

**COLONIAL CAREER AND ARTISTIC IDENTITY FOR FRENCH WOMEN:
ALIX AYMÉ'S EXPERIENCE IN INDOCHINA**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the life and career of Alix Aymé (1894-1989), a French female artist who lived and worked in Indochina during the early 20th century. By investigating the French colonial propaganda of Indochina in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it provides an overview of how the colonial government shaped the images of Indochina and distributed information about the opportunities that this colony could offer to the French people. It further explores the extent to which Aymé's case illustrates the general pattern of French migrants in Indochina, especially women. In doing so, it highlights the importance of class background and social connections for the French to achieve success in the colony. At the same time, her educational and artistic activities were aligned with the general trajectory of French migrant artists in Indochina. Aymé's writings and artworks reflect her colonial experience. While her work met the demand for colonial promotion through art and culture, it was also proof of her attempt to develop an artist career. This thesis concludes that Alix Aymé's case illustrates the general characteristics of French migrant women's success in the colony, yet it is distinguished because of the complex interplay between her role in colonial propaganda and her personal ambitions to develop her own artistic identity.

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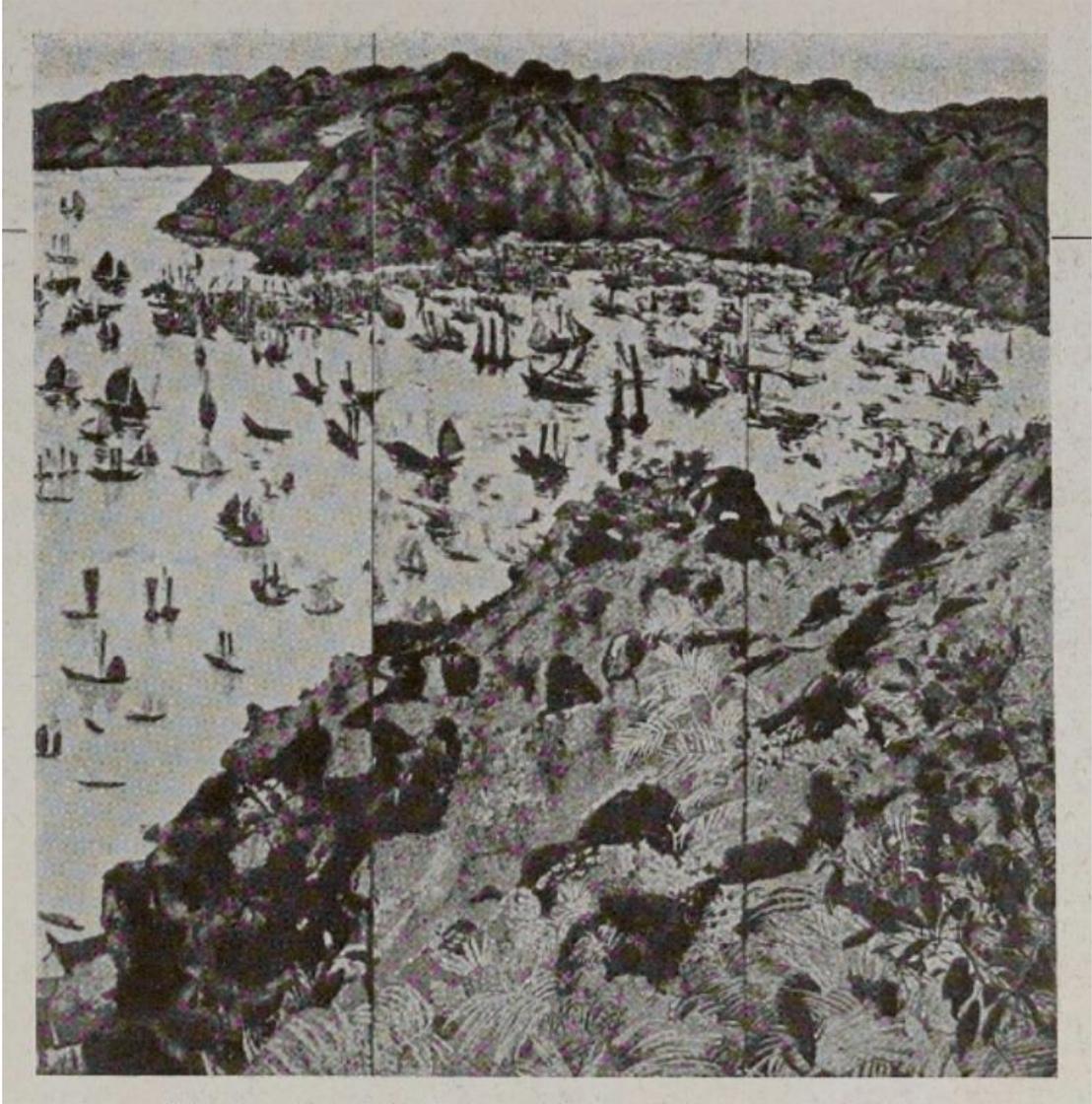


Figure 1. Alix Aymé, a depiction the port of Apowant in Halong Bay, lacquer. *France Illustration: Le Monde Illustré* no.190 (4 June 1949).

INTRODUCTION

By the turn of the 20th century, Indochina witnessed a large number of French migrants as a result of the colonial propaganda by the French government, including French women who accompanied their husbands on their colonial commissions. At the same time, due to the French government's policies in developing Indochina since 1890s, the regional infrastructure and economy had been improved, turning this colony into a potential living place with advantageous career opportunities for the French people. To the French artists, different missions and travel grants had been offered to encourage their coming to Indochina in the framework of developing colonial art and culture. While exploring new lands and their local art, these artists served in the colonial educational system, instructing art for the locals by combining different artistic traditions. Their work was facilitated by the foundation of vocational art schools in Indochina since 1900s. The products of this training program were to meet the demand of the art market for western consumers that were inherently fascinated with an oriental aesthetic.¹

Within this context, there was one French woman whose presence in Indochina reflected the mentioned common characteristics of the French migrant artists. Yet, her case was distinguished from her contemporary colleagues for her practice in lacquer art, which was the product created during the process of developing colonial art. The cultural encounters and exchanges in the early 20th-century colonial context facilitated the establishment of the *École des Beaux-arts de l'Indochine* (The School of Fine Arts of Indochina – hereafter EBAI) in 1925, marking the emergence of the new generation of Vietnamese artists in addition to the local artisans.² Around 1930, the French artist-professors of the EBAI developed the education

¹ Michael North, *Artistic and Cultural Exchanges Between Europe and Asia, 1400-1900: Rethinking Markets, Workshops and Collections* (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2010).

² Before the emergence of EBAI, there had not been an idea of an “artist” who independently practices and creates art. Instead, there was regional communities of artisans doing commission works, which were usually the decoration for architectures. The only exception so far is Le Van Mien (or Le Huy Mien) (1873-1943), who

of lacquer art inside the institution, contributing to the transformation of lacquer art, from lacquer craft to lacquer painting.³ The time working at the EBAI allowed Aymé to partially participate in this process, thus fostering her keen interest in this artistic material. Alix Aymé was the only French artist in Indochina that engaged with lacquer the most in her artist career.

This research project investigates the life and work of Alix Aymé (1894-1989) in Indochina, and also broadens to cover her work after leaving this region in the mid-1940s. She first came to China in 1920 shortly after her wedding due to the appointment of her first husband, Paul de Fautereau-Vassel, as a literature teacher in Yunnan-Fou. The two moved and settled in Hanoi a year after, and Aymé started working as an art educator at the local schools while continuing her art practice by illustrating for French publications. Although the initial motive of her arrival to this distant colony was affected by her marriage, Alix Aymé gradually created her own reputation as an artist through her active artistic activities in both France and Indochina. Her promotion as part of the Laos committee in supervising the preparation for the 1931 Intercolonial Exhibition in Paris marked the milestone of her engagement in colonial missions and later stimulated her career development. She had been known as Alix Aymé after her second marriage to General Georges Aymé, and this name has been attached to her as she became more well-known with her practice of lacquer art.

This thesis focuses on Alix Aymé's life and career as a migrant French woman and artist in Indochina from 1921 to the mid-1940s. However, to have a better understanding, her case needs to be put in the larger context. Examining the French colonial propaganda of Indochina in the late 19th century and early 20th century, it provides an overview of the way in which the colonial government shaped the images of Indochina and distributed information about the

studied art at École des Beaux-Arts de Paris in the late 19th century, but after returning to Vietnam in 1898, he neither worked as an artist nor an art teacher.

³ Lacquer had been long used as a material in making decorative art craft. Joseph Inguimberty, also a French professor at the EBAI, suggested the idea to experience the material as an art medium and this institution later established the department of lacquer, promoting the practice of lacquer art among the Vietnamese students.

opportunities that this colony could offer to the French people. In consideration of the commonalities in the success of French migrants in Indochina, I investigate to what extent Aymé's case illustrated this general pattern of French migrants in Indochina, especially women. A study of her participation in the colonial project indicates the importance of class background and social connections for the French to achieve success in Indochina. On the other hand, I further explore how her writings and artworks could reflect her colonial experience. Looking at Aymé's artistic activities in Indochina, I consider the complex interplay between her role in colonial propaganda and her personal ambitions to develop her own artistic identity.

Primary sources

In answering these questions, this research project considers three different types of primary sources: Alix Aymé's administrative records, personal correspondence, and published work (including both her writings and artworks). Her last name in these documents is titled differently as it had changed over her two marriages. "Hava" was her birth name and had been used until 1920. The name "de Fautereau(-Vassel)" from her first marriage was used during 1921-1931, and she had been known as "Alix Aymé" since 1932. To maintain the consistency and coherence of the thesis, I indicate her by the name "Alix Aymé" since it was used the longest and engaged the most with her by public. Still, data of sources remain as they are.

I first examine French publications to get the official information of her professional activities under the French government. This section includes administrative bulletins for internal records and periodical journals for more public information. All of them could be found on the digital libraries, *Gallica* and *RetroNews*, which are associated with the National Library of France. They cover announcements of work appointments, information of transportation that was funded by the French government, and news of exhibitions. This first group allows me to reconstruct factual details about the artist that could not be attained from other primary sources, which were created by Aymé and contain her subjective perspective.

Secondly, I look at the digital collection of correspondence from the Maurice Denis Museum in the online platform of the Departmental Archives of Yvelines and the former Seine-et-Oise (*Archives départementales des Yvelines et de l'ancienne Seine-et-Oise*). This source contains Aymé's letter to Maurice Denis (1870-1943), her art instructor back in France as well as a prominent French painter.⁴ Participating in Les Nabis, a group of young French artists based in Paris during the last decade of 19th century, he and some other prominent members, such as Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard, played an important part in the transition from Impressionism to Symbolism, as well as other avant-garde movements in early 20th century modern art. After the First World War, his studio *Atelier d'Art Sacré* (Sacred Art Studio), which was co-founded with George Desvallièrre, achieved great success with many commissions of religious artwork for churches and important civic buildings.⁵ These activities therefore maintained his prestige and influence within the French artists' community and connected him with the French authorities.

Aymé had studied with him at a young age and later worked, though only for a short time, at *Ateliers d'Art Sacré*.⁶ Maurice Denis's presence was inextricably linked to Alix Aymé's career. In fact, she benefited a lot from his political and social network, especially in her early career, with a recommendation to the French local authorities in Indochina.⁷ However, Aymé's correspondence does not provide a precise date of the mentioned events. Therefore, my time

⁴ Their collection possesses a few letters from Aymé's mother and her colleague, Valentina Reyre, that mention Aymé. I will also look at them and collate with other primary sources to trace Aymé's activities.

⁵ *Ateliers d'Art Sacré* was a collective body of artists based in Paris from 1919 until 1947 with the aim of training artists and artisans in practicing religious art with the combination between traditional and modern styles.

⁶ The official establishment was publicly announced in November 1919, for more information see *La Revue des Jeunes (The Youth Magazine)* no.2 (25 January 2020): 244, and Aymé mentioned of quitting her job there in a 1920 letter to Denis, see: Alix Hava, 166J 2 [Ms 3919], Maurice Denis Museum. She might have been trained in this studio even before 1919, perhaps since 1918, as it is said in other news that "Six years have passed since the first students of the *Ateliers d'Art Sacré* met daily at the cradle of their foundation located on rue Joseph-Bara," see H. Saint-René-Taillandier, "Les Ateliers d'Art Sacré," *La Revue française politique et littéraire* 18 no.48 (2 December 1923): 628. The period of training and working under this studio formed part of Aymé's art practice, which was presented in her artwork with religious topic or with the implicit reference to religious figures.

⁷ This will be further discussed in the second chapter.

estimate will be based on her signatures and the letters' content, cross-checked with the administrative records.

Aymé's close connection with Maurice Denis put her correspondence in an interesting place between private and public domain. The contents of her letters cover her quotidian description of her surroundings in different places, her working status as well as art practice, interweaved with her critical comments and complaints about social and political situations. Some of them convey her difficulties in life and work, followed by her request to her professor for his support for her career. In this sense, Aymé's letters appear as a form of autobiography which filtered out and selected details of her life to serve specific purposes. Without doubt, her correspondence falls into the category of personal writing. There is, however, the author's awareness of a second reader. In Aymé's case, when she was looking for Denis' recommendation for a job, she probably acknowledged the fact that some aspects of her narratives would be shared to a third person.



Figure 2. Alix Aymé, Scene of a village in Upper Laos, *Le Monde Colonial Illustré* no. 101 (1 Jan 1932): 178.

Finally, I look at her published papers on French journals and some of her artworks. Her writings could be divided into two categories. The first is a series of travel writings during her trip to Laos due to the assigned mission for the colonial exhibition there in 1931, which provides her narratives through an anthropological lens, which are also illustrated by her

ethnographic prints (Figure 2). The second are her critical papers as an artist-professor, conveying her opinion on the role of French educators in Indochina and her reflection on lacquer art. Despite my own expertise in the medium of lacquer from five years of studying and practicing it in Vietnam, I will not focus, in this thesis, too much on Aymé's lacquer work but instead refer to her paintings in relation.⁸ With these written sources and visual materials I explore how her work came in line with the colonial images of Indochina that the French government wanted to promote while enhancing her artistic reputation and identity.

These primary sources have been used in previous research, yet they were analyzed separately and differently. I will discuss this in the following state of the art and further elaborate my approach of studying these sources.

