



What About Vietnam S4-1 - Art in Vietnam – storytelling at its best

Kerry Newsome: 00:01

Xin Chào and welcome to "[What About Vietnam!](#)". One of the topics that doesn't get covered very much about Vietnam is art, and it really should, because it is one of the experiences you're going to get to have when you come to visit Vietnam. Art in Vietnam is everywhere. And as you're going to hear in this program, there are a lot of expressions of art, and it has evolved over time. And we're going to really take it back 100 years and talk about just how Vietnam has developed in the art world.

00:39

I'm joined today with Bridget March. She is a Prolific artist herself. She, originally, trained as a freelance product designer. She became a senior lecturer at Leeds University of Art and moved to Saigon in 2012. And that was really to fulfill a lifelong ambition to be a full-time artist. She was inspired to stay, and she went on to then produce three books about Hội An, Sapa and Saigon. And those books include some of her art and sketches. She has had seven solo exhibitions of paintings and drawings in Vietnam galleries, international hotels. She's also gone on to curate the fabulous art space at [Anantara Hội An Resort in Hội An](#).

01:36

She has her own gallery. And she's very much about supporting local artists in their endeavors and their journey. She gives up the best galleries that you have to see and go to in Vietnam. So that's going to be in your show notes on our website "[whataboutvietnam.com](#)", you can make arrangements to go to her gallery when you visit Hội An. And those details will also be included in the show notes and the transcript. See below. So, make sure you check that out.

02:12

We're in for a great show. And I think we're going to learn a lot about art. And certainly, I hope it's going to give you a greater appreciation of it in Vietnam. Let's welcome Bridget March to the program. Good morning, Bridget March. Welcome to "What About Vietnam".

Bridget March: 02:32

Good morning, Kerry. It's very nice to be here.

Kerry Newsome: 02:36

It's been a while in the baking, hasn't it? I'm so delighted to have you on the show. But two years into COVID, here we are. And I've finally got you on the show. So, I'm very excited. We're going to be talking art today. And I think for people who are coming to Vietnam and get the chance to see some art in Vietnam, I think it'd be really handy for them to know what they're looking at, what they're seeing and maybe some background. So, I'm going to ask you, Bridget, if we can start just talking about a little bit of history of art in Vietnam, and just what people can expect to see when they come.

Bridget March: 03:23

Sure. I remember when I first came to Vietnam, 13 years ago, I was lucky enough to go to the Hanoi Museum of Art. And in fact, that's where I fell in love with Vietnam, because it's chronologically organized. And I felt I was seeing the whole story of Vietnam in pictures. And some of it wasn't easy to understand, because it's so different from western art.

So, some of the landscapes are a bit strange. But in fact, they are representational mountains, are about reaching to heaven. Rivers are about pathways in your life. And you will always see that the people within these landscapes are tiny, really tiny. And that's because it represents men's very small place in the universe. So, they're very different to like quite magical, and the Vietnamese and Asian person can stare at one of these paintings for a long time for an hour and actually meditate about these things, very different from Western art.

Kerry Newsome: 04:40

And I think, that is really worth mentioning because there are aspects of religion in that philosophy of hope, aspirational aspects, and sometimes as a Westerner, we come in, we blow into the country, we get off the bus or whatever, and we're thrown on a tour. And then somebody says, "We're going to this gallery. "We walk in, and we see these pictures. It would have been really handy for someone to just give me some context. And I think those words that you've just shared with us now helps a lot. Can we go into the actual art forms, I guess, as in lacquer art or silk paintings, things like that. Can you talk to us about that?

Bridget March: 05:38

Sure. So, the traditional art forms, in this part of Asia starts with black ink, which is used in representational landscape paintings, and calligraphy. And the calligraphy here is very much the same as it is in the Arab nations, where the calligraphy is also a meditation. It's not necessarily that you think it's beautiful, but you meditate on the words or the meanings. And they're like meditations in your day, remind us to be good and thoughtful and all that sort of stuff.

