Vietnam Fine Arts Museum

A PERSONAL VIEW

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In 1962 government designated a site for the Vietnamese Fine Arts Museum, and at the same time the collection programme began. The building already on the site was constructed in 1937 to house a girl’s boarding school, and the conversion was carried out over the next four years. The long narrow three-storey building had full length corridors on each floor, with upper floors accessed by wooden staircases located in stairwells at each end. It was not a large building. The first director, Nguyen Do Cung (1912–1977), brought enthusiasm and a deep knowledge of Vietnam’s cultural history to the task, and under his guidance, the interior was converted into modest display areas, and the exterior façade modified to reflect the Vietnamese heritage it was to hold. (Illustrated in the Introduction as the lead photograph, and above as the late Nguyen D. Cung’s initial sketch.) The basal area of the ten column supports in the portico feature lotus-petal bands inspired by those in the traditional pagoda, and upper struts were added on the portico (1). The original gothic windows were changed, decorative terracotta inserts placed below second floor windows, and an upward sweeping roof-top finial introduced to the central roof-line echoed traditional pagoda roof-lines. The museum opened its doors to the public, June 24th, 1966.

AS NOTED in the Introduction, the original museum building has undergone two significant expansions since inauguration, doubling the original exhibition space, allowing many more works to hang, and more scope in arranging the exhibits. The larger hanging spaces are particularly beneficial for an appreciation of the lacquer and oil paintings respectively. These changes, together with the installation of new lighting, better showcase the collections, which in turn brings a new level of appreciation. Visitors are now able to pause and contemplate the paintings due to new seating arrangements (2, 3).

The art works are exhibited according to media, and within that, according to chronological flow. The historical starting point is a small collection from prehistory, which includes Dong Son artefacts. While sculptures and ceramics featured in the main date from the Ly dynasty (1009–1225), paintings which make up the largest body of works on display, date from the beginning of the 20th century. In the case of sculptural works remaining in situ, particularly iconic Buddhist sculptures in pagodas, the museum exhibits replicas. Rubbings of significant stone and wood friezes located at other sites are also featured.

The sculptural exhibits on the ground floor of the main building focus on the feudal period (see Pham Ha Hai). The main gallery featuring the majority of sculptures is arranged in such a way it shows the different cultural flows simultaneously at work in the different levels of society.
2 View of lacquer gallery, with new lighting and seating

3 View of oil painting gallery. Foreground sculpture by Diep Minh Chau (born 1919).
Chi Vo Thi Sau (Vo Thi Sau). Bronze, height 127.5 cm, 1956
The museum’s rich holdings of popular carvings sourced from village communal houses are displayed in a small area which opens into a much larger space with three-dimensional works, in stone, terracotta, raw wood, and wood-core lacquer, interlinking court, pagoda and village (4). Thus the simple vernacular perspective of the village sculptor working in raw wood is displayed adjacent to formulaic wood-core lacquered Buddhist sculpture, and the style favoured for members of royalty. This juxtaposition creates a sense of the fecund culturescape at work among different levels of society, as well as the divide. This is evident simply by walking through this gallery.

The concept of fine arts was introduced into Vietnam during the French colonial era. Following the establishment of the Fine Arts School of Indochina (FASI) in Hanoi in 1925, the first batch of students graduated in 1930. The museum gives prominence to artists that studied at FASI (see Nguyen Binh Minh). Paintings on silk are exhibited on the second floor. Among the significant works are those by Nguyen Phan Chanh, who developed an innovative painting style in the 1930s that earned him the title, founder of modern silk painting.

Six galleries on the first floor, are devoted to lacquer painting (son mai), with smaller galleries hanging the early works of pioneers in the field, and one large gallery hanging later works that run to the end of the 20th century (2, 8). The term son mai describes a technique that involves the application of many layers of paint onto a plywood support, and the polishing of each application, until the final product is as smooth as silk. The traditional colour palette used in craft guilds was limited to five colours, a reddish-brown described as cockroach brown, red, gold, silver and black. In the 1930s concerted efforts were made to develop the medium from one used in the crafts, to one that served fine arts. This change was only possible because young artists were prepared to experiment for many years in order to bring about the technical changes necessary. Its emergence as a fine arts medium, and its development can be traced through the lacquer works hanging in these galleries, from the work of the pioneers to contemporary lacquer artists (see Nguyen Binh Minh).

