

## Unraveling the Uniqueness of Vietnamese Lacquer Art

By [Suzanne Macguire](#)

Vietnam art is one among the many art traditions, which has absorbed multiple influences without sacrificing its uniqueness. The history of Vietnamese art and painting narrates an elaborate tale of influences, especially the Chinese and French of the colonial period. Surviving these influences, Vietnamese art has emerged from dormancy and is once again seeing the limelight, especially in France and other European countries. Vietnamese paintings in lacquer have played a major role in the sustenance of the entire tradition of Vietnamese art and paintings.

Vietnamese lacquer art works date back to more than two thousand years. Lacquered items found in ancient tombs in Vietnam, date as far back as the third and fourth centuries B.C. The first instances of lacquer work in Vietnam were found in household items and wares such as the links in the planks of fishermen's boats, peasant household basket ware and wickerwork, sumptuous gilded objects, mother-of-pearl inlay work in furniture and so on. Later the traditional lacquer technique was applied to paintings, thus creating a new genre of art. Initially, these lacquer paintings portrayed the scenic beauty of nature but with the changing socio-political scenario, socialist and communist overtones overshadowed every other theme. However, during 1980's and 1990's, the younger generation of Vietnamese artists rejuvenated the old art form, along with introducing some innovative experiments.

Currently, lacquer art works are produced in large numbers in Vietnam, particularly in the Phu Tho Province. The entire process requires careful attention and patience. In the Phu Tho Province, resins are harvested from the Rhus Sucedanea Tree and converted into natural lacquer, which is then applied to paintings and fine art. The traditional process of lacquer painting requires a minimum of 75 days and is quite complex. Lacquer paintings are done on wood and any imperfections on it are first sealed with lacquer. Traditionally, lacquer comes in three colors- brown, black and vermilion. Artists also use a new technique called chiseling, which gives a richer mix of colors and an apparent sense of size and distance. Next, the wood is covered with a piece of cloth glued to it, using the sap of the lacquer tree and then coated with a layer of the sap mixed with earth. The board is sand papered and recoated with a layer of hot sap. The board is then polished to lend a smooth black surface with a brilliant luster. Once the board is prepared, the painter begins to give expression to his imagination. He draws the outline and applies color one by one so as to let each coating dry slowly. Polishing and washing are the final steps of the procedure, which should be attended with great care. These add a brilliant shine to the surface of the painting. Years of experimentation have produced some great stuff where Vietnam artists have used such materials as plant ash, crushed eggshells, gold and silver to beautify their works.

Such patient and laborious work ought to be unique and this perhaps, is the reason for the growing popularity and demand of Vietnamese lacquer paintings today. Realistic themes depicted in so many works through each historical period, convincingly confirm the expressive, inexhaustible resources of lacquer art. Such Vietnam artists as Nguyen Sang, Nguyen Tu Nghiem, Le Quoc Loc, and Sy Ngoc have contributed greatly to enhance the value and prestige of [Vietnam Art](#) and painting, especially the lacquer tradition.

Suzanne MacGuire is an Internet marketing professional with expertise in content development and technical writing in a variety of industries.