

## Drawing Insights in Việt Nam

By Carol Hendrickson

Every spring, Marlboro College offers one or two semester-long courses that include a travel abroad experience. A few years ago, I had the opportunity as part of a Freeman grant held by the college to participate, along with students, in a study course focused on Asia.<sup>1</sup> The year that I participated, the course was titled Việt Nam: Revolution and Restoration, and it included a three-week trip to north and central Việt Nam. The classwork introduced our group of five faculty and twelve students to key figures and events in the history of Việt Nam, and the trip complemented this learning with visits to cultural, historical, and conservation sites. In addition, we were divided into three student/faculty groups, each with a different focus: ecology (biotic diversity and human uses of the environment), visual arts (traditional art and architecture), and the Vietnamese people's experiences and uses of nature in urban and rural settings. I was a member of the third group.

Like my students, I was not an expert on Asia, let alone Việt Nam. As an anthropologist and Latin-Americanist, I had helped organize a number of courses and study trips to Mexico and Cuba, but Việt Nam was an entirely new challenge. Because of this, I needed to include myself when I considered what we might do when we arrived in the country and moved from site to site. I asked myself: What kinds of observations would be immediately available to us? What sorts of activities would provide good opportunities for independent discovery?

On previous experiential learning trips, I had learned that keeping a visual record is a valuable method of record keeping and an excellent complement to written notes and photographs. Drawing fosters habits of looking deeply at new surroundings and can be done almost anywhere.<sup>2</sup> Of course, what students look at and what they include in their field journals will depend on the focus of their academic projects, as well as what happens to catch their eyes and interests. However, a few general observations point to the worth of drawing as one of a number of research methods useful for experiential learning.<sup>3</sup>

- **Dwell somewhere for a while:** While people can certainly draw from memory or a photograph, the ideal experience entails going somewhere, standing or sitting, and putting pen, pencil, or paint to paper. This forces the observer to look closely, draw, and then draw again. Drawing takes time and concentration, so encourage students to stay for a while and deepen their powers of observation. Sketching can also be done in the context of waiting, which is something that all travelers face whether they want to or not. I remember a student drawing on the grounds of a hotel in Hoi An, a lovely coastal town in Việt Nam. While waiting for others to arrive, she became engrossed in making a detailed drawing of a native plant.

- **Draw wherever you are:** Drawing is a very flexible activity that doesn't take up a lot of space. Draw while you're waiting for food, sitting in a park, or traveling on a bus or train. Don't mind if there are bumps of the



Illustration 1: Urban architecture, by C. J. Walker.

pen or splotches of food because these are linked to the moment. Annotate what caused the bump or blotch and you'll remember that experience.

- **Drawing with awareness of visual traditions:** When we travel, we take with us the visual practices that we've learned growing up. As part of the preparation for a trip, students should be introduced to some of the visual traditions of the place they are about to visit. Whether it is using different types of brushes, paper, or paint, or learning different ways of representing the world, the experience will push students to broaden their practices and understanding of different cultural perspectives.

- **Drawing as part of a larger mindfully engaged process:** Because drawing takes time, the process encourages engaged thinking. As you draw, you come to see in the dual sense of the word: perceive visually and understand. Unlike much writing, drawing in the field makes you want to look up and down from your page, paying attention to both the world in your notebook and the world "out there." What ideas emerge in the



Illustration 2: Map of Mai Chau, by C. J. Walker.

process? Do patterns, shapes, or objects suggest ideas related to a research topic or reading? Example: A student draws the layout of a pipe-house in Hanoi, from which emerge questions about the history of the houses in terms of residency patterns. Another sketch meshes with thoughts about architecture and sustainable practices.

• **Drawing as a complement to writing and other forms of record keeping:** Drawing can lead to writing then back to drawing in a give-and-take process of keeping a journal. Drawing can likewise inform and augment what is captured in photographs, audio recordings, ephemera collections, interviews, and more. Example: A student map of the rural community Mai Chau includes sketches of roads, geographic features, residences, notations about places visited, and the nature of agricultural production and road conditions.

• **Drawing as participatory:** Drawing can be much more of a social process than writing. Strangers rarely stop and ask people writing in public what they are writing. Sketching, on the other hand, can be a magnet not only for people to stop and talk (or gesture) to you, but can also lead to sharing. A person might offer to draw something (a map, for example, or a detail that you haven't gotten quite right). Drawing in public can also be a “kid

magnet” asking: “Do you want to draw something?” is an offer often accepted.

• **Drawing, memory, and emotion:** Drawings can preserve not only the look of what is “out there”—visual memories of certain events, people, things—they can also preserve a sense of the emotions or sentiments. The unusual green of the rice fields and the smell of the earth in Mai Chau during our visit there prompted the university student who was acting as our translator to comment rather wistfully on the impending rice harvest. The drawing now triggers not only my memory of a place and a set of experiences but also the emotion expressed by the young man and his visual-olfactory links to the rice harvest.