06:24

Then there is lacquer art. And the lacquer comes from spindly little trees, it's collected in very much the same way as rubber. So, the trees are scored and the lacquer drips out. The lacquer in each nation depends on its climate, just like wine. And in Japan or Korea, the trees are a bit fatter, and the lacquer flows more freely. The trees in Vietnam are really skinny. And they actually collect the lacquer in seashells strapped to the stems, the trunks of the trees, and so little comes off. And it's said by the practitioners that the Vietnamese lacquer is the most difficult to work with. And it's highly prized.

07:21

Most lacquer painters in Vietnam, using Japanese, Korean or Chinese lacquer, and finding practitioners using Vietnamese lacquer is rare. There are some masters in Hanoi. And we actually have a world specialist in that art form living in central Vietnam. Things like watercolor and oil painting did not come until the French arrived. These were imported from Europe.

07:58

And, in my very limited experience in this, as you well know. I've been gone on a world discovery tour with art in Vietnam. I discovered lacquer art and the basic artwork skill very late. And to the end that I actually bought some during COVID in Australia at a gallery that unfortunately had to close. But what I got to see just before COVID actually, in Saigon, was them crushing the eggshells, the pearl, etc., to raise a different surface to the lacquer art. So, you can buy urns and you can buy beautiful bowls, etc. But the actual paintings or pictures I bought were abstract. But they have these beautiful insets of pearl and different shells, etc. Can you give some explanation of that artwork skill and how long it takes to create one of these because I've been told that many layers upon layers, it can take a while?

09:31

No matter where you are in the world. Artists, hundreds of years ago had to use the materials that were available to them. And the lacquer was the medium which carried the color. So, they would take some yellow clay, mix it with the lacquer to make a nice sort of yellow ochre color. They would crush beetles to get the red cochineal, the red blood from them, mix it with the lacquer to create a red color. And other stones or powders, herbs would be crushed and mixed with the lacquer.

10:19

Now, one of the colors that they were not able to produce was white. So, they took chickens eggs, or ducks' eggs, I should say. They took ducks eggs, because they're so white and crushed them. And depending on how finely you powder them, you can either create something that looks a bit like crazy paving, so it's textured, or you can crush it very finely to get a kind of powdered finish. But of course,

it's calcium. It doesn't make a very smooth white. So, the white is always slightly textured and some artists like it to be more textured, larger lumps of shell than others.

11:11

And they also used mother of pearl because it glitters, and it's been used in many different ways. Sometimes paper is actually coated with the mother of pearl shell to make it glittery. In lacquer paintings, it tends to be used in quite large chunks. To decorate precious items in the painting like a lady's fan, or an emperor's hat would be highlighted with mother of pearl, or mussel shells, different shells, oyster shells, mussel shells, all give different types of mother of pearl. So, this is just using local materials to create the colors you need.

11:59

The base of the painting is clay. These days, the layer of clay is laid down onto plywood. Years ago, it would have been on to a stable dry hardwood. And you take about a three-millimeter layer of clay to get a smooth surface onto which you can apply your color. Whether you're using eggshell or mother of pearl, which is quite lumpy, you actually have to carve a small hole in the clay to inlay the eggshell of the mother of pearl. So, the surface of the painting is smoother. It is really labor intensive. And when you have put all your colors down, you then grind the surface. And depending on how much you grind it, you can reveal colors underneath, or leave colors on the surface. And the finer the abrasive that you use to polish the lacquer, the shinier it will be.

13:15

It can take days to dry the lacquer in between every coat. And it only works in semi tropical and tropical climates because it dries in humidity amazingly. So, this does not work in a climate like the UK, Northern Europe, it just doesn't work. You have to have humidity to "dry" or "cure" the lacquer.

Kerry Newsome: 13:52

And as I got to speak to one of the craftsmen in a factory in Saigon, as I said back in 2019. And he went to great efforts to explain the layers and how many layers it may require to get the right finish that they want to achieve. And sometimes for us, when we're buying lacquer art, we can get the cheaper versions which have only got maybe, one or two layers so it comes off very easily versus the craftsman who has gone to the extra time and effort and labor to increase the layers to increase the life, I guess, of the said item. Is there any truth to that?