State of the art

To scrutinize Alix Aymé's life and career in Indochina, this research aims to contextualize her within the early 20th century, which I will further discuss in Chapter 1. In contrast to a large variety of works conducted on the topic of the colonial promotion and French migration to Indochina in this period, very few could be found on the role of gender with the focus on French women in Indochina and their colonial experiences.

The work that is most dedicated to this subject is Marie-Paule Ha's research.⁹ Her book published in 2014 is an investigation of the colonial gender politics in French Indochina from, as she argues, a "no woman's land" into a "woman's haven." By this, she indicates that the migration of French women was promoted due to the strategic policies in Indochina to expand the French communities and population. Ha works with multiple sources, including women's correspondence in colonial archives, their private writings, and interviews that she conducted

⁸ It is partly due to the fact that her works have actively been put on art market without enough information. Most of them are now said to belong to various private collections. The most credential sources of her artworks are images from 20th century publication, which are mainly in black and white. It is therefore difficult to observe and analyze her technique and color visually.

⁹ Marie-Paule Ha, *French Women and the Empire: The Case of Indochina* (Oxford University Press, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199640362.001.0001>.

with a dozen of French women who used to live in Indochina. The result of her studies refutes the propagated image of colonial woman often found in fictional literature, an iconic French household without paid employment or a poor French widow. Instead, it displays the diversity of the life of migrated French women with different social and ethnical backgrounds.

Moving beyond this geographical scope, Jennifer Anne Boittin's recent research sheds more light on this topic by focusing on French, West African, and Southeast Asian women who were "undesirable" in the colonial regions of French West Africa and Indochina.¹⁰ "Undesirable" is an informal term used by the author to refer to individuals who are prevented from entering the territory or deported to their place of origin within the empire because they were individuals who the government believed to have the potential to consume administrative resources and disrupt the colonial way of life. By highlighting the gendered aspect of colonial surveillance and policing, Boittin's work specifically indicates how factors like gender, race, class and religion influenced the colonial state's perception and control of women. Her examples of these "undesirable" women complement Ha's argument in the way that they clarify the ideal image of a French woman in the colony that the French government sought to construct.

In terms of research on Alix Aymé, until recently, there have been a few studies focusing on her. Most of them briefly analyzed her work in the discussion of cultural exchange and the context of the establishment of the EBAI. The first work to mention and discuss Aymé is a work by Nadine André-Pallois, an art historian, which seeks to discover the nature of the culture exchange between France and Indochina.¹¹ It sketches the general pattern of French artists in Indochina, categorizes them based on the types of colonial activities that brought them there.

¹⁰ Jennifer Anne Boittin, *Undesirable: Passionate Mobility and Women's Defiance of French Colonial Policing, 1919–1952* (University of Chicago Press, 2022).

¹¹ Nadine André-Pallois, *L'Indochine, un lieu d'échange culturel? Les peintres français et indochinois (fin XIXe – XXe siècle)* [Indochina: a place of cultural exchange? French and Indochinese painters (late 19th – 20th century)] (Paris, Presses de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1997).

A comparison between French and Indochinese artists, covering their activities and artworks, serves as a basis for her conclusion that there was the attempt of colonial propaganda through art by the French government. In this context, a cultural exchange existed yet was not completed. The contribution of this research is that it offers the first survey on French artists in Indochina and, through their commonalities in their work and art, indicated their role in the development of colonial art. André-Palloy's research is still a valuable reference work other subsequent studies on the topic of Indochina art.

However, André-Palloy's research on the French artists in Indochina could not showcase the individual diversity of each artist. Pierre Paliard's anthropological method of examining cultural exchange in the context of France's and the EBAI's contribution to promoting Vietnamese national style partially addressed this gap by focusing on one individual.¹² His analysis of Victor Tardieu's thought and his legacies at the EBAI does not reject the negative aspects in writing this history but, at the same time, interprets Tardieu's actions as an inevitable result of the Western conception of colonizers in educating the indigenous and creating a cultural synthesis.¹³ In this paper, he briefly mentions and discusses Aymé's role as a lacquer artist and as a professor. In referring to her 1949 writing of lacquer art, he contends that the concern of a modern artist "marked with the Western spirit" is twofold, including the search and combination of heritages and novelty in practicing art.¹⁴ While his commenting on previous research of the cultural encounters in Indochina provides additional justification for the national identity in the work of Vietnamese artists graduating at the EBAI, the counter discussion on the act of borrowing indigenous art and culture element in the works

¹² Pierre Paliard, "Apport de la France, Promotion de L'expression d'un Style National Vietnamien dans la Première École des Beaux-Arts de L'Indochine" [Contribution of France, Promotion of the Expression of a Vietnamese National Style in the First School of Fine Arts of Indochina], *Open Library of Humanities* 5, no. 1 (13 June 2019), <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.376>.

¹³ *Ibid*, 16.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 6-7.

of the French artists in Indochina is still missing from his account.¹⁵ I aim to narrow the gap here in my analyzing of Aymé's motive in using of local materials in practicing art in the final chapter.

As the frequency of appearance of Alix Aymé's artworks on the art market has increased, she has become a topic of interest for scholars studying Indochina art. These works could be put into two categories: those commissioned by the auction houses and those written out of the art market's context. The first group contains biographical writings of Alix Aymé in the publications of the auction houses, among which *Aguttes* is most active.¹⁶ They are short in length with the focus varied on different aspects of Aymé's life, depending on which of her works were in the lot at that time.

Amongst the second group, the most influential is a 2012 publication by Pascal Lacombe and Guy Ferrer, which is rich in images, providing a compilation of Aymé's artwork with different materials as well as several excerpts from her correspondence and writings to reconstruct her journey in Indochina.¹⁷ Both authors knew the artist herself when she was still alive, and their texts have no critical argument but homage to the artist. This book therefore offers a biased perspective in their biographical narration of Aymé. It successfully intrigued researchers, artists, and public attention to her works, especially in Vietnam, and was also the

¹⁵ Other research that Paliard discusses in terms of cultural encounter in Indochina: Nora Annesley Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2004) (with the focus on Vietnamese artists graduating at the EBAI who later contributed in creating the artistic communities in Hanoi since 1925); Caroline Herbelin, *Architectures du Vietnam colonial: repenser le métissage* [Architectures of colonial Vietnam: rethinking crossbreeding] (CTHS-INHA, 2016) (which measures the impact of French colonization on the architectural landscape of Vietnam from 1858 to 1954).

¹⁶ See *Aguttes*' catalogue "Peintres d'Asie: Œuvres Majeures" [Asian Painters: Major Works] in 2020, 2021, 2023. URL: <https://issuu.com/aguttes> (Accessed 9 June 2024).

¹⁷ Pascal Lacombe and Guy Ferrer, *Alix Aymé: A French Painter in Indochina 1920-1945* (Somogy Art Publishers, 2012).

For further works about Aymé, see: Etienne Barilier, "Alix Aymé, de l'Indochine au Vietnam" [Alix Aymé, from Indochina to Vietnam], *Artpassions no.7* (1 September, 2006): 63-69; Nguyen Hai Yen, "Alix Aymé có phải là cô giáo của danh họa Nguyễn Gia Trí?" [Was Alix Aymé Nguyen Gia Tri's teacher?] *Tia sáng* (9 December 2016), URL: <https://tiasang.com.vn/van-hoa/alix-ayme-co-phai-la-co-giao-cua-danh-hoa-nguyen-gia-tri-10289/> (Accessed 9 June 2024).

first to introduce her correspondences. The book lacks transparency in the origins of some of the primary sources, giving little information without detailed locations of the documents.

In general, most of the existent account focusing only on Alix Aymé could hardly avoid writing “a serene history” of the Indochina colonization which André-Pallos has warned.¹⁸ In an attempt to fill the gap in the research of Aymé’s artwork, to point out her distinctiveness from other French artists in Indochina, they fall into the biased narrative of her biography and, in doing so, remove her from the broader historical context. My research project therefore seeks to critically scrutinize Aymé’s life and work through her traces of thought and activities, placing her case in comparison with her other contemporaries. While part of her life may meet the common trends observed in the cases of other French women or other French artists in Indochina, her decisions in her works made her case exceptional and unique, especially in the context of the cultural exchanges in Indochina.

Theoretical Framework

As my thesis is concerned with the influence of social background and connection on a French migrant's career and promotion in the colony, I am guided by the theory of cultural capital introduced by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in 1960s.¹⁹ Bourdieu’s idea of cultural capital encompasses skills, knowledge, and dispositions that individuals acquire through their upbringing and education, which in turn influences how people navigate social expectations, access opportunities, and maintain their position in society. Although certain criticisms have been leveled against Bourdieu's conceptualization of cultural capital, particularly regarding its class-based and fundamentally racialized nature,²⁰ it remains an

¹⁸ André-Pallos, *L'Indochine, un lieu d'échange culturel?*, 15. Here, she refers to Alain Ruscio’s 1992 work *1945-1954, La guerre française d'Indochine* in which he seek to write an objective, unbiased examination of colonial study and strives to offer a balanced and neutral perspective on this normally emotional topic.

¹⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John Richardson (Bloomsbury Academic, 1986), 15-29.

²⁰ Bridget Fowler, "Introduction," *Pierre Bourdieu and Cultural Theory: Critical Investigations* (SAGE, 1997), 1-12.

appropriate framework for my study, which specifically examines the experiences of French migrants in Indochina without making any direct comparisons to the local population. The core idea of non-financial social resources provides a solid basis for examining the advantages in social mobility that a French migrant may possess in Indochina based on their social standing.

Fredric Jameson's concept of "mediator" is discussed as a key component in understanding literature and culture within a Marxist framework.²¹ Mediator in his argument refers to the role of the text or cultural artifact in mediating between the individual and the socio-political context in which it is produced. The mediator is seen as a site of struggle where different social and historical forces intersect and are negotiated. He contends that literature and cultural texts are not simply reflections of reality but actively participate in shaping and constructing our understanding of the world. In emphasizing the dialectical relationship between culture and society, Fredrick highlights the ways in which texts both reflect and influence the broader socio-political context. In this thesis, I take advantage of the interpretation of the relationship between social context, the author, and their work to consider Aymé's writings and artworks as the bridge between the social context in which she lived in and herself. Her words and images on the second level contain and convey her internal thinking, and also perception, of what she was doing and how she felt of it, to the audience and orient their idea of the 20th-century Indochina to a French female artist.

Thesis structure

The first chapter is a literature review and provides the context for the promotion of Indochina in France in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which led to a significant number of French immigrants to this colony. It examines who the government targeted as the ideal migrants, what information about the colony was provided, and the factors that accounted for

²¹ Fredrick Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981).

the success of the French migrant in Indochina. Looking closely from a gender perspective, it generalizes the pattern of a successful French woman in Indochina. Chapter 1 closes with an overview of French artists who migrated to the colony, and similarly emphasizes the group of women artists.

Building on the contextualization presented in the first, Chapter 2 chronologically overviews Alix Aymé's career in Indochina. It provides an account of the work of colonial art educators, their role in the development of colonial art, as well as the advantages and limitations in career promotion. At the same time, it reveals the close connection between Alix Aymé's career and her socio-political connections and demonstrates how she took advantage of these inherent advantages for her self-development. In addition to her educational career, a summary of Aymé's artistic activities shows her initiative in promoting herself and developing her identity as an artist.

The final third chapter considers the intricate interplay between Aymé's participation in colonial propaganda and her self-promotion as an artist through her published work, including both her writings and artworks. It explores her views on colonial politics expressed through her depictions of landscape, culture, and people. At the same time, considering the way she chose lacquer materials to practice art, it indicates her support of the colonial art development policy, yet at the same time her personal intention to highlight her artistic identity.



Figure 3. Alix de Fautereau, small ornamental illustration, *Les Pages Indochinoises* 3, no.4 (15 April 1925): 143.

CHAPTER 1. THE FRENCH RESIDENCES OF A PROMISING LAND

“Life has become so difficult in France that we cannot hope for a long time to be able to live in Paris with my husband’s little salary. Life in the provinces, although undoubtedly easier, tempts me infinitely less than here [Hanoi].”²²

Around 1923-4, approximately a year after moving to Indochina, when Alix Aymé wrote these lines in a letter to Maurice Denis,²³ France was witnessing an inflation following the economic shock from the First World War. Living expenses increased significantly as the value of the franc collapsed.²⁴ In this circumstance, Alix Aymé and Paul de Fautereau-Vassel were searching for a way to support their stay in Indochina though their income was able to afford a life in the French provinces. What made Indochina so appealing that it invited these French civilians to stay? In fact, Indochina had offered a generous number of opportunities in financial and career improvements to the French people, leading to a significant amount of the French migrant in the early 20th century. Aymé and her first husband, as many others of the middle-class intellectuals from the French metropolises, sought their fortunes in this colony. Yet, not all French civilians could have the opportunity to migrate to Indochina.

Drawing upon secondary sources, this chapter presents a comprehensive overview of French colonial propaganda, while also delving into the practical benefits that Indochina provided to French migrants. When analyzing the factors that contributed to the success of French migrants in Indochina, it points out the preconditions that enabled their dominance in the colony. Furthermore, approaching from the gender aspect, it takes into account the presence of male individuals in the context of successful French women. This chapter closes with an outline of the journey of French artists in Indochina with a focus on women artists.

²² Alix de Fautereau, 166J 2 [Ms 3934], Maurice Denis Museum.

²³ Ibid. There is no date in this letter. The time I provide is based on the detail of her letter, in which she described her job and mentioned Albert Sarraut as the Minister of the Colonies (his first tenure in this position lasted from 20 January 1920 to 24 March 1924).

²⁴ Roger Price, *A Concise History of France* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 228.

Promotion of Indochina for the French

Initially driven by economic interests and strategic considerations, France began its expansion in Southeast Asia in the late 19th century.²⁵ It established control over Cochinchina (Southern Vietnam) in 1860s and then formed protectorates over Cambodia, Annam, and Tonkin (Central and Northern Vietnam) in the 1880s. The Union of French Indochina was created in 1887 to unify these territories, with Laos joining in 1893. Compared to French colonial efforts in Africa that focused on establishing trade networks and exploiting resources through trading posts and local elites, the formation of French Indochina signaled a shift towards direct control and centralized governance, with a significant investment in infrastructure and the establishment of a cohesive administrative framework centered in Hanoi.