• **Beyond drawing:** While I have framed this discussion in terms of drawing (in a very broad sense), the creation of visual field notes lends itself to other visual/material efforts. Ephemera can be easily included on journal pages; the stuff that all of us collect during a trip can become part of a more permanent record. Items can be annotated and, if they aren't precious and in need of being preserved separately, can be glued on a page to form an ethnographic collage. This in turn can prompt insights. The litter, for example, from one segment of a trail in

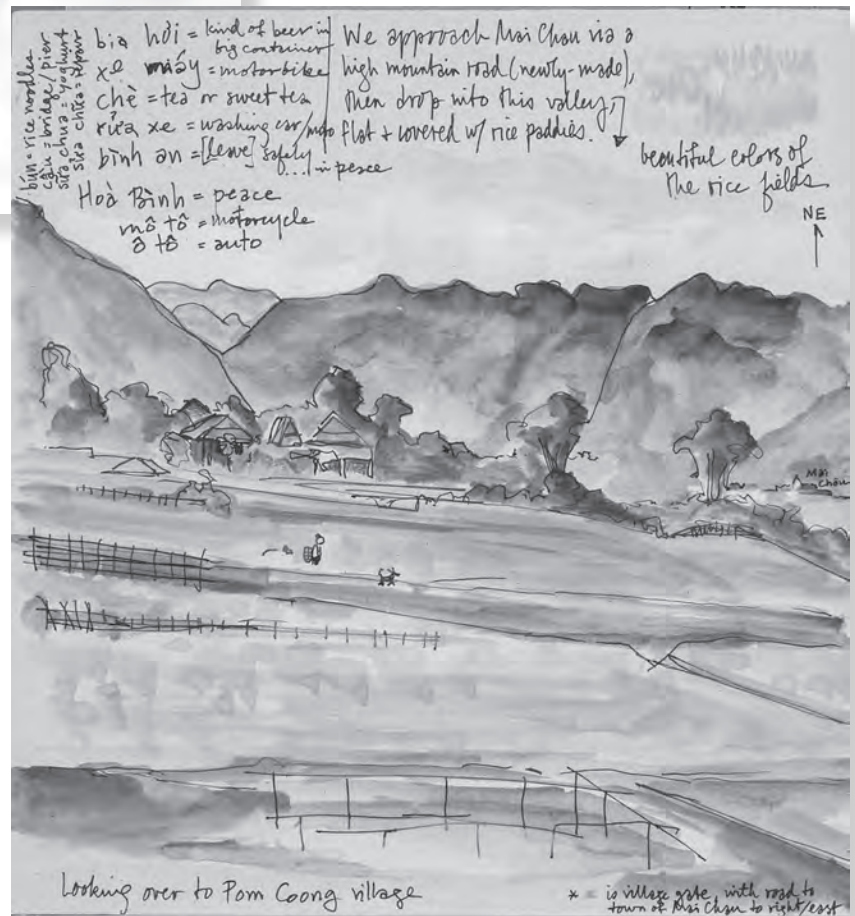


Illustration 3: Mai Chau rice fields prior to harvest, by author.