Bridget March: 14:53

Totally.

Kerry Newsome: 14:54

Oh, thank God for that. [laughter]

Bridget March: 14:57

The cheapest lacquer Arts, which are just a few dollars are not even using lacquer. They're using commercial paint like domestic gloss paint. It has nothing to do with lacquer at all. And then there's the mid-range lacquers, where they're using traditional materials, but maybe using the cheaper Korean and Japanese lacquers. And only, as you say, using 1, 2 or 3 layers. The quality of a piece of lacquer work is always reflected in the price. So, if you're looking at a work of art, which is over \$6,000, you're looking at the real thing. And if it's costing less than that, then you're looking at something that is made from less expensive materials, a quicker process. And at the very lowest level where you're paying \$10 for something, these are just mass produced for the tourist market, they call them lacquers. But they're not even lacquers.

Kerry Newsome: 16:18

I bring that up, because I've often got thrown that line with a group where we've talked about lacquer art, and they've said, "Gosh, I saw these ones in this gallery, and they wanted, I don't know, it was hundreds of US dollars. And I think I saw the same thing in the markets for about \$25." And, you know, I'm hesitant to reply because I need to be careful what I say there. But yes, one is closer to the real thing than the other, can we talk a little bit more? I really want to delve into your history also in Vietnam, and where you're sitting now in Hôi An and I want to expand a little bit more to the other art forms to ceramics, and pottery and maybe even to the lanterns, and some of the other art that people can just

keep their eyes peeled for because there are some beautiful aspects to those. And I would love people to know about that. Can we throw that into the mix?

Bridget March: 17:33

Yeah, you can. I think it's important to define the difference between art and craft. So, craft is where something is reproduced again and again, it's handmade. It takes a great deal of skill. But it's reproduced again and again. And you'll see that in the beautiful embroideries that you'll find in the ethnic villages done by the older women. They're really painstaking. And a jacket, a skirt, a good quality object will take two years to make because they grow the plants that make the fibers that make the weaving that make the dye.

18:32

And it's a very long process. But they're reproducing the same designs generation on generation. And you can identify exactly the village from which somebody comes by the patterns they reproduce. And this is craft. It's a traditional craft. Art, however, is when an artist is producing something original, something conceptual, a new idea, a new design, not just a variation on something that's been done for a long time, like lotus blossoms, all of ours, but actually something original. So, I would like really to talk about the artists that produce these things rather than the craft sort of produced.

19:35

And at the moment, there are actually very few artists working in ceramics. But those who do have their work exhibited all over the world. And at the end of this, I would like your listeners to have access to a list of 10 or 15 artists, the kind of work they produce and where they might see their work.

In Hôi An, there's a lot of traditional crafts, the ceramics. We have a ceramic village, there's woodworking. And amongst the woodworkers, there are artists, and there are craftsmen. And some of the artists who are carving things like jackfruit wood produce the most amazing work and they can be commissioned; you can actually ask them to do something unique for you. And they offer for sale, some unique works of art.

20:44

Alongside that they're producing highly skilled craft work, which is reproduced and available for sale. The lanterns. This is a craft. Lanterns are produced all over Asia. And there's a kind of a story that goes with them, that it was the fishermen who were creating fish traps using bamboo, combined with the tailors who had the silk, they put them together. And they were covering fish traps with silk to create lanterns inside which there would be some oil or candle perhaps. And the lanterns in central Vietnam, I can't speak for what's going on in Hanoi and Saigon. But in central Vietnam, the trend is moving to much more patterned lanterns. They're becoming much prettier. And there is some hand painting going on. And again, you can commission somebody to hand paint something for you. But it's a craft rather than art.

Kerry Newsome: 22:05

That's a great story about the lanterns. My God! I didn't know that. That is terrific too. And I can see that that's feasible, there's some logic to that. Absolutely. Bridget, I want to take you back now to your arrival into Vietnam, in 2012, into Saigon. We've talked about the fact that you had this as a big wish on your list to come to Saigon to further your own artistic journey. Can you talk to us about that? What was some of the significance of you coming to Vietnam and reasons, I guess? And also, where was Vietnam at in the art sphere or the art world at that time? We're talking Saigon, 2012.