As the result, by the turn of the 20th century, Indochina underwent a significant transformation following the restructuring of the administrative apparatus under Paul Doumer, the governor of Indochina in the period of 1897-1902. Doumer prioritized the construction of a comprehensive railway network, notably the Trans-Indochinese railway linking Hanoi to Saigon, which significantly boosted trade and mobility. Roads and ports were also improved for better facilitating transportation and communication. On the other hand, as Indochina was reconstructed as a source of production material as well as a potential market for consuming French products, the exploitation of natural resources and agriculture were among the main focus, which encouraged large-scale plantations and attracted foreign investment. Doumer implemented relatively comprehensive economic reforms, including introducing a new tax system, unifying the currency, and encouraging the establishment of local banks. Modernized urban areas with newly built infrastructure improved living conditions, while affirming France's presence in Indochina. These changes, although placing a burden on the local

²⁵ Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954* (University of California Press, 2011), 13.

population and widening the economic gap between classes, succeeded in gradually stabilizing and developing the Indochina economy in general in a direction beneficial to the French empire. They reflected a broader trend towards more direct and comprehensive colonial management, aiming to integrate colonies more fully into the French economic and political sphere.

Accordingly, in an effort to enhance the potential of Indochina, the French government actively promoted the French migration to this colony for multiple purposes concerning enhance colonial security, regional governance and economic development. Moreover, intelligent labor was particularly encouraged to migrate to the colony as this influx of capital was expected and anticipated to bestow even greater value upon the region.²⁶ At the same time, they were expected to establish a class of French entrepreneurs and landowners, and at the same time supporting French-style education systems to train local elites for administrative roles.

Information regarding the French colonies was therefore disseminated in a variety of ways and formats in different social spaces, with periodic events that emphasized colonial promotion.²⁷ On a daily scale, printing press was the main news channel for regular reports of the French colonies, promoting the overseas dominions of France.²⁸ In addition to the fact and data of the colonies, press, along with other cultural products such as literature and cinema, provided insight into the colonial life through the travel writings. The exotic visuals were demonstrated through the anthropological lens of the French authors, sharing their personal experiences in the far lands with the audiences in France. They were written by the French people who had worked in Indochina, including the colonial officials.²⁹ Paul Doumer's memoir

²⁶ Doumer, *L'Indo-Chine Française, Souvenirs*, 359.

²⁷ Pascal Blanchard et al., "Introduction: The Creation of a Colonial Culture in France, from the Colonial Era to the 'Memory Wars'," in *Colonial Culture in France since the Revolution* (Indiana University Press, 2013), 3.

²⁸ Ha, *French Women and the Empire*, 85.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

was among such products. Published in 1905, three years after he finished his tenure as the Governor General of French Indochina, the memoir captured his journey since the moment he received the appointment. While the last chapter of the memoir contains his reflection on his work as the Governor General of Indochina, the other chapters provided the anthropological descriptions of the regional climate, the local sceneries, cultures, and people with the in-depth geopolitical assessments. Doumer's account revealed the perspective of a policy maker, representing the French empire, its perspective and plans over Indochina – “Piece by piece, constrained as we were by events rather than acting deliberately, our takeover of Indochina took place.”³⁰

On a broader scale, France promoted its power and colonies through the international fairs. An example of such events was the 1906 Colonial Exposition in Marseille. It was neither the first colonial expositions in Europe nor the first international expositions hosted by France, but it was France's first international exposition devoted only to the promotion of French colonialism. As a political reconstruction of reality to serve French colonial discourse, this public visual presentation normalized France's colonization and contributes to construct its national image for the publics. Marseille was strategically chosen as the venue of the event.³¹ It first has an important economic geography, connecting France's trading route with the rest of the world, including importation and distribution of colonial products. Secondly, the distinctive regional climate of this city makes it a perfect location to recreate the environment of the French colonies. Lastly, the city had a symbolic meaning. Long-distance trips in the late 19th century and early 20th century were mainly by sea and most of them were conducted by the French government and for the sake of the nation. Connecting memory with patriotism, Charles-Roux aimed to glorify the colonial exposition as well as the civilizing missions.

³⁰ Doumer, *L'Indo-Chine Française, Souvenirs*, 33.

³¹ Jules Charles-Roux. *Rapport Général: Exposition Coloniale Nationale de Marseille, 15 avril-18 Novembre 1906*, 9.

The 1906 exposition that took place between April 15 and November 15 of that year was a noticeable event, attracting a large number of visitors.³² The positive outcomes of public access laid the groundwork for two additional French colonial expositions in 1922 and 1931. The latter subsequently marked Aymé's notable accomplishments in relation to the French colonial endeavor in Indochina, which I discuss further in the following chapters. Additionally, Marseille was the birthplace of Aymé. While it is unclear how the city may have influenced her, it can be posited that Aymé grew up during a period when there was a heightened demand for French migration to the colonies, particularly Indochina, making Marseille a vibrant transit hub for those leaving and returning to France.

However, how much of the information in these colonial propagandas was providing facts and practical knowledge? According to Norindr, the concept of "Indochina" was largely a product of French colonial ambitions and a manifestation of their exotic imagination.³³ The phantasy of this colony constructed extensively through cultural media, such as novels and international expositions, overlooked the complexity of the colonial reality. While there have been many studies on colonial propaganda,³⁴ Ha's chapter on the same topic contributes to the classification of Indochina propaganda: the colonial promotion for the mass and one for the emigrants.³⁵ It delves into the government's official publications which covered the information of voyages to the colonies, topic of hygiene, economic activities, or the indigenous culture and history, as well as the publication of private initiatives like the *Union Coloniale Française* with in-depth information of colonial employment or possible difficulties that one might have there. From the analyzed materials, she contends that the French government and emigration

³² Ibid., 371.

³³ Panivong Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina: French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film, and Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/4/monograph/book/69978>.

³⁴ For further information of studies on the French colonial propaganda, see Eric T. Jennings, "Visions and Representations of French Empire", *The Journal of Modern History* 77, no. 3 (September 2005): 701–21, <https://doi.org/10.1086/497721>.

³⁵ Ha, *French Women and the Empire*, 85-100.

promoters jointly endeavored to mold the socio-economic profile of prospective emigrants, which emphasized their privilege of social class and race.

The success of a French migrant in Indochina

It could be said that the colonial promotion in France was effective that Indochina witnessed the increasing number of French migrants during the late 19th century and early 20th century. They belonged to different social groups, yet all sought an opportunity to better develop their life and career. However, it has been pointed out that not every French could migrate to the colonies.³⁶ Hence, who was qualified to come? What exactly were the benefits that the French migrants could attain in Indochina? The following literature review on the French migrants in Indochina will demonstrate that there were more complex factors that contributed to the success of a French migrant in Indochina.

Ha's classification on French migrants is benefited by Gilles de Gantès's study, which focuses on two groups: former soldiers of the expeditionary corps who remained as colonists, and French civilians who relocated to the colony in pursuit of improved prospects.³⁷ The settlement of the first group in Indochina was facilitated primarily by their inherent knowledge of the colony and local networks. The examples given show the feasibility for career advancement in management positions or the opportunity for successful personal business development.³⁸

However, the common point of these successful migration cases is that they held expertise that was in demand for development in Indochina or they had the preparation in terms of knowledge and finance. Gantès argues that those who found way to Indochina were from

³⁶ The evidence of returning French civilians (both men and women) back to France is provided throughout Ha's work. It is also briefly touch on in the conclusion of Gantès's study, see: Gilles de Gantès, "Migration to Indochina: Proof of the Popularity of Colonial Empire?", in *Promoting the Colonial Idea: Propaganda and Visions of Empire in France*, eds. Tony Chafer and Amanda Sackur, (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York: Palgrave, 2002), 27. On a more specific study of French women who were declined to come to the colonies, see Boittin, *Undesirable*.

³⁷ Ha, *French Women and the Empire*, 100.

³⁸ Gantès, "Migration to Indochina", 21; Ha, *French Women and the Empire: The case of Indochina*, 101-102.

“social classes that were aware of the opportunities presented by the colonies.”³⁹ His argument is well developed through the depiction of several networks within the empire, especially the Bordeaux commercial network, revealing how the French traders utilized their advantages of race, profession, knowledge, and political situation to benefit their migration in Indochina – “these men had gained first-hand knowledge of the East and were ready to seize any opportunity when it came.”⁴⁰ This observation is also true when applied to Aymé's story as she was well informed about the opportunities for her in Indochina and sought to achieve them, which will further discuss in the following chapter.

Adding to the discussion of the French migrated businessmen, Ha also remarks on how the guidance and information regarding colonial migration generally provided targeted to applicants who held either specialized training that would enable them to secure mid-level positions or possessed capital that would allow them to launch their own businesses there.⁴¹ In this argument, Ha mainly focuses on French businessmen, yet it is still correct when looking at how the French government provoked the colonial agriculture development - "The French who come to create agricultural operations in Indochina are only useful if they have intelligence, education and capital."⁴² During Doumer's tenure, several French agricultural organizations had been established, including the Directorate of Agriculture and Commerce of Indo-China, dependent on the General Government, service institutions of geology, meteorology, forest, along with an economic bulletin. On the one hand, the establishment of these new organizations demanded highly intelligent laborers. On the other hand, the French civilians were repeated reminded not to perform manual labor due to the severe climate in Indochina, yet it was also

³⁹ Ibid., 26-27.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 18-19.

⁴¹ Ha, “*French Women and the Empire*,” 97.

⁴² Doumer, *L'Indo-Chine Française, Souvenirs*, 358,

the priority of the French government in remaining the white prestige that they tended to avoid developing the white working class in the colony.⁴³

Therefore, financial conditions were one of the factors that the French colonial government considered to evaluate applications to migrate to the colonies, in order to avoid and reduce the number of poor whites in these areas.⁴⁴ Similarly, French migrants in Indochina were also requested to repatriate if they no longer have enough financial capacity. It can be said that the French people who were sent to the colonies, or were successfully approved to migrate, met all the professional and economic conditions, met the needs of the French government and were able to fulfill their duties and ensure a stable life in the colony.

The success of a French woman in Indochina

From a gender perspective, the discussed advantages and colonial opportunities for French women were somewhat more complex. Through colonial propaganda tools, French women also received information that shaped the careers they could develop as well as their proper clients in Indochina. With the dissemination of colonial propaganda, along with promotion from the French government, the number of French women in Indochina had increased by 1930s, gradually narrowing the gender gap ratio of the French population in Indochina.⁴⁵

Gantès briefly comments on how French women were able to achieve higher professional ranks in their professions in Indochina through many examples in different fields. However, his generalized examples overlook the deeper social backgrounds of these women. One of his examples is Jeanne Biétry, a young woman who became a managing director of a newspaper in Indochina.⁴⁶ What Gantès fails to mention was that she was the daughter of Pierre Biétry, a French politician and trade union activist who was relatively active in the early 20th

⁴³ Gantès, "Migration to Indochina," 20-21.

⁴⁴ Ha, *French Women and the Empire*, 112-118.

⁴⁵ Ha, *French Women and the Empire*, 130.

⁴⁶ Gantès, "Migration to Indochina," 23.

century. The newspaper she later ran belonged to her father's property, which he established in 1914 in Saigon when he moved to Indochina.⁴⁷ Alexandra David-Néel, at first, seems to be an excellent example that Gantès provides regarding the career opportunity that a French woman could find in Indochina, an opera singer in Paris who struggled to make ends meet later got the chance to be a premiere chanteuse in Hanoi.⁴⁸ David-Néel, as any other French migrants in Indochina, had a quite qualified background, coming from a middle-class family. Her father once owned a local newspaper and despite the time when their family faced economic difficulties, he could still be able to afford his daughter proper education including music and English class.⁴⁹ Therefore, a common pattern could be found from these examples of successful French women in Indochina yet had been missed out. They both came from intellectual middle-class families and though they might achieve better career or higher salary in Indochina, their inherent economic conditions in France were above average.

The case of Alix Aymé could also be seen as an example of the success of a French migrant in Indochina. Starting from an eight-hour-a-day job in a printing press in Paris that could barely afford her training and working at an art studio, she achieved a much better career as an artist and educator in Indochina within ten years.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, her background is no exception to those of the French civilians who made the way to the colony. The financial situation of her family was sufficient to cover the costs of her artistic and musical studies, as well as their travelling abroad.⁵¹ At the same time, her success in Indochina was partly due to the influence of her existing social relationships and her initiative-taking in looking for her opportunities, which I will further analyze in the next chapter. By and large, these successful

⁴⁷ Pierre Salinger, *P. S.: A Memoir* (St. Martin's Press, 1996).

⁴⁸ Barbara M. Foster and Michael Foster, *The Secret Lives of Alexandra David-Neel: A Biography of the Explorer of Tibet and Its Forbidden Practices* (Overlook Press, 1998), 36; Gantès, "Migration to Indochina," 23.

⁴⁹ Foster and Foster, *The Secret Lives of Alexandra David-Neel*, 12.

⁵⁰ Alix Hava. 166J 2 [Ms 3919], Maurice Denis Museum.

⁵¹ Antoine Gallois, "Chronique d'Extrême-Orient: Madame Alix de Fautereau, Peintre Indochinois" [Chronicle of the Far East: Madame Alix de Fautereau, Indochinese Painter], *Extrême-Asie* no.38 (1 August 1929): 639.

French women in Indochina shared similarities in terms of social background, economic condition, and social network, which played key role in their colonial achievements.

However, Indochina was not always favorable for French women. Ha points out that not all applications for colonial migration were accepted, including those from the intellectual class, and that even when the accepted applicants reached Indochina, many of them had to return home after a short period of time when the financial situation is no longer enough to cover life.⁵² The success of the above-mentioned women in the colony was the result of the French government's efforts to shape a colonial image generally, and an image of the civilized colonial residents specifically. "European women carved out a space amid the options available to them: options for the most part created by imperialism and limited by male dominance" – as Strobel remarks on European women in the British Empire,⁵³ the successes as well as obstacles of French women in the colonies were related to gender aspects.

