



World of Art

Art from Vietnam

In the ongoing discovery of contemporary Asian art, one wonders what is next after China and India. Some expert eyes are set on Indonesia – but others are anticipating that the next big thing is Vietnam.

Words: **Patricia Hiramatsu**

ALTHOUGH CONTEMPORARY Vietnamese art is still relatively scarce in European and American auctions, several galleries attending the Affordable Art Fair, as well as major London galleries, have spotted the potential of these artists. Vietnamese art is also increasingly visible in Christies' and Sotheby's spring and autumn sales in Singapore and Hong Kong.

Dealers argue that the absence of copyright laws in the country is hampering the recognition of contemporary Vietnamese works in the global art scene. But in spite of this, everyone agrees that Vietnamese contemporary art has huge potential. It is new, it has a solid French fine art foundation, yet it maintains an original identity. Crucially there are many young and talented artists to choose from and prices are still reasonable.

“Vietnamese art has huge potential... There are many talented artists to choose from and prices are still reasonable”

Raquelle Azran, a Franco-American collector and curator who specialises in contemporary Vietnamese fine art, explains that the history of Vietnamese fine art starts with the French in 1925. This was when Victor Tardieu, an Impressionist artist and friend of Matisse, established the highly reputed Hanoi Academy of Fine Arts, which is still active today.

Since then, many trends and schools have developed, says Azran, but one can basically distinguish three periods of artistic evolution.

Firstly, from 1925 until 1945, a classically romantic and impressionistic period during which artists were exposed to Western styles and mediums, such as oil on canvas.

A second period of creativity then occurred from 1966 until 1970, when artists rejected the European school and looked to folk art and modernism. The trio of artists known as the fathers of Vietnamese contemporary art were active during this time: Bui Xuan Phai, Nguyen Sang and Nguyen Tu Nghiem. Works by all three artists are now selling for tens of thousands of US dollars in Singapore and Hong Kong auctions. The trio did more than anyone to bridge the gap between Vietnamese traditional and contemporary painting by incorporating people, dances and street scenes, while refining age-old mediums ▷

FOUR OF THE BEST

“Vietnamese art is defined by its brimming vitality, lush colours and directness,” says collector Raquelle Azran. Here are four contemporary artists from the Asian country to look out for

LA BA QUAN

After graduating from the Hanoi Academy of Fine Arts in 2000, the young artist has been working on a series of *Happy Hour* paintings – see *Hanoi Happy Hour V*, pictured right. “Quan paints the men on the street and in the cafés of Hanoi, in the spirit of Berlin avant-garde art of the Twenties,” says Azran. “Quan is unique within the Vietnamese art oeuvre in his focus on male figures that are louche, liminal and gripping.”



HONG VIET DUNG

Greatly influenced by Buddhism, Hong Viet Dung uses pale, muted colours to create works of extreme calmness and inspire meditation and contemplation. *Landscape With Buffalo*, left, is a perfect example of his fondness for setting small figures or focal points in vast, hazy settings. His work is constantly in high demand – both in galleries and auction houses across the world.

DANG THAO NGOC

Dang Thao Ngoc only graduated from the Hanoi Academy in 2005 but Azran is already an admirer of her work (see *Red Lips*, right): “Ngoc paints her view of the world in vivid oils on canvas. Her imagery draws on traditional Vietnamese iconography as well as contemporary themes. She is fascinated by women’s conversations she overhears and records. These often serve as inspiration for her contemporary narratives of life and love.”



NGUYEN THANH BINH

The Wiltshire-based gallery Oc-Eo Art has a large collection of this more traditional Hanoi painter’s work. “We have been exhibiting him profusely,” says Oc-Eo founder Peter Quintana. “He is well known for depicting female figures wearing the white *Ao Dai* dress, but also draws inspiration from music, his daughter [see *Ballerina*, right] and Japanese Haiku. He aims to convey a message of immense significance with few colours and details. He has been exhibiting abroad since 1991 and is an artist of great potential!”

such as silk or lacquer-on-wood painting.

Finally, we have 1980 up to the present day – a period of unprecedented creativity and variety. Encouraged by the government's policy of economic reforms (or *Doi Moi*), artists showed hardly any inhibition and work in all sorts of styles, revisiting traditional themes (the buffalo, the village, ancient dances) and exploring contemporary issues (woman in society, globalisation, alienation, ecological issues). Collectors and dealers alike are closely observing the developments.

“Installation art and performance art are in the early stages of development,” says Azran. She explains that even within this younger generation of artists, “traditional genres such as painting still predominate.” However, as more artists begin to study and

exhibit abroad, she foresees wider diversity that will earn contemporary Vietnamese art the international recognition it deserves.


Contemporary Vietnamese art is highly decorative but there is little reference to the country's terrible past, in particular the Vietnam War and its legacy. Azran explains that wartime art exists but the Vietnamese, “a most practical people”, have chosen not to dwell on the past. Instead, they focus on the present and future.

French influence

Peter Quintana, founder of Oc-Eo Art – an online gallery based in Wiltshire that regularly exhibits Vietnamese art in London – confirms this and says that is precisely what attracts him to Contemporary

Vietnamese art.

“You look at the work that some of these artists produce now and it is peaceful and graceful, and you wouldn't believe that these artists spent part of their formative years struggling to grow up in a country that was divided or at war,” he says.

“Contemporary Vietnamese art differs from other South East Asian art in that it has naturally a very strong French influence. But right from the beginning artists were encouraged to paint in their own language, and they have succeeded in using Western techniques and adapting them to present something that is distinctly Vietnamese. So, when you look at a Vietnamese painting, you see something that is both familiar and mysterious at the same time.” 



WHERE TO SEE Vietnamese art

■ Durlacher Fine Art

Representing 12 Vietnamese artists
(020) 7603 9953. www.durlacherfineart.com

■ Kings Road Gallery

LAPADA-approved contemporary dealers
(020) 7351 1367. www.kingsroadartgallery.com

■ The Marigold Gallery

Asian art dealer and bespoke consultancy
www.marigoldgallery.com

■ Oc-Eo Art

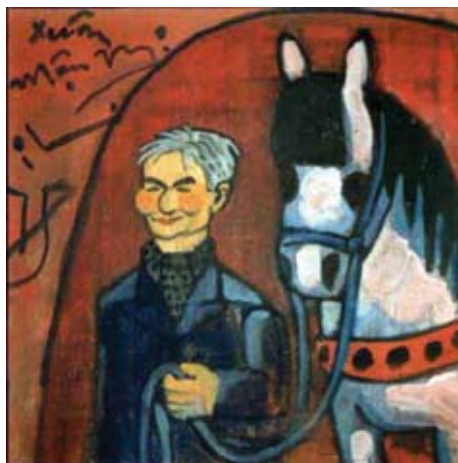
The Wiltshire dealers are showing work by Vietnamese artists at Mall Galleries
28 October – 9 November. www.oc-eo.co.uk

■ Raquelle Azran

Specialist dealer based in Israel and the US
www.artnet.com/razran.html

■ Smithfield Gallery

A new show of emerging Asian artists features Vietnam's Nguyen Hung Son
3-15 November. www.asia-fineart.com



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Ho Huu Thu, *Mandolin*, lacquer on wood, 91x104cm;

Nguyen Than, *Nude*, watercolour on rice paper, 60x80cm; Nguyen Yen Nguyet, *Still Life*, watercolour on silk, 68x68cm; Bui Xuan Phai, *Man and His Horse*, oil on wood, 34x34cm

OPENING PAGE Nguyen Dieu Thuy, *Under the Shadow of Bamboo*, oil on canvas, 150x120cm