Bridget March: 23:05

No, really not that long ago. Although quite a lot has changed in the art world.

Kerry Newsome: 23:09

Yes. Just a bit.

Bridget March: 23:11

Yeah. Anyway, I suffered from the same as many aspiring artists when I was young. It's a bit like, "Don't let your daughter go on the stage, Mrs. Brown. Don't let your daughter become an artist. Don't let your son become a dancer. Don't let them join a rock band. It's going to end in failure."

Kerry Newsome: 23:42

It's not a real job.

Bridget March: 23:42

You're going to starve, you know. Anyway, so I went to university, I did design, and I was a successful product designer for 20 years. And then I ended up as a senior lecturer in an independent art school in northern England. And at the same time, I'm painting, I'm etching, drawing. I'm getting my work into galleries. And I really want to give up the day job and be a full-time artist. But the truth is that in the Western world, unless you are independently wealthy or have a wealthy patron, it's really almost impossible to give up the day job because the cost of living is so high. And a new artist needs to build up a portfolio of work. And even if you're brilliant and amazing and you have a famous patron and you've got a million dollars, it's still going to take you three or four years to become established. I didn't have that privilege.

24:54

I came to visit a friend in Vietnam, and she suggested that I come here and spend a bit of time, I thought, well, I could take a year out. And I could do that. But 10 years later, I'm still here, and I could afford to do it in Vietnam, the cost of living is much lower. And because the art scene was still emerging, after years of oppression. Western artist arriving and doing watercolors and publishing books of sketches and so on, was quite a novelty. And I, very quickly had a little bit of success, enough to establish me, and I was interviewed by TV stations and all kinds of publicity.

25:47

At that time, Vietnamese artists were still being censored by the culture police. And if they weren't doing kind of portraits and flowers and landscapes, if they were trying to say something a bit more conceptual, then the culture police would land on them and insist that the work was destroyed. I worked in a gallery in Saigon for a short time and was familiar with the activities of other galleries in the city. And it was very regular for exhibitions to be visited by the culture police on the opening night. And they would come in and they would take pieces of work off the wall, or insist that they be covered with brown paper, because they felt that they were not fit for public consumption. Or they offended the government's view of the way Vietnam should be represented.

26:55

For example, there was an exhibition of a young photographer, Vietnamese photographer, who was doing fabulous photography among some of the older buildings in Saigon, really great color, contrast light. But they covered the whole of his exhibition with brown paper, because they thought that it represented poverty. And that was not how Saigon wanted the world to perceive it. They didn't know that westerners coming into the country knew exactly where "Saigon was at that it was at a turning point in its life, it was turning from a third world city into a modern superstar. And this transformation and the remnants of the old city are considered very beautiful by westerners, who are interested in buying photography. A lot of that kind of thing was going on. My work was considered to be very safe, because I was doing nice little watercolors of lovely urban and countryside landscapes. And I became very popular because of that, and the authorities love me, because I've made Vietnam look very beautiful.

27:48

Kerry Newsome And I think, it's worth mentioning that because people, when they do get to look at a piece of art, are going to draw certain perceptions about what the story is behind it, let's face it. Good art, to me speaks to you. It has a story and there's something in that. And you're right, Vietnam is very big on making sure that they are seen by the world in a particular way, depending on, as you say, the culture police's perception at the time. I think, there has been an evolution that we are witnessing that Vietnam is becoming a little bit more open about sharing some of their not so good views of their countryside, or their history or their whatever. Because, it's about keeping it real also, for the rest of the world.

Kerry Newsome: 29:28

History is not always going to look beautiful, it's going to have aspects of horror and pain and shame and destruction, but that would be every country possibly in the world. So, why would Vietnam be any different? However, moving on, you and I spoke earlier about the artists and the differences in three main cities being Saigon, Hué and Hanoi. Can you speak to that a little bit more, I found that really interesting?

