human resources and building an advanced Vietnamese culture imbued with national identity has created conditions for artists, including female painters, to develop their creative capacities and affirm their individual voices in artistic practice. From this perspective, changes in women's silk painting reflect not only the evolution of visual language but also the process by which women have established themselves as subjects of cultural creativity in the context of renewal and international integration.

Whereas images of women in silk painting were previously often associated with familiar archetypes such as young women, mothers, or symbolic forms of traditional beauty, contemporary works increasingly focus on personal life and private experience. Stories of family, motherhood, memory, emotion, and psychological states appear with growing

frequency, reflecting the need for self-expression and artists' concern with the inner world of individuals in modern life. This change shows that women no longer appear merely as images observed from the outside but increasingly become subjects of experience and artistic expression. Through their works, female painters directly recount stories connected to their own lives, memories, emotions, and reflections. This is also an expression of the rising status of women in cultural life. It is fully consistent with the strategic orientation on women's affairs, in which the Party has consistently emphasized awakening and maximizing women's role and enormous potential in national development. In the visual arts, this is reflected in women's transition from objects of representation to creative subjects, cultural subjects, and subjects who construct artistic meaning from their own lived experiences.

Alongside changes in the construction of human imagery, many female painters choose to approach women from an insider's perspective. Rather than pursuing idealized images or representations of social norms, they focus on specific individuals with distinct inner lives, emotions, and reflections. Women in these paintings are no longer merely symbols of beauty or traditional roles; they are increasingly seen as subjects capable of cognition, choice, reflection, and dialogue with themselves. This change reflects the development of individual consciousness and women's growing need for self-expression in contemporary life, while also demonstrating their increasingly proactive role in creating and shaping cultural values.

In addition to changes in content, women's silk painting in Ho Chi Minh City has also witnessed considerable experimentation in modes of expression. Artists not only inherit the softness and translucence traditionally associated with silk but also actively expand its expressive possibilities through experiments with composition, color, mixed media, light, and exhibition space. These explorations reflect a spirit of innovation in artistic creation and demonstrate the promotion of individual creative capacity in cultural life, in line with the orientation to "maximize the values and strength of Vietnamese culture and people in the new era; promote the role and mission of artists, intellectuals, and cultural workers" ^[10]. In this way, female artists not only broaden the expressive boundaries of silk as a medium but also enrich the landscape of culture and the arts in the contemporary context of integration and development.

1. From Emotional Expression to Self-Dialogue in Selected Representative Works

The shift from aesthetic object to dialogic subject in silk paintings of women in Ho Chi Minh City is clearly manifested through diverse approaches to women's lives. Whereas in earlier periods women were often viewed through the lenses of beauty, virtue, or traditional roles, in many contemporary works they directly participate in constructing artistic meaning through their own lived experiences, emotions, and reflections. This reflects the process of promoting women as subjects of cultural creativity in contemporary artistic life.

Women's voices in silk painting do not constitute a homogeneous discourse but reflect multiple facets of women's lives. From experiences of love, family, and motherhood to journeys of confronting memory, trauma, and the self, female painters have expanded the expressive range of silk painting into increasingly diverse dimensions.

Through this process, silk painting becomes a space in which women can articulate their viewpoints, emotions, and perspectives on life while also engaging in dialogue with issues concerning themselves in modern society. From the perspective of human development, this also represents the affirmation of individual identity and the strengthening of women's role as subjects in contemporary cultural life.

Ho Chi Minh City provides favorable conditions for implementing cultural development policies, building a creative environment, and expanding international exchange. At the same time, international exchange and cooperation have helped create a dynamic cultural space in Ho Chi Minh City, enabling artists, including female silk painters, to access new artistic trends and broaden their creative possibilities.

Within the broader cultural space of Southern Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh City has developed distinctive characteristics through its position as one of Vietnam's dynamic centers of economic development, culture, and international integration. The vibrant pace of urban life, the rapid reception of new artistic trends, and favorable conditions for professional exchange have encouraged female painters to innovate in both creative thinking and visual language. Alongside established artists of earlier generations such as Lê Thị Kim Bach, many younger artists continue to study, research, and develop silk painting in more contemporary directions. Many female painters also focus on experiences closely associated with women's lives, family, and personal identity, thereby diversifying artistic voices in the contemporary context. From the perspective of artistic geography, Ho Chi Minh City's distinctive conditions not only provide a favorable environment for creativity but also contribute to shaping the unique identity of women's silk painting through openness, dynamism, and receptiveness to multidirectional cultural influences during the period of integration.