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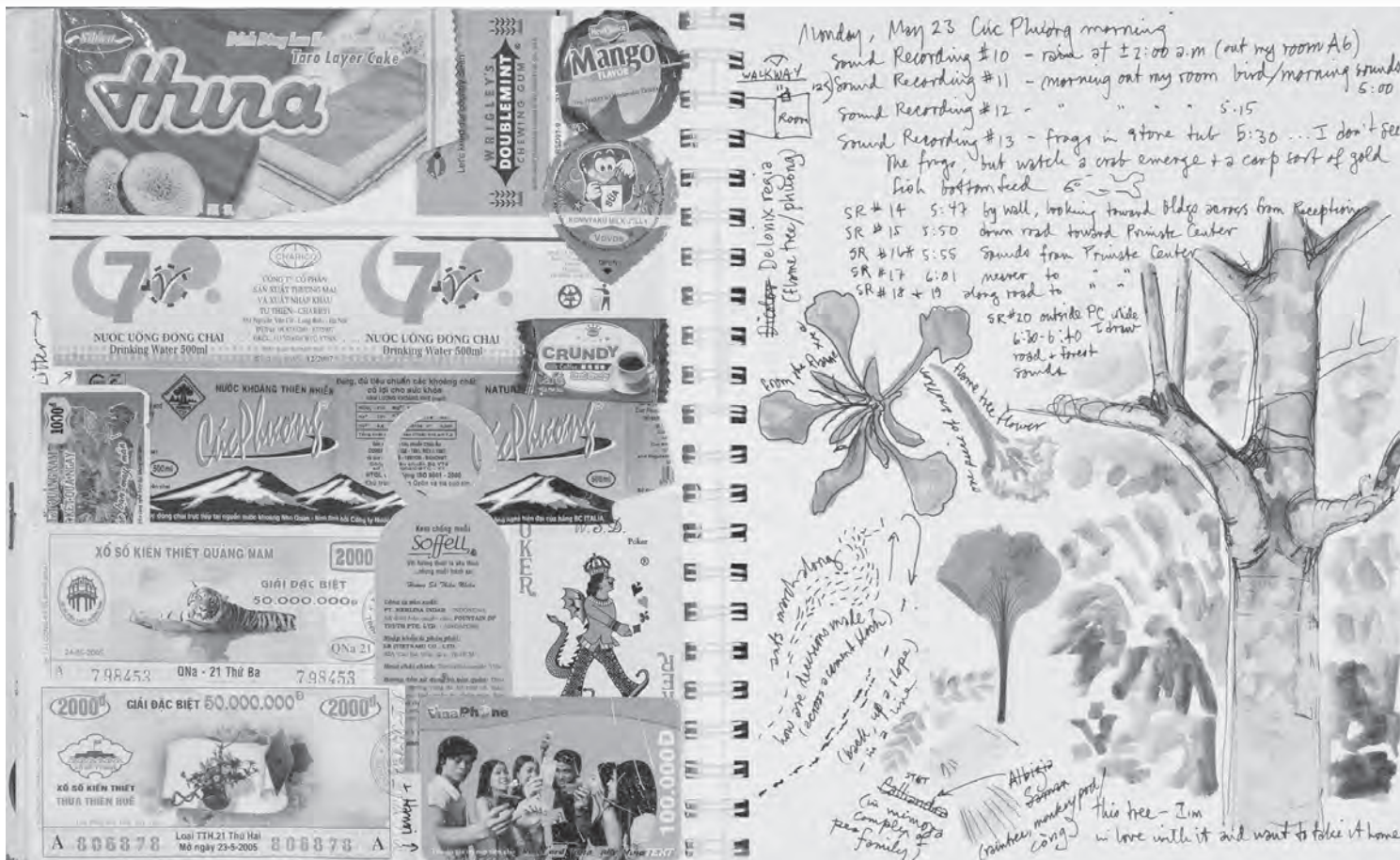


Illustration 4: Cúc Phương litter collage, by author.

Cúc Phương National Park created a document of people's actions and suggested the use value (now past) of particular materials.

• **“But I’m not an artist”**: A common comment from people asked to practice visual field notetaking is “I can’t draw.” One way to respond to this is to indicate different ways of making marks on a page that are meaningful for documentary purposes but not something that calls for an ability to represent the world with great skill. A square of color might be a meaningful record. (What is the color of rice as it nears harvest time?) How about the layout of local roads? Lines suggesting the direction of gestures or movements can get around having to draw the human figure in more detail. Marks on the page can also give a sense of the context in which a person is working. Sweat stains can be a reminder of the intense heat of Việt Nam in May, a smudge of fruit a reminder of an eating experience, or a red-brown line the color of the clay earth (the mark having been made with a piece of earth).

Along with these points in support of drawing as part of field work, I include the **ethics of drawing**. This is not the place to go into a lengthy discussion, but as with any field method, there are ethical questions to consider, particularly when it comes to drawing people or drawing in sensitive places such as shrines or temples. How are people being represented? What constitutes respectful sketching of humans and other subjects? When is sketching appropriate or inappropriate? These are all questions worthy of discussion in class and during a field trip.

Our journey to Việt Nam was part of an ongoing exploration of the use of visual field notes as part of student and faculty research. It is not the only method I would want someone to practice. However, I have come to realize how these visual notes can be used to support the educational goals of a trip as well as engage students—and others with whom they share their work—in an ongoing learning process. ■

## NOTES

1. This and other Marlboro College study trips to Asia were made possible by a grant from the Freeman Foundation (2002–2012).
2. Under the label “drawing,” I include work with pens, colored pencils, paints, and even the earth or stone of a place if it can be used to make marks.
3. For a more theoretical treatment of visual field notes, see Carol Hendrickson, “Visual Fieldnotes: Drawing Insights in the Yucatan,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 24, no. 2 (2008): 117–132. For a different treatment of the Việt Nam material, see Hendrickson, “Ethno-Graphics: Keeping Visual Field Notes in Việt Nam,” *Expedition* 52, no. 1 (2010): 31–39.

CAROL HENDRICKSON is Professor Emerita of Anthropology at Marlboro College. She received her PhD in Anthropology from the University of Chicago. While her principal field research has been conducted in Guatemala with Mayan women weavers, as the sole anthropologist teaching at Marlboro College, she regularly included Asian materials in her classes and participated in study trips to China, India, and Việt Nam.