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**LIFE STORY: To mark the 20th anniversary of the death of Bui Xuan Phai (above), a play and an exhibition of 14 of his paintings pay tribute to the eminent artist. Featured is an oil on canvas titled Old Hanoi Street (left).**

PHOTOS: SINGAPORE ART MUSEUM, GALLERY.PASSION4ART.COM

# Fame, at last

**Ignored in his lifetime, Vietnamese artist Bui Xuan Phai is now celebrated in a play and an exhibition**

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ARTS REPORTER

**V**IETNAMESE artist Bui Xuan Phai died impoverished and unrecognised in his lifetime.

Now, posthumously, he is probably Vietnam's most famous artist, with works that fetch up to \$50,000 in auctions.

His life, too, has proved to be juicy fodder for art. As this year is the 20th anniversary of his death, a play and an art exhibition paying tribute to his life and work will take place this month.

A theatre production based on his life, titled *Bui Xuan Phai*, will play at the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) from today to Saturday. It is put on by local theatre company The Fun Stage and stars Richard Chua as the artist.

A concurrent display at SAM, *Tribute To Bui Xuan Phai, 1920-1988 Hanoi*, will showcase 14 of Bui's paintings and drawings.

The exhibition and play are part of the Vietnam Festival organised by the National Heritage Board. This country-themed festival is happening across all the board's museums, including the National Museum and the Philatelic Museum.

Other events in the festival include a three-day symposium on modern and contemporary Vietnamese art and a food festival at SAM.

Says Ms Joyce Fan, 44, curator of the Vietnam Festival: "Bui is regarded as one of the eminent artists of Vietnamese modern art. His dedication to painting gained him a lot of respect.

"He was very prolific, and the lack of proper painting materials did not deter him. He is well known for his simple paintings of Hanoi's streets."

Born in 1920, Bui trained at the French colonial art academy *Ecole des Beaux Arts d'Indochine* in Hanoi, and is known for painting scenes of that city in a lyrical, abstract style.

But it was not until 1984 that he held his first solo exhibition. He died in poverty four years later from lung cancer.

The play *Bui Xuan Phai* draws on the artist's journals, which are published both online and in scholarship of his life and art.

This is Fun Stage's second go at the play. The first was in 2003, but its director Benny Lim says this production will be less naturalistic and will flesh out parts of Bui's imagination and inner life.

The play also integrates scenes of Cheo theatre, a form of traditional Vietnamese opera performed by guest artiste Eleanor Clapham. The Australian actress made waves in Vietnam as the first non-Vietnamese to practise the art professionally.

The 24-year-old will be performing extracts from famous Cheo operas, which were an inspiration to the artist. For example, an opera about a vivacious and flirtatious girl, played in the beginning of the play, parallels Bui's excitement and optimism regarding life after graduation.

Says Clapham: "My character is Bui's subconscious, and I will enhance the emotional aspects of the play."

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> *Bui Xuan Phai* plays at the Singapore Art Museum from today to Saturday at 8pm. There is an extra 3pm matinee on Saturday. Tickets at \$26 from Sistic (tel: 6348-5555 or [www.sistic.com.sg](http://www.sistic.com.sg)).