The influence of the urban environment is clearly evident in the open-minded handling of visual language. In the work *Fisherman's Happiness*, Huỳnh Thị Kim Tiên uses geometric forms, graphic lines, and strong color contrasts to create a fresh visual effect distinct from the traditionally soft expression of silk painting. Meanwhile, in the *Yên sắc* series, particularly the work *Gentle Resonance*, Phạm Long Thủy Trúc adopts a tendency toward image simplification, restrained detail, and the combination of contemporary aesthetics with the material foundation of silk. These explorations demonstrate female artists' flexibility and innovation in the context of the city's deepening international integration. They also represent a process of selectively absorbing contemporary cultural and artistic values on the basis of inherited traditional artistic foundations, thereby enriching Vietnamese silk painting in the context of development and international integration.

From the perspective of artistic geography, the identity of women's silk painting in Ho Chi Minh City can be seen as emerging from the intersection of Southern Vietnamese culture and the city's modern urban environment. The dynamism, openness, and receptiveness of female painters to new influences have contributed to a distinct perspective on silk painting that is both rooted in tradition and reflective of the creative spirit of contemporary artists. This shows that Ho Chi Minh City's cultural environment not only facilitates the development of new artistic practices but also helps mobilize the creative resources of artists, thereby

shaping cultural values with distinctive identities in the country's process of integration and development.

2. Cultural Institutions and the Creative Environment of Women's Silk Painting

Transformations in women's silk painting stem not only from artists' individual efforts but are also associated with the process of building a cultural environment and developing cultural and artistic institutions. This process vividly reflects the Party's strategic orientations toward building a healthy cultural environment suited to the context of a socialist-oriented market economy and international integration ^[11], while also seeking to "promote the spirit of ownership, potential, creativity, and the highest possible contribution of women from all strata" ^[12]. These orientations have provided a basis for expanding exhibitions, training, research, professional exchange, and art promotion activities in recent years.

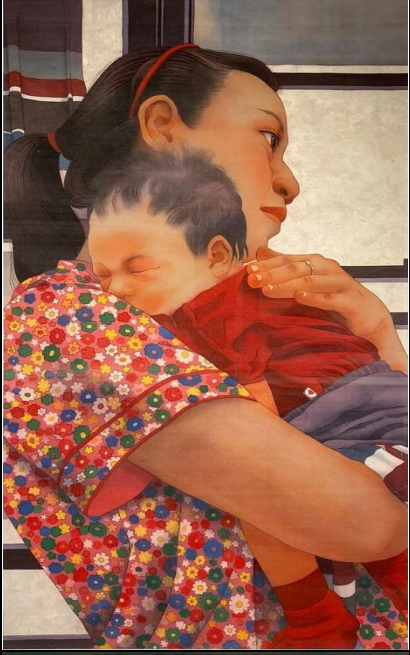
In Ho Chi Minh City, the presence of fine arts training institutions, professional organizations, museums, exhibition spaces, and artistic exchange activities has contributed to the

formation of a relatively favorable creative environment for artists. Within this environment, female painters have opportunities to access professional knowledge, expand academic exchange, engage with new artistic trends, and gradually affirm their creative voices. The creative space formed through connections among artists, audiences, and cultural institutions has helped foster the development of women's silk painting in more diverse and contemporary directions.

These developments show that Ho Chi Minh City continues to play an important role as one of the major centers of contemporary silk painting in Southern Vietnam. In an open and highly connected artistic environment, female painters are able not only to develop distinctive creative styles but also to participate actively in the creation, preservation, and transmission of cultural values through art. This is also an expression of the growing role of women as subjects of cultural creativity in the current process of building and developing an advanced Vietnamese culture imbued with national identity.

Appended List of Illustrative Images

Artwork title	Source	Artwork image
“For the Peace of the Country” Medium: Silk Dimensions: 120 x 240 cm Artist: Lê Thị Kim Bạch (Collection of the Ho Chi Minh City Museum of Fine Arts)	Reproduced from: 40 Years of Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts 1975-2015, Fine Arts Publishing House, p. 23	
“Resentment and Sorrow” Medium: Silk Dimensions: 60 x 85 cm Year: 2025 Artist: Mss Ngọc Mai	Ho Chi Minh City Law Newspaper (2024). Artist Ngọc Mai returns with the silk painting exhibition 'Song of a Soldier's Wife'. Ho Chi Minh City Law. Accessed June 12, 2026. Họa sĩ Ngọc Mai trở lại với triển lãm tranh lụa 'Chinh phụ ngâm' Báo Pháp Luật TP. Hồ Chí Minh	

“Eternity” Medium: Watercolor - Ink - Silver on Silk Dimensions: 102 x 56 cm Year: 2022 Artist: Tôn Nữ Thị Bích Trâm	Reproduced from: Young Artists Club of the Vietnam Fine Arts Association through Different Periods, Fine Arts Publishing House, p. 68	
“Whisper” Medium: Silk Dimensions: 84 x 112 cm Year: 2020 Artist: Nguyễn Hoàng Minh (Second Prize, Vietnam Fine Arts Exhibition 2020)	Reproduced from: Proceedings Commemorating 110 Years of Gia Dinh School of Drawing - Ho Chi Minh City University of Fine Arts (1913-2023), Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts Publishing House, p. 201	

Conclusion

A review of selected female painters and representative works in Ho Chi Minh City from 1986 to the present shows that women's silk painting has undergone significant changes in both content and modes of expression. The expansion of subject matter from symbolic images to concrete lived experiences, together with explorations in visual language, demonstrates the adaptability and innovative potential of silk as a medium in the context of contemporary fine arts.