Gallery 11, a small gallery on the first floor, exhibits works from the Resistance War (1945–1954). Anyone interested in Vietnam’s 20th century history should find this gallery of interest. In this decade war was an all-consuming fact of life, reflected in the portable mediums, ink, pencil, watercolour, pastels, most on paper supports but some on silk, oil on canvas, and woodblocks. Gradu-
Luu Cong Nhan (1930–2007). Suong som Ba Vi (Early Morning Dew at Ba Vi). Oil on canvas, 82 x 104.8 cm, 1993

Dang Duc Sinh (1927–1997). O moi xom (In Every Hamlet). Oil on canvas, 85 x 115 cm, 1984

Phung Pham (born 1934). Chong han (Fighting the Drought). Lacquer, 113 x 133.2 cm, 1990

View of through-corridor with sculptures. Foreground, Le Thi Chinh (born 1939). Co gai Quan Ho (Quan Ho singer). Bronze, height 110 cm, 1958

ates from FASI, famous in Vietnam, are also represented here. A large bronze sculpture Om bom ba cang (Grasping a Three-Pronged Anti-Tank Bomb) (5) by Tran Van Hoe (1912–1984), 1960, is strategically placed immediately inside this gallery. While it is confrontational, it does define the theme (see Nguyen Binh Minh).

Oil paintings are exhibited on the second floor, and the layout follows that on the lacquer floor. The earliest paintings exhibited pre-date the founding of FASI. The influences of European artists, particularly French is evident in the early years, as too are those from Japan in the 1940s, and later still Socialist Realism. Again, the compact arrangement allows the visitor to view all these developments through a large number of works in a manageable area (3, 6, 7).
The works of large numbers of living artists also hang in these galleries. Their numbers suggest a need in the near future for a museum of contemporary art. That would allow living artists greater opportunity to show their works in their lifetime, and free space for early works currently confined to storage. It would be a pragmatic response to the fact of an ever-growing collection vis-à-vis limited hanging space, even with the recent extensions.

On the second floor, small adjoining galleries 21–22, show works on paper from the second half of the 20th century in different mediums, and different genres. They feature universal themes, but there is a definite sense of place. This is an intimate space suitable for works of small dimensions (11–15). Contemporary sculptures are located throughout the galleries (3, 5, 10). They are also located in the walk-through corridors, for example the second floor corridor features five sculptures (9). Yet those placed in corridors are in danger of being passed unnoticed.

During the 1970s a three-storey annex was constructed close to the original building. It shows ceramics in the basement, in a series of small interconnected well-lit gal-

13 Tran Tuyet Mai (born 1958). Chua dau may xe lua (Locomotive Repairs). Woodblock, 30 x 40 cm, 1983

16 Incense burner. Heavily decorated with applied motifs, moss-green and brown coloured glazes. Stoneware, height 40.5 cm. Bat Trang, 16th–17th century

17 Double gourd. Stoneware, blue and white. Cham Island underwater excavation. Chu Dau, 15th century

18 Dao Van Can (1894–1976). Stoneware, height 31 cm. Prince Hung Dao Reading the Art of War, first half 20th century

19 Flowerpot in shape of water buffalo. Stoneware, unglazed. Tho Ha, 19th century

The presentation is uncluttered, and the distance of the objects from the viewer allows close inspection. As elsewhere in the museum, the arrangement is chronological. There is a comprehensive selection from the museum’s large holdings, a small number from underwater excavation, and samples of bleu de Hue. The largest numbers on display are from the northern production centres, dating from the 11th century, and this is largely about glazed ceramics (16, 17). However, it is good to see included in the glass cases ceramics from unglazed ceramic traditions (19). It is also good to see the less exposed younger ceramics traditions of Lai Thieu and Bien Hoa, from the south, if only in small numbers (20). I doubt if the works by early 20th century potter, Dao Van Can
(1894–1976) (18) are exhibited outside this museum. To my knowledge this is also the only museum to exhibit works by pioneers in the field of modern ceramics (21–23).

