

The Exquisite Art of Lacquer Painting

Cover
Story

ArtBlue Studio helps us discover the wondrous creativity of Vietnamese lacquer paintings.

Lacquer painting is a uniquely Vietnamese art form with a beauty that is striking: shiny gold and silver leaf and the whiteness of crushed duck eggshells contrast with rich natural-colour pigments, all applied through multiple layers of translucent lacquer to create paintings of dramatic lustre and strong three dimensional effect.

Lacquer paintings are said to be 'Inverted' paintings: the artist applies multiple layers and then sands and polishes the outside layers to reveal the colors of the lower layers. The artist creates detail by removing the paint rather than by building it up with a brush or palette knife, as in oil painting. The technique is extraordinarily demanding as each step of the polishing process must be precise; the slightest mistake can be disastrous. Each layer must dry fully in heat and humidity for several days before the artist can proceed to the next step; cold and dry weather prevent the lacquer from ever drying completely. The layering of lacquer and the drying, sanding and polishing process can take a month or more. The final result, however, is a limpid painting of amber-like depth, with magnificent light and texture.

That Vietnamese artists are the only ones to paint with lacquer in this way is a result of a remarkable blending of cultural influences. The history of lacquer goes back more than a thousand years to China, where it was used decoratively to protect objects and wooden structures such as lacquer-ware dishes or the pillars and wooden structures of temples. Chinese traders brought lacquer to Vietnam, where the process achieved great popularity. The



Halong Bay by Nguyen Hong Son, 70 x 140 cm, lacquer



Playing Chess, 60 x 80 cm

Horse by Duong Sen, 60 x 60 cm

establishment in Vietnam of French fine arts academies during the early 20th century Colonial period resulted in a unique blending of traditional lacquer techniques with western art concepts. Nguyen Gia Tri is regarded as the first artist to have achieved harmony using this melded medium.

Today, there is a small group of master lacquer artists who are able to reach harmony and perfection in their paintings. Do Xuan Duan, who at over 70 years old keeps painting from heart and soul, is recognized as one of the best living lacquer artist in Vietnam. With unique use of colors and contrast, his paintings convey the beauty of everyday life. ArtBlue Studio also welcomes to Singapore two other renowned and award-winning masters of lacquer painting: Duong Sen, best known for his ability to create emotion in abstract works, and Nguyen Hong Son who depicts with exceptional technical skills the charm of Vietnam.

With its large collection of works acquired directly from master painters, ArtBlue Studio is a main supplier of lacquer paintings to galleries outside Vietnam, working directly with museums and galleries throughout Asia and the world to support the growing interest of the international art world in acquiring Vietnamese lacquer masterpieces. Despite her commitment to promoting Vietnamese art worldwide, ArtBlue's energetic and enthusiastic owner, Ms Phuong Nguyen, welcomes the opportunity to escort visitors on a private tour of the gallery's works, sharing her own passion for the wondrous lacquer art of Vietnam.

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