In a research of the diffusion of French ideals of femininity and gender ideology through the symbolic image of Marianne and Joan of Arc to reshape the image of Cambodian women (which were perceived as androgynous by European visitors due to their short hair and traditional clothing), Penny Edwards mentions the participation from the French housewives in the propaganda activities, in which some of them "exerted influence outside the private sphere."⁵⁴ Edwards gives an example of the wife of Henri Russier, the head of the Department of Cambodian Education in 1914, and her work of Cambodian history which was eventually incorporated into the history curriculum of colonial schools. Though not much could be found regarding the background of Mrs. Russier, in this instance, it could be said that her choice of

⁵² Ha, *French Women and the Empire*, 111-112.

⁵³ Margaret Strobel, *European Women and the Second British Empire* (Indiana University Press, 1991), xi.

⁵⁴ Penny Edwards, "'Propagender': Marianne, Joan of Arc and the Export of French Gender Ideology to Colonial Cambodia (1863–1954)", in *Promoting the Colonial Idea: Propaganda and Visions of Empire in France*, eds. Tony Chafer and Amanda Sackur (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2002), 119.

colonial activities was influenced by the political work of her husband and at the same time it also fitted with the French government's propaganda about the image of a civilized woman.

Thus, how did the French government visualize and promote their ideal image of a French woman in the colony? Boittin's analysis emphasizes this colonial feminine image portrayed in the literary works of French female writer Clotilde Chivas-Baron: be willing to be independent but at the same time remain constant modesty in both public and private spaces.⁵⁵ Moreover, Boittin emphasizes Chivas-Baron's description that "a colonist who had to master skills allowing her to function without her husband, but whose existence abroad depends upon him."⁵⁶ Though it was a fictional image of a French woman in the colonies in Chivas-Baron's literature, it still contains somewhat realistic element. Her assessment corresponds to the review of the French government's travel decisions for women in Indochina. This element could be observed when looking at how the travel decision document was written for the French women in Indochina. In this instance, their mobility ranks were more or less influenced by the husband's employment position, mostly with an upgrade, which would be demonstrated in the following example below of a decision to take a leave of absence from a female teacher:

" Mrs. Carizey, although classified in the 3rd category of the table annexed to the decree of March 24, 1919, modified by that of September 4, 1926, traveling with her husband Head of senior office of Civil Services, benefits from the classification of the latter in accordance with article 38 of the decree of March 24, 1919. She will move to 1st class if nothing prevents it at the expense of the Tonkin local budget, aboard the Messageries Maritimes liners which will depart from Haiphong to Marseille from next August."⁵⁷

In another example of Alix Aymé, the presence and status of husbands is expressed in how their respective children are ranked. In the travel decision below, there was a detailed description of how the children's travel expenses were covered by the respective colonial budgets of the regions where their respective fathers were working:

"The young Michel de Fautereau whose father, excellent senior licensed teacher, in service in Cochinchina, is classed in 1st category B. will travel in 1st class. The young

⁵⁵ Boittin, *Undesirable*, 31

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵⁷ *Bulletin administratif du Tonkin* (1 January 1928), 1792.

François Aymé whose father, colonel of colonial infantry is classified in the same category, will also travel in 1st class. The travel expenses of the young Michel de Fautereau Vassel will be reimbursed to the general budget by the local budget of Cochinchina. The travel expenses of the young François Aymé will be reimbursed to the General Budget by the Colonial Budget.”⁵⁸

The above arguments provide a basis for reconsidering Alix Aymé's family background and their possible impact on her career. As mentioned in the next chapter, Paul de Fautereau Vassel (husband from her first marriage) and Maurice Denis (teacher and godfather of her first son) had a positive influence to varying degrees on his career advancement and promotion of himself as an artist. Although there is not much concrete evidence to show how she benefited from her second marriage to George Aymé, a lieutenant colonel of the French army in the colony (he was later promoted to lieutenant general, senior commander of the Indochina troops in 1944), an argument can be made that, first of all, thanks to that, her social position was not disturbed and she was still able to advance normally at work (in fact, she had the opportunity to work at the EBAI, a specialized art education training institution in Hanoi). In addition, George Aymé was also the brother of Marcel Aymé, a famous French novelist and playwright. One could assume that the second marriage connected Alix Aymé to more influential and intellectual circles in France and this could benefit her artistic career in terms of public recognition, especially during 1930s-1940s when she had quite a few art exhibitions in both France and Indochina. However, due to the lack of evidence, my thesis will not delve into this argument.

The pattern of French migrant artists in Indochina

Nadine André-Pallois has provided a comprehensive outline of French artists in Indochina, including the ways in which painters, both amateur and professional, could come to this colony. She generalizes about their experiences as well as the images expressed through their artworks, combined with her research on Indochina artists, to serve as a basis for her

⁵⁸ *L'Avenir du Tonkin* no.12615 (24 January 1938): 2.

conclusions about colonial art propaganda and cultural exchange. This section of my thesis is to summarize the main points of André-Pallois's research, while adding demonstration regarding French female painters, a group that is not so prominent in her research, from which to contextualize the arguments provided in the next two chapters on Alix Aymé's career in Indochina.

Accordingly, French artists in Indochina were divided into two groups: settlers who engaged in artistic activities in the colony in addition to their main occupation and government missionaries, among which she focuses more on the latter. The first group included French civil servants and soldiers who settled or had lived there for some time. Their jobs, often relatively high official positions, seemed to have facilitated their artistic activities, allowing them to display their works at major events such as international exhibitions. The second group focuses on more artistic expertise, varied from professional painters who were rewarded the title of *Peintre de la Marine* (Marine Painter), those who came on their missions within the colonial expositions, the winners of *Prix de l'Indochine* (the Indochina prize) and the artists who were contracted as art educators at local institutions.

The French administration provided financial assistance to artists through scholarships and short- and long-term missions, with the aim of fostering cultural exchange between the metropolis and the colony (Figure 4). This support system was instrumental in enabling French artists to stay in the colony for extended periods and maintain their financial stability. Notable among this group is the Indochina Prize established in 1910 with the governmental fund. This award paid for the travel of the winner to Indochina and facilitated their colonial work. However, most of the winners had quite short stay there, this colony was merely a destination to many of the French artists. As André-Pallois indicated, it was not Indochina their target goal but their desire of travelling.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, for those who sought for extending their stay, the

⁵⁹ André-Pallois, "L'Indochine, un lieu d'échange culturel?", 180.

activities in local art educational institution that were offered by the prize was among the most feasible solution.⁶⁰ A prominent example is Victor Tardieu (winner of 1926), who played an important role in establishing EBAI and developing its curriculum, thereby contributing to the formation of a generation of Vietnamese artists. Male first. In addition, Jules-Gustave Besson (winner of 1924) and Évariste Jonchère (winner of 1932) also illustrated the French artists who, thanks to the advantage of the Indochina prize, lived and worked actively in the field of colonial art education. On the other hand, the Indochina Prize does not seem to be favorable for female artists as none of them are given this opportunity. It is unclear what criteria make women ineligible for this award, but a small part of the French female artist's attitude towards this award will be revealed in the following chapter from the perspective of Alix Aymé.

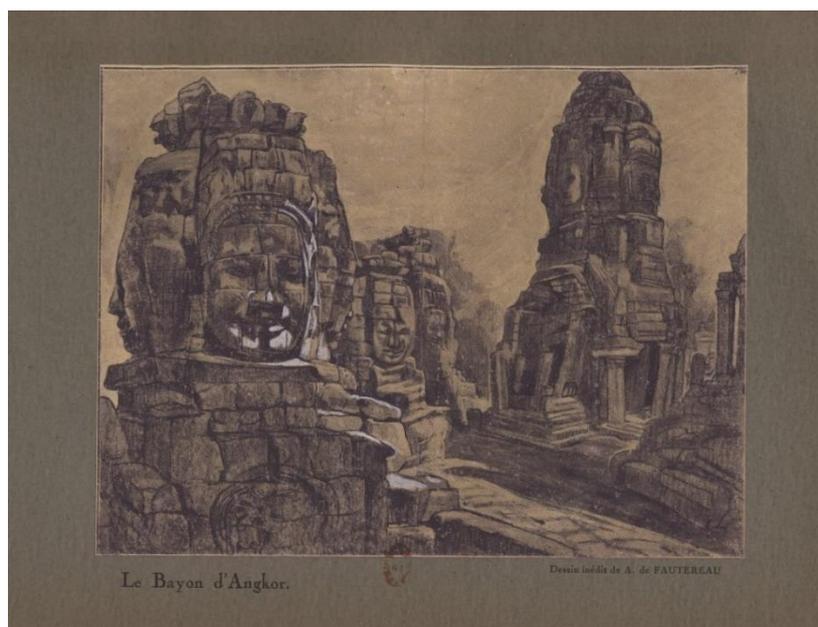


Figure 4. Alix de Fautereau, “Le Bayon d’Angkor” [The Bayon of Angkor], drawing, *Les Pages Indochinoises* 1, no.10 (15 October 1924). (Page is not numbered)

The number of female artists accounted for a quarter of the total of three hundred French artists in Indochina that André-Pallois identifies. Besides Alix Aymé, who is presented in more detail with notable traces of her artistic activities in the colony, the remaining female artists, in

⁶⁰ André-Pallois, "L'Indochine, un lieu d'échange culturel?", 150.

addition to the names in the appendix, are only summed up in one descriptive sentence - "others follow their husbands, civil appointed servants in the colony," pattern to which Aymé was no exception.⁶¹ Among the female artists in the list, those who chose to settle permanently often had a relatively stable time in the colonial education system. In addition to the female artists mentioned in the above list, I also looked at other French female *professeurs de dessin* (drawing teachers) at local general education institutions.⁶² Colonial administrative records show that most of these female painters and professional teachers had relatively short working hours, but the remaining ones showed relatively long working duration that were up to ten years. The administrative records of Suzanne Bonnal de Noreuil and Madeleine Carizey-Auger testify in support of this argument. Both were later awarded the title of *Officier d' Academie*, an award honoring the contribution to education.⁶³

What made these female artists choose to teach art in the colony? In her study, Ha points to salary incentives for full-time civil servant positions, notably two types of leave, which, depending on specific time conditions, allow employees to receive half salary or full salary. With this treatment, French artists were able to return to France for a vacation regularly and still ensure a stable source of income. This was confirmed by Alix Aymé's account in her letter as one of the reasons why she wanted to continue educational work in her colony – “What’s more, I would be paid during my holidays and my pay, together with that of my husband, would allow us to spend a winter in Paris from time to time.”⁶⁴ Moreover, stable work in a long period increased the possibility of their promotion as well as the correspondingly higher salary, which could be seen through the work records of Jane Gioan, a professor de dessin in Cochinchina. In 1925, when she took the position of fifth-class teacher, her salary was 7,900 francs.⁶⁵ By

⁶¹ Ibid., 72.

⁶² The term *professeur de dessin* will be further explained in the following chapter.

⁶³ *Annuaire Administratif de l'Indochine* (1 January 1936), 102.

⁶⁴ Alix de Fautereau, 166J 2 [Ms 3934], Maurice Denis Museum.

⁶⁵ Explanation of ranking in colonial education will be further indicated in the following chapter.

1936, after 11 years of work, as she was promoted to second-class teacher, this number had increased significantly to 32,000 francs.⁶⁶

What makes the remaining female artists only generalized in André-Pallois's study is their relatively low level of recorded artistic activity, which makes it difficult to trace them as artists in the colony during author's research framework. In a short study in a later collective book on a similar topic, André-Pallois added a visual reference to one oil painting by Suzanne Bonnal de Noreuil.⁶⁷ As for Madeleine Carizey-Augé, one of her engravings could be found in a colonial journal while another one was mentioned in an issue not in the archives.⁶⁸ In most cases, their traces exist only in administrative records, in contrast to Alix Aymé whose public presence was relatively high, which will be discussed further. in the next chapters.

This chapter provides an overview of the colonial propaganda of the French government in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, while also considering the background of the French migrants who achieve their success in the colony and generalizing about French artists in Indochina. This section also provides an outline model of successful French émigré women (whose success was constructed of racial, social, economic, and political advantages) and about French female artists in Indochina. The research results presented in Chapter 1 will form the basis for the research in Chapter 2, when I present in more detail Alix Aymé's colonial work and how she leveraged her inherent advantages to not only increase her employment opportunities but also her public presence as an artist.

⁶⁶ About the job position and salary of Jane Gioan in the mentioned years, see: *Annuaire Général de l'Indochine* (1 January 1925), 581; and *Annuaire Administratif de l'Indochine* (1 January 1936): 70.

⁶⁷ Nadine André-Pallois, "Les peintres: voyageurs et professeurs" [Painters: travelers and teachers], in *Du fleuve Rouge au Mékong: visions du Viêt Nam* [From the Red River to the Mekong: visions of Vietnam], ed. Musée Cernuschi (Paris Musées, 2012), 33.

⁶⁸ Madeleine Carizey, "Hameau des environs de Dason" [Hamlet near Dason], lino printing, *Extrême-Asie* (1 September 1927), 64. Another of her printings published in the November edition in the same year was listed in the July edition, yet there is no copy of the November edition on *RetroNews*.

CHAPTER 2. CAREER DEVELOPMENT OF AN ARTIST IN FRENCH INDOCHINA

“I think you will believe me, dear sir, knowing that I am not vain, if I tell you that all painters or draughtsmen, who have obtained positions or orders here owe it more to the recommendations than to their value, as is the general case.”⁶⁹

As the decision to appoint Paul de Fautereau Vassel, Alix Aymé’s first husband, to the position of a secondary school teacher in Indochina took effect in November 1921,⁷⁰ it also marked her new journey in this colony, and at the same time meant finding a new job in a new place. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, to the French civilians who were qualified, Indochina offered them many opportunities to advance their careers and financial prospects, which, combined with the promotion of the government's colonial propaganda, resulted in a high number of applicants. These opportunities as well as challenges were highlighted in the excerpt from a letter that Alix sent to Maurice Denis during her early years in Indochina while emphasizing the importance of social connections in securing desirable employment.

The focus of this chapter is the study of Alix Aymé’s career in Indochina as an art educator and an artist in Indochina. An overview of French educators in the field of art would clarify her career path in the early years settling in the colony. I contend that the case of Aymé comes in lines with the pattern of migrated French women as well as migrated French female artists that have been discussed in the previous chapter. Her initiative-taking also illustrated the independence of a French woman in the colony that Chivas-Baron referred to as she proactively approached the colonial authorities with the support from Maurice Denis to maximize her advantages. By analyzing Aymé’s correspondence with Denis, I consider her strategic and political thinking in leveraging social connections to further her own development as an artist in Indochina.