Bridget March: 30:01

Sure. So, prior to the French arriving, artists weren't just artisans or crafts people. And they would be reproducing beautiful works of art, for temples, for the homes of the wealthy, for government buildings, and so on. They were not really permitted or encouraged, or able to express themselves. It wasn't appropriate for people who created art, to have to produce conceptual art, or something that even identified the artist up until 100 years ago. And artists would sign their work with the name of the emperor, not with their own name. And there are still some beautiful works in Hoi An, which assigned to this way.

31:14

For example, in the **Cantonese assembly hall**, in the old town, there is the most beautiful, vigorous dragon, which is constructed out of concrete and Broken China, a bit like the work that Gaudi does in Barcelona, exactly the same craft. And there's a signature on it, that the signature is the name of the emperor at the time. And we will never ever know the artist who developed the idea for this particular dragon.

31:56

So, when the French arrived, they wanted to bring with them some of the western art, music, dance architecture. And gradually, they established different schools where people could study this, the teachers initially were French. They also took some Vietnamese artists and crafts people back to France, to learn how to use some of the Western materials and to learn from European artists, music, art, fashion, and all the different arts, literature, poetry, and so on. And then these Vietnamese came back to Vietnam and were established in schools about the very first was in Saigon in 1903, something around that date.

32:56

The next one was in Hanoi. And the third was the most modern, which was I think, 1957 was in Huế. And each one of these schools developed its own way of interpreting the arts, because of the teachers who were working there, and Hanoi featured very much on technique. And Hanoi is still very well known for copy artists, they are brilliant, they can copy the Mona Lisa, almost perfectly. Because they're so skilled at manipulating the colors and the materials. They're fluent in that language. But they're not, there weren't anyway, so skilled at developing new concepts in art, or messages, or styles. In Saigon, they focus more on the technical arts, like graphic design, architecture, the kind of things that build a modern city. And of course, alongside that, came artists and a much more modern Western, and ultimately Americanized approach to producing art, fashion, design, literature.

34:26

Huế, is kind of somewhere in the middle, and out of the Huế School of Art have come some amazing colorists. The art has a very European feel about it, but it's fresh, it's uniquely Vietnamese and the use of color, the landscapes, the buildings, the interpretation of the environment. And, if you go in and out of enough galleries and you see the names and origins of enough artists, you can begin to see where they came from, which school they studied in, becomes clearer.

Kerry Newsome: 35:05

Okay, so if I'm coming to Vietnam, and I really want to seek out some art that you've talked about, the kinds of work that we've discussed on the show today, where do my guests go? Where do they hit?

Bridget March: 35:23

Alright, I've got a list.

Kerry Newsome: 35:25

Excellent. I knew you would, Bridget. I was counting on that. I'll add that, just before you say anything. I want everyone to know that list will feature on the website, it'll have a link to the list on the show notes. So, whether you listen on iTunes, or Spotify or any of those, it'll always direct you back to where you can get that list. So, all yours now, Bridget, just so you know that list going to be there.

Bridget March: 35:57

Okay, I think everybody knows, Asia can be really tricky, because you can't recognize what's authentic, and what is fake, what's a copy, and what's the real thing. So, it's important to know where to go. And I

have a list which will direct your listeners to the three major public museums of art in Hanoi, Huế, and Saigon. And there's quite an interesting young contemporary art museum in Da Nang, that's worth a visit. But in addition to those, in each center, I'm offering what I know to be the best art galleries, if you're looking for the real thing.

36:54

Now, look, when you're visiting, when you're traveling, I've done the same. You're not necessarily looking for authentic works of art, you're just looking for something which is going to be a lovely souvenir of your visit. It might be something abstract, it might be a landscape, might be a portrait, and you'll find those. You can't help everywhere you go; you'll trip over those. And local artists usually have their work hanging out on the street outside their studios. It's not hard to find. But even when you go into an artist studio, you don't really know if the artist is producing original work, or whether he or she is actually reproducing the work that his grandfather did. All that some famous artists in Hanoi or Saigon produced 100 years ago, you have no idea.