These transformations reflect not only the evolution of a traditional art form but also the process of promoting women as creative subjects in cultural life. Whereas women previously appeared mainly as objects to be observed and admired, in many contemporary works they have become subjects of experience, emotion, reflection, and the construction of artistic meaning from their own lives. Through painting, women are not merely represented but directly participate in the processes of creating, preserving, and transmitting cultural values in contemporary society. From the theoretical perspective of cultural and human development, the shift from aesthetic object to dialogic subject in silk paintings by female artists in Ho Chi Minh City is an expression of the process of strengthening the

human role as subject in cultural creativity. The increasingly visible presence of women's voices in silk painting not only enriches the landscape of contemporary Vietnamese fine arts but also demonstrates the effects of expanding opportunities for participation in cultural life and promoting women's creative potential during the period of renewal and international integration.

Accordingly, promoting women's role as subjects of cultural creativity is significant not only for the development of fine arts but also for enriching the nation's cultural resources and endogenous strength. This is also one of the important conditions for achieving the goal of building an advanced Vietnamese culture imbued with national identity and promoting Vietnamese human values in the country's new stage of development.

Sources of Citations

Communist Party of Vietnam. Documents of the 13th National Congress. National Political Publishing House - Truth, Hanoi, 2021, 1.

(2), (6) Politburo of the 10th Tenure. Resolution No. 11-NQ/TW dated April 27, 2007 on women's affairs in the period of accelerated national industrialization and modernization, 2007.

Government of Vietnam. Resolution No. 28/NQ-CP dated March 3, 2021 promulgating the National Strategy on Gender Equality for the 2021-2030 period, 2021.

15th National Assembly. Resolution No. 162/2024/QH15 on the investment policy for the National Target Program for Cultural Development for the 2025-2035 period. Hanoi, 2024.

(5), (8), (10), (12) Politburo. Resolution No. 80-NQ/TW dated January 7, 2026 on the development of Vietnamese culture. Hanoi, 2026.

(9) Ho Chi Minh. Complete Works. Vol. 5. National Political Publishing House - Truth, Hanoi, 2011.

(11) 11th Party Central Committee. Resolution No. 33-NQ/TW dated June 9, 2014 on building and developing Vietnamese culture and people to meet the requirements of sustainable national development. Hanoi, 2014.

References

1. Organizing Committee of the International Women's Fine Arts Exhibition. Her Presence in Colours - 10th Edition. Vietnam 2012. Tre Publishing House, Ho Chi Minh City, 2012.
2. Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism - Department of Fine Arts, Photography and Exhibition. Seminar on the Silk Painting Exhibition. Hanoi, 2008.
3. Hoàng Nguyễn Thị Năm. Femininity in Contemporary Vietnamese Literature: Viewed through Artistic Symbols. *Journal of Arts Education*, 2020:32:89–93.
4. Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts Association. 40 Years of Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts, 1975-2015. Fine Arts Publishing House, 2015.
5. Vietnam Fine Arts Association. Modern Vietnamese Women Visual Artists. Fine Arts Publishing House, 2022.
6. Vietnam Fine Arts Association. Young Artists Club of the Vietnam Fine Arts Association through Different Periods. Fine Arts Publishing House.
7. Huynh Huu Uy. Modern Vietnamese Visual Arts. Fine Arts Publishing House, Hanoi, 1992.
8. Nguyen Thi Chien. Reflections on Culture from Tradition to the Contemporary. Labor Publishing House, 2013.
9. Nguyen Thu. Textbook of Silk Painting. Fine Arts Publishing House, 2004.
10. Pham Thi Chinh. History of Vietnamese Fine Arts. University of Education Publishing House, 2008.
11. Ton Nu Bich Tram. Master's Thesis in Fine Arts: Trends in the Use of New Materials in Contemporary Vietnamese Silk Painting. Ho Chi Minh City University of Fine Arts, 2024.
12. Ho Chi Minh City University of Fine Arts. Proceedings Commemorating 110 Years of Gia Dinh School of Drawing - Ho Chi Minh City University of Fine Arts (1913-2023). Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts Publishing House, 2023.