⁶⁹ Alix de Fautereau, 166J 2 [Ms 3934]. Maurice Denis Museum.

⁷⁰ "Enseignement" [Education], *L'Écho Annamite: organe de défense des intérêts franco-annamites* [The Annamite Echo: agency for the defense of Franco-Annamite interests] no.378 (9 September 1922): 1.

An art educator in Indochina

Art education in Indochina in the early 20th century was provided in the French educational programs. In addition to general education, vocational training in art-related fields was also provided in conjunction with the establishment of vocational schools. However, its development had not yet matched that of mechanical training, which was the main focus of vocational education during the 1900s.⁷¹ The number of institutions specializing in art products was therefore very limited with the *École de Thu-Dau-Mot* founded in 1901 focusing on furniture arts, and *École de Bien Hoa* founded in 1903 majoring in art crafts and objects.⁷² The other vocational schools covered a much larger scope in terms of training fields, for instance, the *École professionnelle de Hanoi* established in 1902 had three main fields: industry (training in the main trades which used of iron and wood), agriculture, and art (art founders and lacquerers).⁷³

More positive changes towards the development of art in Indochina could be witnessed in the 1910s with the increase in educational institutions generally and the introduction of new art-related lessons into the program of vocational schools particularly.⁷⁴ These developments were part of the larger framework of colonial education, which aimed to create a system of education that would be tailored to the specific needs of the colonized population, with a focus on promoting local arts and culture. The Indochina government's 1930 report highlighted the significance of vocational education in the region as followed:

⁷¹ The favor of mechanic development was discussed in Gouvernement Générale de l'Indochine, *Rapport au Conseil de Gouvernement: Situation Générale de la Colonies pendant l'Année 1912* [Report to the Government Council: General Situation of the Colonies during the Year] (Hanoi: Imprimerie D'Extrême-Orient, 1913), 8.

⁷² Gouvernement Générale de l'Indochine, *La Cochinchine Scolaire: L'Enseignement dans le pays le plus évolué de l'union Indochine* [Cochinchina School: Education in the most advanced country of the Indochina union] (Hanoi: Imprimerie D'Extrême-Orient, 1931): 48; *Rapport au Conseil de Gouvernement* (1 January 1923): 79.

⁷³ *Annuaire général de l'Indochine: Administratif, Commercial et Industry* 1911 (1 January 1911): 314.

⁷⁴ In 1912, there were four new educational programs added to vocational education, including: pottery, indigenous artistic drawing, industrial drawing, and art foundry. See: Gouvernement Générale de l'Indochine, *Rapport au Conseil de Gouvernement: Situation Générale de la Colonies pendant l'Année 1912*, 61. Other vocational institutions established during 1910s are the *École des Arts Cambodgiens* (1912) and the *École de dessin, de lithographie, et de gravure de Gia-Dinh* (1913).

“However, everyone has always agreed on the necessity of such teaching. Much better, we have sometimes gone so far as to think that vocational education should constitute the true education of the indigenous masses; that it was the prerequisite for economic and social development and that it would even be the panacea thanks to which all the discontented, all the downgraded, all the embittered, all the anti-French would disappear.”⁷⁵

This 1930 general review indicated the contribution of vocational schools to the financial improvements in the colony, which were to create and navigate job opportunities regionally. The General Directorate of Public Instruction highlighted in their annual reports that vocational education ought to ensure employability for graduates. However, there were no specific statistics on the job search rate of these graduates in the subsequent reports by the colonial authority. In some cases, graduate students could be hired by their institutions, yet it could be also seen as a solution of reducing expense since payment for the indigenous employee was lower than for the French employee holding the same position.⁷⁶

Reflecting on the establishment of the French vocational schools in Indochina, Boi-Tran Huynh first and foremost reaffirms the initial intention of the French government in introducing vocational schools as a solution to meet "their own needs" of applied arts and crafted products.⁷⁷ The primary motivation was the potential of stimulating economic growth by the export of Indochinese handicrafts.⁷⁸ Concurrently, looking at the way the Indochinese industry was developed, it could be posited that they expected to produce colonial products with skilled labor at low cost, complementing both the economy and scope of operations of the French empire.⁷⁹ On the other hand, she argues that these institutions facilitated the traditional aesthetics to adapt with Western employment. Another example given by Ha was the *École de*

⁷⁵ Section des services d'intérêt social. Direction Générale de l'Instruction publique [Social Interest Services Section. General Directorate of Public Education], "Enseignement Professionnel" [Professional Education], *Service de l'instruction publique en Indochine en 1930* [Public education service in Indochina in 1930] (Hanoi: Imprimerie d'Extrême-Orient, 1930), 83.

⁷⁶ Ha, *French Women and the Empire: The Case of Indochina*, 191-2.

⁷⁷ Boi Tran Huynh, "Vietnamese aesthetics from 1925 onwards" (PhD. diss., University of Sydney, 2005), 83.

⁷⁸ Doumer, *L'Indo-Chine Française, Souvenirs*, 134.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 360.

dessin, de lithographie et de gravure de Gia Dinh, which, with its training in drawing, lithography, and engraving, adapted to the demand of press publication in Cochinchina.⁸⁰

In 1922, a new professional position was introduced, known as the *professeur technique*, which was tailored to the growth of vocational education. This position was used for both specialist professors in industrial and art institutions, and it marked a departure from the previous practice of using only the title of *professor de dessin* to address art educators in both general and vocational education. Starting with three occupational positions, the number of *professeur technique* soon increased in the following years, reaching a total of seventeen in 1930.⁸¹ The ranking of promotion was quite similar to that of the general educators. There were two groups of ranking, *professor technique* and *professor technique principal*, each of which had subgroups evolving up to the first class. After reaching the position of the first-class *professeur technique principal*, the highest rank that one could achieved further was *hors classe* (excellent class). A one-year intern stage was required for the new employees or those with little experience. For example, Suzanne Bonnal de Noreuil had been a *professeur de dessin* since 1924, yet she still had to do one year of intern in 1930 before officially becoming a third-class *professeur technique* in 1931. Meanwhile George Groslier, who contributed significantly to the French colonial government with his work in founding the National Museum of Cambodia and at that moment was the director of the *École des Arts Cambodgiens*, was designated directly as the second-class *professeur technique* in 1923 and got promoted to *hors classe* in 1926.⁸²

After moving to Hanoi, Alix Aymé first became a *professor de dessin* at local schools. During these early years, she expressed concerns about the possibility for tenure without strong

⁸⁰ Huynh, “Vietnamese aesthetics from 1925 onwards,” 87-8.

⁸¹ See: *Annuaire général de l’Indochine* 1911: 568-569; *Service de l’instruction publique en Indochine en 1930*, 133.

⁸² *Annuaire général de l’Indochine: Partie Commerciale* (1 January 1923): 584; *Annuaire administratif de l’Indochine* (1 January 1926): 620-1.

recommendations, as she had observed that such positions were often awarded based on personal connections rather than merit.⁸³ Her concerns were not unfounded, as the demand for these positions was relatively low in Indochina during the early 1920s. There was on average one *professeur de dessin* for each educational institution. In some cases, the same educator could be working at two institutions simultaneously. For instance, Gaston Leloup was recorded to be working at both the *College Paul-Bert à Hanoi* and the *Institute de Jeunes Filles* in 1915, or Evariste de Rozario worked at both the *École Supérieure de Pédagogie* and the *École Supérieure d'Agriculture et de Sylviculture* in 1922.⁸⁴ Aymé herself also taught at two institutions in 1924, the *École des Arts appliqué de Hanoi* and the *École primaire supérieure de filles de Hanoi*.⁸⁵ At the same time, by the time she settled in Hanoi, colonial employment was now more difficult to attain as she did not only compete with other French migrants but also the local people who had been educated and qualified by the French education system developed in the cities.⁸⁶

Aymé had been working as a *professeur de dessin* for approximately three years before being appointed as an intern *professeur technique*. The opportunity of promotion in these two positions was quite equivalent. Compared to Marie-Paul Ha's study on French *institutrices* in Indochina, a same pattern could be witnessed in the background of the female *professeurs technique*. Ha indicates that the recruitment of French *institutrices* prioritized applicants within the colony, who were the relatives of colonial civil servants, such as their widows or daughters, or the transferred cases whose husbands also worked in the education system.⁸⁷ This could ensure convenience and stability in working arrangements for married couples serving in Indochina.

⁸³ Alix de Fautereau, 166J 2 [Ms 3934]. Maurice Denis Museum.

⁸⁴ For the information of Gaston Leloup, see *Annuaire général de l'Indochine* 1915: 170. For the information of Evariste de Rozario, see *Annuaire général de l'Indochine* 1923: 107-8.

⁸⁵ *Bulletin administratif du Tonkin* 1924 no. 15 (August 1924): 2669.

⁸⁶ Gantès, "Migration to Indochina:", 27.

⁸⁷ Ha, *French Women and the Empire*, 191.

Cross-checking with records of six female *professeurs technique* that I found in the records of the regional general directories from 1922 to 1937, four of them were daughter or wives of high officers in the French colonial government,⁸⁸ while the other two, Alix Aymé and Mariette-Marther-Fernand Balick, were married to another French educators. However, in contrast to the argument on the financial and career opportunities for French women in Indochina in the previous chapter, it is noticeable that male employees for *professeur technique* outnumbered their female colleagues and tended to hold higher positions. Mrs. Balick's specialty was ceramics and her experiments with local materials brought about a successful production called *Vert de Bien Hoa*, leading to the large number of commissions for the *École de l'art de Bien Hoa*. Though she later received the title *Officier d'Académie*, the first-class *professeurs technique* was the highest position she had achieved in her career and among her female colleagues. It was, however, lower than the positions of her male colleagues who finished their intern around the same time. An explanation for this could be based on the number of employees and work positions per institution and area. Mrs. Balick worked at the same institution as her husband, Robert Balick, who had been the director there for almost twenty years, and later reached the highest rank in his profession, *professeur de technique principal hors classe*. Another example of how the working region could affect career promotion could be found in the case of Thomas-Pierre Cudenet and Paul Bellugue, who both started their intern in 1926. Working at the *École Normale d'Instituteurs*, a different institution in Cochinchina, Cudenet might have achieved higher rank than Mrs. Balick, attaining the third-

⁸⁸ Two of the four cases are: Suzanne Bonnal (married to a Chief Inspector of the Native Guard, see *Bulletin administratif du Tonkin* 1925, 2782), Madeleine Carizey (married to a Senior Office Manager of the Civil Service, see *Annuaire Administratif de l'Indochine* 1928, 56, 454). The other two, Emma Guibert (surname at birth Torre) and Germaine Hébrard (surname at birth Poulin), both married in Indochina. There are information of French men in Indochina with last names that match the last names (both before and after marriage) of these women, however there are no direct mention of their relationships.

class in the *principal* rank, but his speed of promotion was much slower than Bellugue, his colleague in Cambodia where there were less professional art professors.⁸⁹

The outline of the two positions *professeur de dessin* and *professeur de technique* gives a clearer view of Alix Aymé's work as an art educator in the colony. This also highlights the prospects and obstacles for French women in colonial employment opportunities discussed in the previous chapter and serves the context to frame the subsequent analysis.

A good recommendation, a better career

“I shall therefore be very happy, dear sir, if you will kindly give me a word which, at the ministry, will add great weight to my candidacy.”⁹⁰

As discussed above, Aymé's first marriage to Paul de Fautereau Vassel gave her an advantage in applying for educational career since the French colonial government prioritized to employ educator couples. Nevertheless, her limited working experience in art education was an obstacle for her when finding a job in her first years in Indochina. The request for support and the significance of having a social network to attain a career in Indochina were among the frequently mentioned topics in Aymé's correspondence with Maurice Denis. A letter of recommendation from a good reference therefore became important and valuable. Aware of this, Aymé took advantage of their close relationship and expected, through Denis's help, to approach and convince the competent authorities in the colony.

Maurice Denis's presence was inextricably linked to Alix Aymé's career, especially in the early stage. Participating in Les Nabis, a group of young French artists based in Paris during the last decade of 19th century, he and some other prominent members, such as Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard, played an important part in the transition from Impressionism to Symbolism, as well as other avant-garde movement in modern art within early 20th century.

⁸⁹ According to the 1930 statistics, there were 8 *professeurs technique* in Cochinchina and 2 in Cambodia. At the same year, Cudenet was the second-class *professeur technique* while Bellugue became the second-class *professeur technique principal*.

⁹⁰ Alix de Fautereau, 166J [Ms 3930]. Maurice Denis Museum.

After the First World War, his studio *Atelier d'Art Sacré*, which was co-founded with George Desvallière, achieved great success with many commissions of religious artwork for churches and important civic buildings. These activities therefore maintained his prestige and influence within the French artists' community and also connected him with the French authority.

Aymé's correspondence revealed that more than once she was looking for the support and recommendation from Denis for her career development as an artist. One of which was around 1925-1926 when she was looking for a government-funded scholarship for French painters in Indochina:⁹¹

"The Minister of the Colonies gives, through the Colonial Society of French Artists, various prizes which consist of travel grants to different countries and all kinds of facilities to be able to work for oneself. That of Indochina is very difficult to obtain because there is a kind of small coterie, or it is difficult to enter."

The prize in question, the Indochina prize, was highly competitive, as it offered the appealing benefits which were presented in the first chapter. Moreover, Aymé pointed out the status of "small coterie" around this prize, which was difficult to enter. Taking advice from deputy chief of staff of the Colonial Society of Artists, she reached out to Denis for his recommendation in order to get the "political support" from the Minister of the Colonies. Her letters demonstrate her proactive learning about political relationships and their influence in Indochina in applying for the government-funded grant. Through information about the organizational structure and jury panel of the Indochina prize, she sought to approach involved influential figures to increase her possibility of success. She believed that if she were recommended to the President of the Society by the Minister of the Colonies, Mr. Léon Perrier, her chances would increase considerably.⁹² Due to the following letters, Denis did write a

⁹¹ Alix de Fautereau, 166J 2 [Ms 3930], Maurice Denis Museum. There is no date on this letter, yet I conclude the time based on the information of the leave which was mentioned – "I'll have to go back to my 30 hours of work as soon as my leave is over, which is very painful." Cross-checking with the administrative record, Alix Aymé was granted a six-month leave with full payment from October 27, 1925. For detailed information of the decree, see *Bulletin administratif du Tonkin* 1925: 2781.