37:43

So, you really need to go to some of the better art galleries, and they are in that list. My little gallery in central Vietnam is just about the only place in central Vietnam, which properly represents, offers a full service for local artists and visitors. My aim in the gallery is to support local artists, with the website, videos, interviews, you can come and talk to me about the art. I can arrange visits for you to meet the artists or even spend time with artists if you want to have an experience with them. A full-service gallery like mine, gives you the trust you need to spend a bit more than average on art. And I've listed similar places in "Hanoi and Saigon. And it's not easy. You need to know you're in the right gallery. If you're a collector, at least.

Kerry Newsome: 38:57

Yes, and I think that is just such a great point because I don't know how many times, I've been kind of double checking myself to go, "Is this the real McCoy or is this just a really good copy shop or whatever." And I hate the fact that Vietnam gets called copy-copy. I think that really- that brand, that everything is copy-copy. I really want to do everything I can on this show to stamp that out. I'm not saying that there isn't copy-copy stuff out there.

39:39

Of course, that's a reality. But to brand it totally that there aren't true artisans out there in Vietnam that are doing the most exquisite art and guess what, you're not going to get it for a nickel. People have said to me before, "I think Vietnam could get expensive." And I said, "Compared to what?" It's interesting, for a lot of people there is a, I guess a perception that they're always going to get something for a nickel or dime in Vietnam that they wouldn't pay that extra money for that beautifully designed dress, that's just a one-off piece of art that if you walk into a room, you are going to be a showstopper.

40:36

There's leather work, there is beautiful ceramics that. Yes, they're not nickel and dime stuff. And I've been to your gallery, I've always loved the work that you do, and more so probably the work that you do for artists, and to give them that platform because as you say, it's hard to find. And it's hard to find that authenticity. And it's that authenticity that you sell, mostly, I think, is the gift to us all.

Bridget March: 41:12

So, I'll tell you now, my favorite places to visit.

1. Number one has to be the "**Hanoi Museum of Art**. It is large, it's well organized. It's amazing. The breadth, the variety of work is amazing. And you really learned something about Vietnam without having to read a book or a guidebook. It's all laid out before you in pictures. It's a story book. And all the different art forms are there, lacquer, oil, watercolor, silk, painting, ceramics, sculpture, and the collection there covers a period of about 1500 years. It's really great. It's great. And it's right in the heart of the most interesting part of the city very close to the famous temple of literature. And it's really easy to find it's very accessible.

42:23

2. My second most favorite place is the **Museum of Art in Saigon**. It's in the most gorgeous building in the middle of town near the central market. And again, it's arranged slightly differently, and it has a more contemporary feel than the Hanoi one. It's more colorful, there is more abstract stuff. There is some of that Russian brutalist stuff. There are bronzes and much more ceramics. It's a really lovely place to go. And it's not as big as the Hanoi Museum, you can do it in about an hour.

43:04

3. And my third is, absolutely, don't miss this one. This is just outside Huế. And it is the [Lebadang Memory Space](#), and it is new. It has been architect designed, it's in the most beautiful hillside setting. The building itself will take your breath away. And inside is the story of the life of one Vietnamese artist who came originally from a village near Huế. And the work is fabulous. There are videos to sit and watch. It's an amazing place and it's got a great cafe and a gorgeous garden setting.

So, those would be for me, the three, don't miss these. If you're interested in art, don't miss these three. And then if you've got a bit more time, have a look at the list that accompanies this and go exploring.

Kerry Newsome: 44:15

Definitely. And I hope to see you Bridget in Hội An later this year, can't wait to catch up face to face. It's been a while. Thank you again for coming on the show and sharing your insights into art in Vietnam.

Bridget March: 44:31

It has been totally my pleasure and it's really lovely to see you again, Kerry, after such a long time. Thanks.

We speak about a list in the show of Bridget's favourite galleries, the blog listing those is here;-

<https://www.marchgallery-hoian.com/post/vietnam-s-contemporary-art-in-2022>

The gallery details and all her social pages are here. Feel free to reach out directly.

www.marchgallery-hoian.com

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