

Q&A

Setting the Record Straight

Kerry Long-Nguyen is something of a firebrand. And she's on a mission. Frustrated by the dismissal of Vietnamese arts in a range of publications on South East Asian art, Kerry set out to put together a tome on the culture that has fascinated her for over 30 years. Five years of interrupted labour later, *Arts of Vietnam: 1009 — 1945* was published earlier this year.

Douglas Pyper caught up with her, and received a damn good schooling.



WORD: THERE SEEMS TO BE A TONE OF ANGER IN THE BOOK WHICH APPEARS TO ALSO HAVE BEEN ITS STIMULUS. I REFER TO THE “DISREGARD, OMISSION, PERFUNCTORY HANDLING” TO WHICH YOU FEEL VIETNAMESE ART HAS BEEN SUBJECTED AND ALSO ITS PRESENT STATUS AS “NEGLECTED” AND “MISUNDERSTOOD”. CAN YOU ELABORATE ON THIS MORE?

KERRY: Frustration but not anger and I’m surprised you see it like that. Certainly frustration at the absence of comprehensive literature on the arts and its development, especially when I first became interested in the subject this was so, and I can say that turned to exasperation as this situation remained unchanged across the decades. I am talking about the literature, general books on the arts of Southeast Asia, and museum catalogues. [...] In the last decade or so I was often contacted by museum personnel from different countries seeking information about, for example statuary, embroidery, ceramics. It was clear a fog existed and a book on the subject was badly needed, and since no one was doing anything about it, I decided I should come to the task! At least it would be a beginning.

WORD: YOU DESCRIBE VIETNAMESE ART AND PEOPLE TO BE “INTIMATE, ACCESSIBLE AND EMPHATICALLY HUMAN”. WHAT LEADS YOU TO THIS CONCLUSION? I’M PARTICULARLY INTERESTED IN YOUR DESCRIPTION OF CERTAIN ARTISTIC PRACTICES AS “EMPHATICALLY HUMAN” — CAN YOU EXPLAIN THIS DESCRIPTION?

KERRY: Firstly, let’s not confuse the arts, the culture and the people, what I am concerned with is the arts. I think your quote comes from the front flap of the book? If we go into this a little deeper and if I might quote from the conclusion, “Its structures — palaces, pagodas, temples, and dinh — press close to the earth and embrace the landscape; they are on a human scale, intimate and personal.” I am talking here about scale. If you have visited old pagodas, dinh, or the Ngo Mon Gate or Palace of Supreme Harmony in Hue, I think you will know

what I am talking about. I then went on to say, “This is the essence of its arts: genial, accessible, and emphatically human.” [...] In the book my statement about being accessible should be read in the context of time and place. The arts were not so esoteric as to be beyond the ken of the ‘people’; they understood its language, although the message might be interpreted a little differently at a distance from the capital, as at village level. From what survives we can see the ‘people’ also participated in the making of the arts, the degree of that depending on circumstances. In the Mac period in the 16th century, for example, statues of the king were made and placed in small village pagodas, and even if somewhat farouche, the point is this tells us something about the king and his relationship with his people and their attitude towards him.

WORD: IS IT FAIR TO SAY THEN THAT VIETNAMESE ART IN THE PERIOD COVERED WAS MOSTLY INFLUENCED BY RELIGION AND THE WHIMS OF DYNASTIES?

KERRY: Well I wouldn’t describe it as the whim of the dynasties. Most dynasties had a very clear plan about the direction they wanted the country to take, especially when founded, and the arts served that purpose (there was no TV or other media outlets to help with that), but within that there were a great deal of variation. Again if we look at the beginning of the Ly dynasty there was an urgent need to unite the different clans, and this was achieved with the help of the Buddhist hierarchy, and the iconography of the dynasty sent a clear message of this mutual support. However, at the same time artisans indulged in a good deal of creativity, and I think the results are quite ingenious. This idea of the arts serving the needs of the dynasty was of course not unique to Vietnam, similar situations also existed in Europe with regards to religion and the arts with both state and church as patron of the arts in different countries in different periods.

WORD: THE BOOK IS DIVIDED INTO CLEAR HISTORICAL AND CHRONOLOGICAL ERAS — WHICH

DO YOU FIND MOST ARTISTICALLY INTERESTING?

KERRY: The Ly, Mac, Restored Le and the Nguyen Dynasty were all greatly interesting. It’s a tragedy that so much of Vietnam’s arts have been lost for all sorts of reasons and the gap this creates in knowledge is regretful. Let’s hope that from now on there are no more losses, and of course archaeology may yet turn up some surprises.

WORD: YOU WRITE IN THE BOOK, “AS ONE PROGRESSES SOUTHWARD THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE DIVERSIFIES; ITS ARTS, THE PRODUCT OF A MORE RECENT PROCESS OF CULTURAL SYNTHESIS; A FACT THAT PRESENTED INTERESTING CHALLENGES IN THE PURSUIT OF MY OBJECTIVE”. IS IT RIGHT TO CONCLUDE THAT SOUTHERN ART IS MORE DIVERSE? CAN YOU EXPLAIN WHAT THE RECENT CULTURAL SYNTHESIS WAS AND WHAT CHALLENGES DID THIS POSE FOR YOUR WORK?

KERRY: The art of the Kinh anchored in the river plains in the north is thousands of years old while 1753 marks the official beginning of Vietnamese administrative and military control of the far south. By this time this territory held Vietnamese settlers, Chinese refugees who were permitted to settle there after the fall of the Chinese Ming dynasty, as well as Cham and Khmer inhabitants. All these people lived in this land and so to write about the arts of the Kinh in the far south was more complex. Their relationship with other ethnicities had to be considered; in fact evidence shows artisans from different ethnicities worked together along with others who sometimes came from the centre and further north to work on specific projects. It wasn’t until 1802 that the geographical entity that comprises the modern nation was unified. So, you see, this southern part of the country was ‘young’ in terms of Kinh arts, and these Kinh were exposed to different sets of influences to those in the north. These Kinh had to be innovative in this different physical environment, climate, vegetation, etc. in which they found themselves.

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