⁹² Alix de Fautereau, 166J 2 [Ms 3932], Maurice Denis Museum.

recommendation for her to the minister. His influential connection brought her an opportunity to meet Perrier and another recommendation from Perrier to the president of the Colonial Society of French Artists. Despite having a guaranteed reference from a senior officer of the colonial authority, Aymé's application was unsuccessful, which reaffirmed the high level of competition for the Indochina prize and the importance of social relationships - "I had a great chance. But there are so many things below these coteries that it seems almost impossible to get something."⁹³

The status of "coterie" surrounding the Indochina Prize indicated that there was more than one source of political influence trying to have an impact on the outcome. What is interesting is that, although Aymé's words were critical, her actions in seeking political support in the colony through Maurice Denis's connections were not outside this "coterie" situation. In fact, it was a common solution that French candidates in Indochina often used, also in the more general case when applying for a job. Support from people in higher positions increased the possibility of success of the application, although the inevitable consequence was the difficult question of choosing between a worthy candidate and a well-connected one.⁹⁴ The request for nomination returned several times in Aymé's letters, among which her tactical thinking could be found as she wrote:

"I hope you find a way to reach Mr. Fabry. But perhaps, despite Mr. Sarraut's change in circumstances, a recommendation to him would be even more useful. Because he is keeping a considerable influence here and he will, seemingly, return as Governor."⁹⁵

The context of this excerpt was at the time when Aymé was looking for a teaching position around the period of 1924-1925 approximately. She expressed some difficulties that she may have had for her appointment to the official position though having met all the required criteria. Aymé believed that a word from Denis would increase her chance of success. Moreover, her

⁹³ Alix de Fautereau, 166J 2 [Ms 3936], Maurice Denis Museum.

⁹⁴ Ha, *French Women and the Empire*, 170.

⁹⁵ Alix de Fautereau, 166J 2 [Ms 3933], Maurice Denis Museum.

comparison of the political influence between Sarraut and Fabry indicated her political awareness. Albert Sarraut, who just finished his tenure as the Minister of the Colonies (1920-1924), was an ambitious choice of Aymé in seeking for a political connection and patronage from the local authorities. Having been the Governor-General of French Indochina in two tenures (1912-1914, 1917-1919), he was known for the native education reform, especially in the development of indigenous art.⁹⁶ His words were thus more influence in educational matters, compared to that of Jean Fabry, who was in charge for a short tenure (29 March - 14 June 1924).

The examples presented here through the case of Alix Aymé illustrates how the advantages of social and political relationships contributed to the success of the French in Indochina. Aymé understood the certain disadvantages that the gender identity and social status could pose to her,⁹⁷ while at the same time acknowledged her advantages and utilized them strategically to ensure her ability to develop in the colony.

Self-promotion of an artist

As mentioned previously, Aymé's career journey was quite dynamic compared to her contemporary female colleagues. However, this dynamism, which I will discuss later, resulted in the multiple times of transfers and mission, plus the time on leave, slowing down her speed of promotion as a *professeur technique*. Aymé and Mrs. Balick were doing the internship in the same year, yet Mrs. Balick got promoted to the second-class *professeur technique* two years before Aymé.⁹⁸ Similarly, Nguyen Van Tho (also known as Nam Son) became a third-class

⁹⁶ About educational reforms in Vietnam and Albert Sarraut's contribution in this matter, see: Nicola J Cooper, "French Colonial Discourses: The Case of French Indochina 1900-1939" (PhD. diss., University of Warwick, 1997), 73-4; Milkie Vu, "Examining the social impacts of French education reforms in Tonkin, Indochina (1906-1938)," *Inquiries Journal* 4, no. 04 (2012). <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/a?id=634>. About his policy concerning the indigenous art, see: Albert Sarraut, *La mise en valeur des colonies françaises* (Payot, 1923), 104; Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945* (University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 45.

⁹⁷ Alix de Fautereau, 166J 2 [Ms 3927], Maurice Denis Museum. Here she wrote: "But I fear that as a woman, and having no title, not even that of a student of the school outside of which nothing exists for some people, I will always be put aside."

⁹⁸ For Mrs. Balick's promotion, see *Annuaire général de l'Indochine* 1930: 568. For Fautereau's promotion, see *Annuaire général de l'Indochine* 1932: 644.

professeur technique two years after Aymé, but later got promoted to the higher rank of first class.⁹⁹ In addition to their noticeable achievements with local art materials (Mrs. Balick with her experience with ceramic, which has been mentioned above, and Nguyen Van Tho with his contribution in the development of lacquer painting), both had a long-term and fixed work at their institutions.

It was her goal of practicing art, or in general becoming an artist, that she concerned the most as it was repeated multiple times in her correspondence – “If it were possible for you to get me something that would allow me to be considered as a painter here.”¹⁰⁰ Much as she enjoyed her work as an art educator, she complained that thirty-hour working per week was taking her time for her own art practice.¹⁰¹ In fact, her amount of working hour even slightly increased one year after that to thirty-four hours.¹⁰²

Besides the work at the local schools, Aymé also collaborated with *Les Pages Indochinoises*, a literary and artistic journal, as an illustrator from 1923 to 1926. This job allowed her to publish her art, most of which were woodblock prints from the scenery sketches throughout her journey in Asia. More important, it facilitated her self-promotion to the public as an artist in Indochina. As a result, she was invited to a group exhibition at Druet Gallery in Paris in 1926, displaying her works alongside her teacher's, Maurice Denis. It was the first time that her name and artworks were prominently featured in various French journals.¹⁰³ They positive responses and expressed an interest in the images of Indochina scenery and culture that were still relatively unfamiliar to the French public.¹⁰⁴ Though there is no trace to conclude

⁹⁹ For Nguyen Van Tho's promotion, see *Annuaire général de l'Indochine* 1936: 102.

¹⁰⁰ Alix de Fautereau, 166J 2 [Ms 3927], Maurice Denis Museum.

¹⁰¹ Alix de Fautereau, 166J [Ms 3935] and 166J [Ms3930], Maurice Denis Museum.

¹⁰² *Bulletin administratif du Tonkin* 1924 no.15 (August, 1924), 2669.

¹⁰³ Pinturricchio, “Carnet des Ateliers,” *Le Carnet de la semaine* no.556 (31 Jan 1926): 10-11; Vanderpyl. “Salons et Expositions,” *Le Petit Parisien* no.17882 (13 February 1926): 6; Eugene Soubeyre, “Petites Expositions,” *La Nouvelle Revue* no. 326 (1 March 1926): 83-85; “La vie artistique: Le Salon. – Quelques Oublies petites expositions,” *Le Figaro* no. 143 (23 May 1926), 4; Jean d'Arms, “L'Annam et les arts français,” *La Dépêche coloniale* no.8421 (12 February 1926): 1-2.

¹⁰⁴ Docteur de Fénis, “Une artiste de Hanoi fait connaitre a Paris L'Indochine” [An artist from Hanoi introduces Indochina to Paris], *L'Avenir du Tonkin* no. 9115 (28 August 1926): 1.

that Denis supported her participation in this event, his reputation still left a positive impact on her public recognition. In an article solely focused on Alix Aymé. Chivas-Baron referred to her as Denis's "brilliant disciple," bestowing numerous praiseworthy words to describe her character and creations, while simultaneously recognizing her capacity for artistic development and growth.¹⁰⁵ After *Les Pages Indochinoises* ceased operations in 1926, Aymé maintained her artistic activities through illustration work for literary publications and art exhibitions (Figure 5).¹⁰⁶ Notably, her solo exhibition in 1928 was held in Saigon, expanding the scope of her presence in Indochina.¹⁰⁷ The success of the exhibition was recognized by the visits not only of influential colleagues in the region but also of colonial authorities.¹⁰⁸

As she was placed under the disposal of the Resident Superior in Annam and worked at the *Collège de Quoc-Hoc Hue*, she got an opportunity to create a poster for the Tourism Office of Annam.¹⁰⁹ Though there were not many writings related to this poster, it indicated her closer engagement in the colonial propaganda implemented by the French government. With these diverse and vibrant artistic activities, along with the colonial visual representation in her work, Aymé' was appointed to participate in the Laos committee for the 1931 Intercolonial Exhibition in Paris.¹¹⁰ This exposition was the largest and most significant among other French colonial exhibitions, displaying the greatness of the French empire and its colonial

¹⁰⁵ Clotilde Chivas-Baron, "Une vision Extrême-Asiatique à Paris" [A Far Asian vision in Paris], *Extrême-Asie* no. 4 (April 1926): 135-136.

¹⁰⁶ Her work in Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* was mentioned in one of her letters to Maurice Denis (see Alix de Fautereau, 166J 2 [Ms 3923]) and in a newspaper report, see: Féris, "Une artiste de Hanoi fait connaitre à Paris l'Indochine": 1. For her work in the IX Hanoi Fair booklet, see *L'Annam à la Foire de Hanoi: Produit de l'Annam* (Hanoi, 1928).

Her other illustration for a translated novel which was originally from Krotkaïa Dostoïevski and translated by Jean Chuzeville, see: *Mercure de France* no.693 (1 May 1927), 321 and *Le Crapouillot* (1 May 1927): 65.

¹⁰⁷ F.B, "Saigon Artiste: L'exposition Fautereau" [Saigon Artist: Fautereau's exhibition], *L'Avenir du Tonkin* no. 9708 (23 August 1928): 5; *L'Avenir du Tonkin* no.9986 (31 July 1929): 5.

¹⁰⁸ It was reported that Alix Aymé's exhibition was visited by Pierre Pasquier (Governor General of French Indochina during 1928-1934), Paul Blanchard de la Brosse (Governor of Cochinchina during 1926-1929), and Jules Besson (Director of the *École d'Art de Giadinh* during 1925-1936). See: F.B, "Saigon Artiste": 5; *L'Avenir du Tonkin* no.9986 (31 July 1929): 2.

¹⁰⁹ "La belle activite du bureau officiel de Tourisme de Hue." *L'Avenir du Tonkin* no. 9834 (24 Jan 1929), 2; F.B. "Deux Affiches de Propagande Touristique." *Les Annales Coloniales* no.44 (18 March 1929).

¹¹⁰ "Annam: Hue." *L'Avenir du Tonkin* no. 9918 (8 May 1929): 5; *Bulletin administratif: Commissariat de la République française au Laos* no.5 (1 May 1929), 595.

project.¹¹¹ It was a milestone in her artist career that presented her not only before the French and Indochinese but also international audiences. After the event, her series of travel writings narrating her journey in Laos was published in French journals. In the following period (until the Japanese invasion of Indochina in 1945 when General Aymé was imprisoned),¹¹² she maintained regular artistic activities in both creating and teaching. During her work at the EBAI (1934-9),¹¹³ she participated in researching lacquer materials and then applied this material to her artistic work.

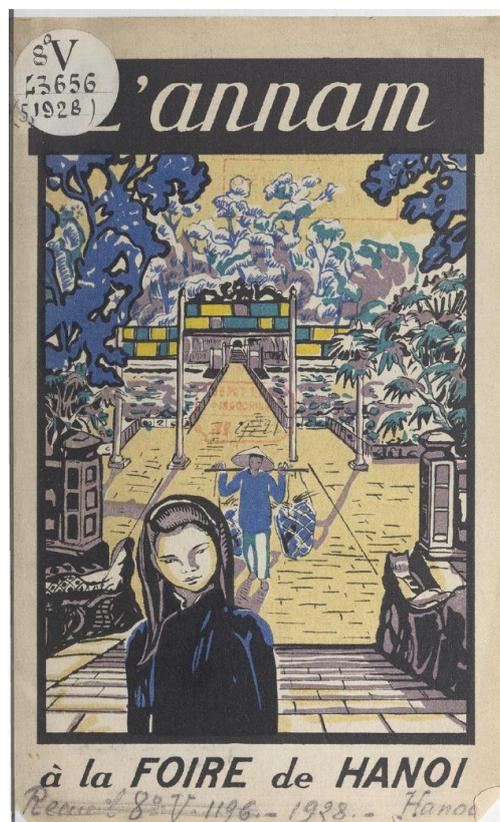


Figure 5. Alix de Fautereau, The cover of the IX Hanoi Fair booklet, *L'Annam à la Foire de Hanoi: Produit de l'Annam* [Annam at the Hanoi Fair: Product of Annam] (Hanoi, 1928).

It is difficult to clarify whether Aymé's educational and artistic activities within the colonial framework benefited her to promote her artistic career or whether her artistic activities enabled her to participate in colonial activities. However, it could be concluded that there was

¹¹¹ Cooper, "French Colonial Discourses," 115.

¹¹² *Revue de Défense Nationale* (1 September 1945): 365.

¹¹³ *Trường Đại học Mỹ thuật Hà Nội 1925-1990* [Vietnam University of Fine Arts 1925-1990], 47.

the artist's proactive search for opportunities to develop her career. Aymé's letters reveal her interest in the social and political circles involved in artistic activity in the colony. By maintaining and seeking support from Denis, she showed her awareness of the importance of these networks that, at the same time, emphasized the close connection between artistic activities in the colony and the colonial government's public education. A critical examination of Aymé's involvement in public education in Indochina is essential to understand how a female artist from France could advance her career in the colony. Her life and career aligned with the discussed pattern of a French migrant and Nadine Andre-Pallois' general description of the French traveler artists, who seized the opportunities that art offered them to support their artistic career.¹¹⁴ By considering her artistic activities, this chapter emphasizes her initiative-taking in self-promotion in public, providing the foreground for the arguments in the next chapter.

In the third and the last chapter, I will examine a series of her writings and artworks found in published publications to see how they reflected her experiences in Indochina. It attempts to answer to what extent her public representations met the colonial propaganda demands of the French government and to what extent they showed Alix Aymé's attempt to mark her personal characteristic as an artist.

¹¹⁴ André-Pallois, *L'Indochine, un lieu d'échange culturel?*, 179.

CHAPTER 3. PROMOTING COLONIAL PROPAGANDA OR BUILDING ARTISTIC IDENTITY?