The ground floor in the annex is reserved for special exhibitions, while a large gallery on the first floor features a comprehensive selection of traditional woodblocks. There are Hang Trong coloured woodblocks with religious themes, with printed black outlines and hand applied colours, and Dong Ho colour woodblocks in which a separate woodblock is used for each colour. There are works from provincial and regional traditions, Lang Sinh from Hue, Kim Hoang from Ha Tay province, religious themes from Nghe An province, from Vu Di, Vinh Phuc province, and the works from minority communities. Not to be overlooked in this gallery is a glass cabinet with a display of traditional children’s toys, some used until recently, but now fading into obsolescence under a deluge of cheap plastic imports. This open space with good lighting shows these works to best advantage. This is a colourful display, visually attractive, and informative on the different woodblock traditions in Vietnam.

The large second floor gallery is devoted to applied decorative arts (24). A dense display, not arranged chronologically, the gallery shows the handiwork of anonymous craftspeople, products from workshops and guilds from the 19th century, some notable 20th century lacquer products also from workshops, and with one or two individual artisans identified by name. In essence this gallery is about cultural diversity. It cuts across ethnicity, class and religion, and there is an interesting variety of aesthetics at work. Aesthetic appreciation at the imperial and cultural capital, Hue (1802–1945), or among Hanoian urban elite in the same period is quite different to that in the agricultural heartlands, or among ethnic communities that live mainly in the northwest, the western highlands, or the far south. The utilitarian and ritual objects exhibited are rich in collective imagination and artistic expression born out of the shared lives of each group. In the context of this gallery they are about craftsmanship and beauty and are not intended to be viewed as either ethnological or anthropological specimens. On display are objects made out of a staggering variety of locally sourced indigenous raw materials: timbers such as ebony, plant fibres such as rattan, bamboo, cotton, plant dyes, ivory, abalone shell, oyster shell, mother-of-pearl, coconut shell, gold, silver, copper, bronze, brass, lacquer, clays and handmade paper. The range of technologies employed is limited only by the imagination and the technological
24 View of gallery of applied decorative arts

25 Armoire. Wood with openwork, inlaid mother-of-pearl floral design with squirrels, tiny ivory balusters in horizontal bands, and a pair of painted dragons inserted behind glass. Brass pulls, 46 x 44.5 x 26 cm. Kinh. Hue. Thua Thien Hue province, Nguyen dynasty (1802–1945)

26 Ritual vessel. Coloured enamels with gold, on bronze support (phap lam), height 32 cm. Kinh. Nguyen Imperial Workshops. Hue. Thua Thien Hue province, 19th century
skills of the maker. These raw materials are converted into houses, boats, textiles, baskets, jewellery, kitchen and farming utensils, hunting weapons, furniture, musical instruments and ritual objects (25–37).

In this brief commentary it is only possible to refer to some exhibits, yet within each category there are many objects and nuances. Many have had little textual exposure. The present arrangement to some extent precludes a close examination of the fine minutiae on more intricate artefacts. Yet, it does present a vivid, visual panorama that leaves a first time visitor with a strong impression of the rich mosaic of traditional crafts, and the sheer creative ability of the fifty-four ethnicities that make up the nation Vietnam.

30  Square tray. Wood with ivory panels featuring carved openwork design. Kinh. Hue. Thua Thien Hue province

33  Variety of silver objects in repoussé, some with applied gold. For personal use. Lower right, tubular lime container with attached pick. Made by Kinh silversmiths, Hanoi, and used by many ethic groups

34  Torque, silver. Four concentric bands secured with ties, and a simple engraving on front panel. Gia Rai. Gia Lai province

36  Betel Box. Wood inlaid with mother-of-pearl. The insert is divided into compartments. Kinh. Ha Tay province

37  Armoire, wood. With carving, open-work, and heavy mother-of-pearl inlay, 114.5 x 113 x 29 cm. Kinh. Hanoi, Nguyen dynasty (1802–1945)