“Painters play a role within the colonial framework through their teaching and their official commissions, but also outside this framework, through their personal work.”¹¹⁵

Moving beyond the personal sharing in her letters to Denis, this chapter scrutinizes her works that were directedly aimed at the public, to be specific which were her writings and artworks published on French journals. In this larger scale of self-fashioning, they demonstrate Aymé's experience as a privilege French woman as she moved within the colonial spaces. Furthermore, my analysis looks at to what extent Aymé was engaged with the colonial promotion, both as an art educator and as an artist.

In the context of French Indochina, the colonial government had a desire to propagate through art with the products of the process of renewing indigenous cultural traditions through Western teaching, which I will discuss later in this chapter. These products, through trading and art fairs, reached the French and European consumers. Meanwhile, these propaganda media in Indochina, the development of art education, the establishment of local art institutions or the Indochina prize, all served to organize and promote overseas territories. However, it is more complicated to assess the role and attitude of French artists towards colonial propaganda in this process. André-Pallois contends that their activities in the colony fell within the above propaganda framework, but their activities were more motivated by personal development and enhancing their personal experiences as artists.¹¹⁶ They participated in the French government's policy of promoting Indochina in return for work missions or subsidies but did not necessarily contribute to the justification of colonization. Their art thus tended to illustrate their colonial experiences as they explored the local primitive scenes in an ethnographical approach. However, André-Pallois also remarks that their idealistic vision, or to be specific, their

¹¹⁵ André-Pallois, *L'Indochine, un lieu d'échange culturel?*, 265.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 268.

depictions, indicated the neglect of the state of the regional poverty and war. Their peaceful and romantic visual presentation, however, were in keeping with the images that the French government wanted to promote the colonies, therefore became a tool of propaganda of the French presence there.

Accepting André-Pallos's position of the role of French artists in colonial propaganda, this chapter discover how Alix Aymé's work fitted to the framework of colonial propaganda. Moreover, I argue that her writings with the perspective of an art educator show her support to the way that French government developed colonial art. At the same time, a close look at her choice of art materials, which I focus more on her lacquer art, indicates that her artwork might meet both her serve for the colonial propaganda of the French government and her own attempt to establish her artistic persona.

The description of a travelling French woman

"She had to take extremely dangerous routes to reach the most remote areas of the country, where only a few Europeans had ventured before. Mrs. Alix Aymé was the first European woman to face the Laotian forests and bushes. These are the risks of such journeys, borne with true French courage,..."¹¹⁷

As mentioned previously, Aymé's participation in the international colonial was a crucial milestone in her career as an artist. This position appointment allowed her to stay in Laos for 18 months to capture the "different scenes of indigenous life" through her artworks that would then be presented to the French and international audiences.¹¹⁸ In this thesis I could not approach visual sources of her works displayed in the 1931 exposition to see exactly what she presented of this region in the framework of the French colonial project. Nevertheless, I examine her series of travel writings which were illustrated with her small-sized woodblock

¹¹⁷ Alix Aymé, "Une Française au Lao: En route vers Luang-Prabang avec les six fils du roi" [A French woman in Laos: On the way to Luang-Prabang with the six sons of the king] *Le Journal* no.14535 (3 August 1932): 1.

¹¹⁸ "L'Indochine a l'Exposition: Le pavilion du Laos." *Les Annales Coloniales* no. 111 (1 August 1931). (Publication does not include page numbers)

prints and published after the exhibition in two French magazines to see how she narrated her experience during the journey.

The excerpt above was the introduction by *Le Journal* for Aymé's series with seemingly exaggerated and relatively sensational wording. Here, her identity was clearly defined, "A French woman in Laos" as in its title, emphasizing racial and gender identities while signaling to the targeted readers, which were the French audiences, what could be expected from this defined anthropological lens. During this supposedly risky move through different regions of French Indochina, Aymé's trip was made by many different means of transportation, from traveling on water by canoe or ferry, to traveling on horseback, and even switched to driving or walking in some parts of the route. These means not only reflect changes in terrain, but they were also intermediary tools that partly revealed the space where encounters between colonists and indigenous people took place within the framework of empire with its social class and cultural division, from which the migrants could formulate their stories, identify allies, or gain further understanding of the colonial project.¹¹⁹ Whereas Aymé's accounts of movement on, or above, the water were emphasized with the dangers that came from the natural terrain, her stories about movement on land showed diverse depictions of a white woman's cultural exploration and social superiority.

“Without the rapids, the trip would be very peaceful. But these are so terrible that my heart stops as soon as I hear their bellowing. The canoeists encourage the engine with their rhythmic cries, but it runs out of steam, panting; I watch its beats while holding my breath. Often, it stops, the canoe then no longer moves forward, it goes backwards.”¹²⁰

Aymé narrated her journey on the river with a fast and concise rhythm, reflecting the interruptions in movement caused by constant natural dangers. Interspersed with the visual descriptions was a synthesis of different sounds indicating the uncomfortable situation. This

¹¹⁹ Boittin, *Undesirable*, 58-9.

¹²⁰ Alix Aymé, “Une Française au Laos: Un Voyage en Pirogue à travers les rapides de Mekong” [A French woman in Laos: A trip in a pirogue through the Mekong rapids], *Le Journal* no.14538 (6 August 1932): 1.

difficulty on the water repeated many times throughout the trip. In these accounts, Alix Aymé acted as a meticulous narrator, not only sharing her personal feelings and states, but also providing details on how the situation was solved by her companions, most of the case that were the canoeist, the driver, and the *coolies* (Figure 6).¹²¹ The perspective of an observer highlighted her position in the group, a French woman representing the colonial government in a relatively pristine natural area in the colony. If the maritime ships that Boittin analyzes had a hierarchical division of social status according to the seat class,¹²² then on the canoe or ferry that Alix Aymé sat on, the social hierarchy was simplified into the indigenous and the French. To be more specific, the relationship between these two groups was often that of the servant and the served.



Figure 6. Alix Aymé, “En pirogue sur les rapides” [In a canoe on the rapids], *Les Journal* no.14536 (4 August 1932): 1.

It thus formed a contrasting scene division that took place simultaneously in Aymé’s narrative. On the one hand, the driver and *coolies* searched along the river for a ferry to continue their trip as the bridges were too dangerous to cross. On the other hand, the artist “took the

¹²¹ The word *coolie* in this context refers to cheap native labor. For more historical context of the development of this term, see Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (JHU Press, 2006), 13.

¹²² Boittin, *Undesirable*, 58-9.

opportunity to walk" while admiring the beauty of the river.¹²³ The act of wandering and exploring was repeated, directly and indirectly, in Aymé's series, which is consistent with the desire of French artists to increase experiences and discover new lands that André-Pallois mentioned.¹²⁴ In this additional process of moving, which was independently performed on the part of the artist, she emphasized the feeling of enjoying solitude in a vast, unexplored space – "Since I have been traveling through the forest, I have come to enjoy my solitude and feel like a discoverer of new lands,"¹²⁵ which showed the commonality to other travel accounts of French writers. This same feeling could be found in a writing another French writer, Jeanne Leuba, as she wrote: "I feel myself at the heart of everything that I have always so violently loved: my boundless forest, its deprivations and dejections, its large visual happiness, its solitudes, its dangers..."¹²⁶ Boittin points out the juxtaposition between enjoyment and danger in these travelogues, which, written to promote colonial tourism, omitted factual information about the means of action that involved the native labor.¹²⁷

On the other hand, overland travel allowed cultural contacts with indigenous peoples to take place more frequently at close range (Figure 7). Material, or in most cases belongings and costumes, became an intermediary tool for the subjects in this meeting to observe and evaluate each other. If Aymé expressed admiration for the silver bracelets on the Lao people's wrists, these people expressed curiosity about her riding outfit and boots.¹²⁸ Although the artist diligently documented the scenes of daily life and festivities in Laos, paying close attention to the actions and appearance of the locals, she was also, through her narrative, observed by the natives. More than once, Aymé referred to her identity as a French woman in these

¹²³ Aymé, "Une Française au Lao: En route vers Luang-Prabang avec les six fils du roi": 1.

¹²⁴ André-Pallois, *L'Indochine, un lieu d'échange culturel?*, 267-8.

¹²⁵ Alix Aymé, "Une étape en pays lu haut Laos" [A stopover in the upper Laos], *Le Monde Colonial Illustré* no.101 (1 January 1932): 178.

¹²⁶ Jeanne Leuba, "Jours d'autrefois, le Prah Khan de Kompong Svan" [Days of yesteryear, the Prah Khan of Kompong Scan], 10 March 1937, 3APOM1Leuba, ANOM, as quoted in Boittin, *Undesirable*, 65.

¹²⁷ Boittin, *Undesirable*, 65-6.

¹²⁸ Alix Aymé, "Une Française au Laos: Un Voyage en Pirogue à travers les rapides de Mekong" [A French woman in Laos: A trip in a pirogue through the Mekong rapids], *Le Journal* no.14538 (6 August 1932): 2.

observations, as this identity made her stand out but also separate from the surrounding landscape. A traveler's non-belonging to the space where they were becomes even more evident as encounters with other representatives of the colonial government were often depicted in association with positive transformations on her journey.¹²⁹ In these circumstances, similarly, she acknowledged her privileged background that enabled her to receive assistance from the local community and benefit from favorable facilities throughout her journey.



Figure 7. Alix Aymé, “Jeune Laotienne” [A Young Laotian], sketch, *Les Journal* no.14536 (4 August 1932): 1.

Looking at the small wood prints accompanying the article, it can be seen that Aymé's work, both her writing and her printings, met the mission requirements of this trip and corresponded to the image of the colony that the French government wanted to show in the 1931 international colonial exposition - an anthropological illustration showing the unique culture and customs of people in Laos, set in a peaceful natural setting. The only fierceness was depicted in two paintings depicting the scene of going through the rapids on the Mekong River, however it was a conflict between humans and nature, not between people in the colony.

¹²⁹ Aymé, “Une Française au Lao: En route vers Luang-Prabang avec les six fils du roi”: 2.

Aymé showed harmonious interactions with the native people, demonstrating French control in Laos, and reflecting the development of the civilizing mission there.

The perspective of an art educator in the colony

As presented in Chapter 2, Aymé's career in colonial education showed her proactive approach to the local authorities for their political support, which could benefit her career promotion. If her letters attempted to convince the authorities of her artistic abilities indirectly through the recommendation of Maurice Denis, her publications show support for the way in which the French government developed colonial art in Indochina.

Her first published article was from the early years of her settling in Hanoi which demonstrated her opinion about teaching art, or particularly decorative art, in Indochina. She offered a cultural analysis of the approach to iconographic indigenous art, which she argued, was too focused on religion. Criticizing the chaotic combination of different artistic styles such as the “Sino-Annamite motifs ‘decoration’ on a Louis XV piece of furniture,”¹³⁰ she emphasized the importance of reviving the artistic traditions that the French government proposed in the task of local schools in teaching decorative arts, which was "to encourage, in all fields, the creation of an original art, which is neither a crude copy of ancient Chinese art, nor a more or less skillful imitation of Western art."¹³¹ Her support was best shown in her own words, in which she wrote: " Let us only intervene as educators where the great universal rules of composition, balance, allocation of objects for their practical uses, and respect for the materials used are in question."¹³²

This writing also explicitly expressed her request for the French government's intervention in prioritizing this regional artistic awakening by establishing art institutions in

¹³⁰ Alix de Fautereau, “Le feu sous cendre” [The fire under the ashes], *Les Pages Indochinoises* 2, no.3 (March 1924): 113-8.

¹³¹ *Rapport au Conseil de Gouvernement de l'Indochine: Session ordinaire de 1925* [Report to the Governing Council of Indochina: Ordinary session of 1925]: 105.

¹³² Fautereau, “Le feu sous cendre”: 117.

the colony, especially the need for an art museum, which she considered as “an elegant means of propaganda.”¹³³ Aymé's argument also indirectly referred to the reciprocal development between colonial art and economy, in which the development of colonial art would attract the public, and conversely, the wealth of the colony would correspondingly bring a larger yet more demanding customer base. Overall, this article by Alix Aymé clearly shows her support for colonial development policies, which made her different from the general trend of French migrant artists' attitudes toward colonial politics.

In this circumstance, Aymé's support of colonial art development partly came from the perspective of a European artist who was trained to carry out independent personal creations when witnessing Indochina art, more specifically Vietnamese art, as in community art projects carried out by a group of artisans. She repeatedly mentioned the idea of Annamese people's lack of creativity, both in letters to Denis and in published articles - "The Annamite worker does not create, does not compose. It is simply patterns that are passed down from generation to generation."¹³⁴ In this sense, her job was to help her students in creating art with modern aesthetic while keeping their own traditional style.

Approaching the matter of Aymé's support of colonial education from another angle, it is possible to hypothesize whether there was an influence from her first husband, Paul de Fautereau Vassel, who was also a literature teacher. In a public speech in Hanoi in 1927, which was later documented and published in a local newspaper for the French readers, he declared that "every French person in Indochina must be an educator."¹³⁵ Speaking about the superiority of the French, Fautereau Vassel emphasized the civilization of Western education and science through the achievements of previous generations of French scientists. These summaries served

¹³³ Fautereau, "Le feu sous cendre": 117.

¹³⁴ Alix Aymé, "La Laque en Indochine et l'École des Beaux-arts d'Hanoi" [Lacquerware in Indochina and the Hanoi School of Fine Arts], *Études d'Outre-Mer* [Overseas Studies] (December 1952): 411.

¹³⁵ "Distribution solennelle des prix aux élèves des établissements scolaires de Hanoi" [Ceremonial distribution of prizes to students of Hanoi educational establishments], *L'Avenir du Tonkin* no. 9350 (11 June 1927): 1.

as a basis for him to discuss the issue of colonial technological development and the benefits it can bring, and at the same time relate it to the difficulties that French educators may encounter when dealing with issues of local tradition. This French view of civilization was also expressed implicitly in Aymé's description of different awareness in terms of hygiene issue as between the Laotian women and herself. Her depiction of the lovely local children, yet were "covered in vermin", highlights their contrast as she distributed "pieces of cheese wrapped in beautiful silver paper" to the local people.¹³⁶

If the above assumption about the influence between the married couple on socio-political views is established, it could also be applied to her second marriage to General Aymé, who participated in important French military campaigns in Indochina. At this time, her avoidance of the negative aspects in the region under the French colonial rule while highlighting their achievement in colonial education and culture could be seen as the indication of her support for colonial politics.

The choice of a colonial artist

“It has often been said that this high and delicate art which must combine the penetration of the spirit with the perfection of the form could only be the prerogative of Asians, as it requires meticulous care and inexhaustible patience. The example of Alix Aymé, after that of Dunand, proves that French genius is capable of such an effort.”¹³⁷

Such was Albert Sarraut's compliment for Alix Aymé's lacquer art. Apart from Jean Dunand, who was renowned for his applied art involving lacquer material,¹³⁸ during the 20th century, no other French artist, particularly a woman, extensively incorporated lacquer in their artistic practice during the 20th century. Her exceptional choice of material distinguished her artist career from other French artists.

¹³⁶ Alix Aymé, “Une Française au Laos: la dernière étape sur le chemin du retour” [A French woman in Laos: the last step on the way home], *Le Journal* no.14539 (7 August 1932): 2.

¹³⁷ Albert Sarraut, “Laque (Avant-propos) [Lacquer (Foreword)],” *Études d'Outre-Mer* (December 1952). (This text has no page number.)

¹³⁸ Gordon Norton Ray and George Thomas Tanselle, "The Art Deco Book in France", *Studies in Bibliography* 55, no. 1 (2002): 1–131; Félix Marcilhac, *Jean Dunand : His Life and Works* (New York : Abrams, 1991).

She was first exposed to the material around 1923, yet at that moment still within a framework of instructing decorative art for local students in vocational schools.¹³⁹ The pivotal moment that altered the way she worked with lacquer was the *EBAI*'s educational program in developing lacquer practice around 1930 under the direction of Joseph Inguimberty.¹⁴⁰ Accordingly, technical research was the priority of professors in the beginning, because, as Aymé remarked, this local material “had been badly used by the Annamite.”¹⁴¹ By recreating the techniques employed in the production of Chinese and Japanese lacquer using indigenous materials over time through extensive experimentation, the professors and students of the EBAI have refined and perfected the lacquer techniques, expanding its application from the realms of applied arts to fine arts (Figure 8).

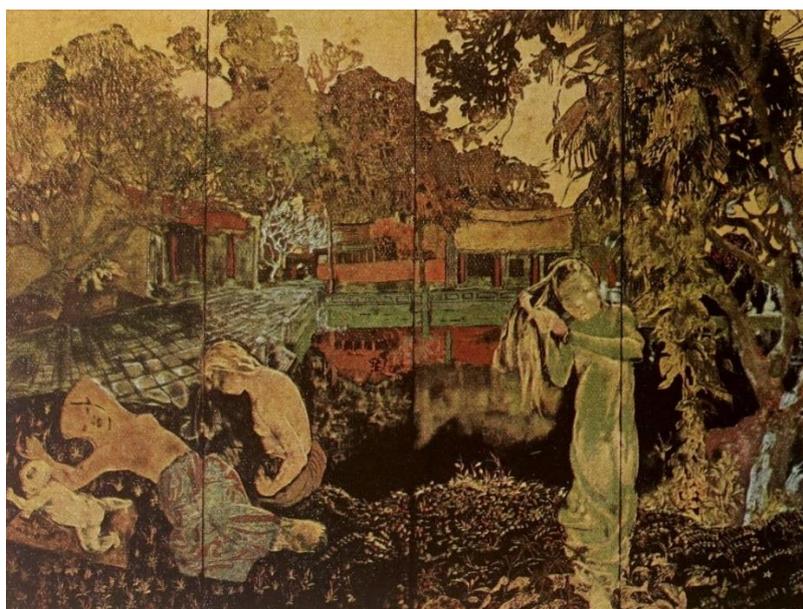


Figure 8. Alix Aymé, “Panneau décoratif sur fond d’or” [Decorative panel on a gold background], lacquer, *France Illustration: Le Monde Illustré* no.190 (4 June 1949).

¹³⁹ Alix de Fautereau, 166J 2 [Ms 3935], Maurice Denis Museum. The time that I mention was based on Aymé mentioning of her drawing of Yunnan-Fou on *Les Pages Indochinoises*, which illustrated for this article: Pierre Foulon, “A Yunnanfou,” *Les Pages Indochinoises* 1, no.4 (15 December 1923): 127-138.

During 1923-4, she was working at the *École des Arts appliqué de Hanoi*, see: *Bulletin administratif du Tonkin* 1923 no. 24 (October 1923):2443 and *Bulletin administratif du Tonkin* 1924 no. 15 (August 1924): 2669.

¹⁴⁰ Lisa Bixenstine Safford, ‘Art at the Crossroads: Lacquer Painting in French Vietnam’, *The Journal of Transcultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (3 August 2015): 126–70, <https://doi.org/10.11588/ts.2015.1.16061>; Bettina Ebert and Michael R. Schilling, ‘A Technical Analysis of Paint Media Used in Twentieth-Century Vietnamese Lacquer Paintings’, *Studies in Conservation* 61, no. sup3 (1 August 2016): 52–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393630.2016.1227051>.

¹⁴¹ Alix de Fautereau, 166J 2 [Ms 3935], Maurice Denis Museum; Aymé, “La Laque en Indochine et l’École des Beaux-arts d’Hanoi”: 411.

The time working at EBAI in the mid-1930s allowed Aymé to participate in this research and experimental process, therefore developing a profound knowledge of the material. After approximately a decade of practicing lacquer art, she published three topical articles on lacquer art in 1949, 1950, and 1952.¹⁴² They provided a comparative overview of the material's history and its range of applications across different regions of East Asia, in which she showed her preference and admiration for Japanese lacquer technique -"Chinese lacquerware never reached the degree of perfection of Japanese lacquerware. Because if the Japanese were not the first to discover the remarkable properties of the lacquer tree, they understood and used them admirably."¹⁴³ Above all, the process of making lacquer was described in detail, with a scientific explanation of the material's characteristics, which could only be achieved through multiple times of practice. For Alix Aymé, lacquer is an artistic material that not only possesses a visually astonishing beauty in its appearance but also offers a process that is full of unexpectedness and potential to introduce new techniques.

With such impressive material, why were there a little number of French artists migrating in Indochina practicing lacquer? The answer implicitly lies in Aymé's writings. Accordingly, the intricate nature of the process, particularly the characteristics of lacquer that enable it to dry only in high humidity, leads to a longer completion time for the work. The materials and tools of creation are diverse, most of which require special local materials to use and craft. Most importantly, lacquer contains toxins that cause itching and rashes, which has no real cure but temporary solution to relieve the symptoms. Therefore, to do lacquer art, one not only need the perseverance to learn a completely new type of process and technique to become familiar with this material, in prior to spending an equally long time perfecting the work, but also the determination to endure the temporary negative health effects.

¹⁴² Alix Aymé, "Technique de la Laque" [Lacquer Technique], *France Illustration: Le Monde Illustré* no.190 (4 June 1949); Alix Aymé, "L'art de la laque" [The art of lacquer], *Tropiques* no.327 (December 1950): 52-60; Aymé, "La Laque en Indochine et l'École des Beaux-arts d'Hanoi".

¹⁴³ Aymé, "L'art de la laque": 53.

As the result, lacquer was not suitable for the majority of the migrant French artists in Indochina had a relatively short stay. For those who had long-term residence in the colony, it was not the preferred choice of medium for creating art due to the mentioned complex requirements and its accompanying disadvantage in terms of health. The common employment pattern of French artists in Indochina was to participate in art educational institutions, which did not leave much time for their artistic creation. Moreover, working materials and tools also require a certain amount of preparation and funding. In the case of the EBAI, the budget was advanced by the colonial government, then repaid from profits earned from selling works of art through galleries, exhibitions, or fairs.¹⁴⁴ In general, lacquer was not an easy and economically profitable material. For a French woman, lacquer is even more unsuitable for practice because the process requires physically heavy workload. The effects of natural toxins on appearance are incompatible with Chivas-Baron's ideal image of a French woman in Indochina, that she must maintain her decorum in all circumstances. This ideal image returned once in Aymé's travel writing when young local women, who seemed to have a certain visual assumption of French woman, expected to see her in a "real lady" costume.¹⁴⁵

Alix Aymé stands out as an exception among French emigrant painters and the general 20th-century French painters, owing to her choice of practicing lacquer art. The reason for her actions can be explained in two ways. First of all, it may have stemmed from her interest and excitement as a French artist in local art. Her articles about lacquer all express the same view of praising this material. Not only lacquer, Aymé also practiced art with silk painting, which was also an experimental material taught in the EBAI under the stimulation of Victor Tardieu.¹⁴⁶ Both of these materials were developed at the EBAI within the framework of

¹⁴⁴ Phoebe Scott, "Colonial or Cosmopolitan? Vietnamese Art in Paris in the 1930s–40s," *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia* 3, no. 2 (2019): 191.

¹⁴⁵ Aymé, "Une étape en pays lu haut Laos," 2.

¹⁴⁶ Paliard, "Apport de la France, Promotion de L'expression d'un Style National Vietnamien dans la Première École des Beaux-Arts de L'Indochine," 189.

colonial education, promoting local artistic traditions but at the same time applying Western aesthetics, while creating space for the artist's exploration and creativity.



Figure 9. Alix de Fautereau, “Marché Annamite” [Annamite Market], *Les Pages Indochinoises* 2, no.3 (15 March 1924): 102.

On the other hand, Aymé's uncommon choice of artistic medium could be analyzed as a strategic decision in building her artist identity. French artists adopted academic art education in France and while they came to Indochina, they were on the margins of the new modern art movements emerging in Europe.¹⁴⁷ Their works focus on exploiting indigenous images and culture, the images of exotics landscape that the European were in favor of.¹⁴⁸ Aymé's works therefore also focus on the typical natural and cultural landscapes in Indochina. River and mountain landscape, local architecture, and indigenous people in traditional costumes are the most common images in the illustrations she created for *Les Pages Indochinoises*. Her depiction of Indochina met the French government's requirement of promoting colonial images, a peaceful place full of resources under the French surveillance (Figure 9).

¹⁴⁷ André-Pallois, *L'Indochine, un lieu d'échange culturel?*: 265.

¹⁴⁸ Scott, "Colonial or Cosmopolitan? Vietnamese Art in Paris in the 1930s–40s": 200.

At the same time, her favor of Japanese lacquer reflected the French fascination for art products with Far East Asian aesthetic. Lacquer art, which originates from applied arts, possesses visual advantages that make it suitable for decorative elements. Influenced by Maurice Denis, Aymé gained extensive experience in both teaching and practicing decorative art, especially in large scale paintings. This size allows her to do multiple decorative details in the visual arrangement as seen in "La Pastorale" (Figure 10). The painting depicts indigenous and European girls relaxing on the shore of a lake near a Northern Vietnamese pagoda architecture. There she described the typical plants of this area in detail down to the distinctive shape of the leaves. The application of Japanese lacquer techniques is evident in the intricate detailing of the red dress worn by a girl in the foreground, wherein the white floral pattern is achieved by carefully attaching small and delicate eggshells. At the same time, the golden bamboo clumps in the background have a subtle color gradation which could be achieved by finely grinding the gold leaf into powder and later gracefully regulating the particle density in the area.



Figure 10. Alix Aymé, “Grand Panneau Décoratif: La Pastorale” [Large Decorative Panel: The Pastoral], *France Illustration: Le Monde Illustré* no.190 (4 June 1949). (This publication does not include page number)

In doing so, Alix Aymé's lacquer art reflects the combination of different art traditions, including the European principles of artistic creation, Japanese lacquer technique, and the new lacquer technique and expression developed by the professors and the students of EBAI when working with local material.¹⁴⁹ She became one of the actors involved in the blending of different artistic traditions that took place in this colonial context. To the French colonial government, the development of lacquer art at the EBAI also demonstrated for their success in the colonial art project in Indochina. Her name thus stood out among other French artists in Indochina, as seen in the quoted compliment that Albert Sarraut indicated to her.

This chapter explores the complex interplay between personal ambition and colonial propaganda in the works of Alix Aymé. Her writings and artworks, particularly those published in French journals, reveal her privileged experience as a French woman moving within colonial spaces and, at the same time, underscore her engagement with colonial promotion, both as an art educator and as an artist. While Aymé's art illustrated for André-Palloy's argument that French artist tended to avoid colonial politics in their work, her writings indicate the opposite. Nevertheless, her motivations appear to be driven more by personal development and the enhancement of her experiences as an artist. A closer examination of her choice of art materials, particularly her lacquer art, suggests that her work could serve both the colonial propaganda of the French government and her own attempts to establish her artistic identity.

¹⁴⁹ The lacquer trees from different regions, with different methods of planting and sap harvesting, provide material with different properties.

CONCLUSION

This thesis analyses Alix Aymé's life and career in Indochina in relation to the common pattern of French migrant women's success in the colony in the early 20th century. It concludes that her case illustrates the general characteristics that have been pointed out: coming from the middle class with adequate economic conditions and having political and social connections. Approached from a gender political perspective, it also displays the influence of French men, not only limited to family relationships but also social relationships in general, on her career. I highlight that Alix Aymé was aware of the advantages of her socio-political connections and made good use of them to promote her career development, which was especially evident in her early years in Indochina. In requesting recommendations from Maurice Denis, she leveraged his social connections and influence to get the political support from the local authorities, which could facilitate her career development in Indochina.

At the same time, Aymé's educational and artistic activities indicate that she was not an exception of the general trajectory of French migrant artists in Indochina proposed by Nadine André-Pallois. She showed a strong ambition to promote her artist career, demonstrated through her diverse artistic activities in both France and the colonies. Most of these activities were within the framework of the colonial project, but at the same time, I contend that, in many circumstances, Alix Aymé expressed support for colonial politics and the French government's colonial artistic development policies. Her descriptions of the colony in her writings and artwork display a peaceful natural landscape along with her ethnographic depictions that fit the ideal propaganda image of the French colonies. On the other hand, participating in colonial art projects enabled her to explore new lands and research traditional art materials, such as lacquer art. Her attachment to this material could be explained in terms of her passion for the beauty and possibilities of the material. However, I posit that choosing a material that was not common for French artists could also be seen as a way for her to create a unique mark with her artistic

practice. Therefore, through Alix Aymé's colonial experience, this thesis studies the complex interplay between the career of a French artist in Indochina within the framework of the colonial project and her personal ambition to develop her own reputation as an artist.



Figure 11. Alix de Fautereau, *Les Pages Indochinoises* 3, no.3 (15 March 1925): 103.

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