



MAKING IT BETTER

Folk Arts in Pennsylvania Today

An Essay

by Amy Skillman

“I hope that through our art, Americans may better understand the beauty of our culture, the truth of our experiences and all that we bring to America.”

The first thing Tuoc (pronounced Tuk) did when I arrived at his home to talk about his paintings was to offer me a cup of tea. It was strong jasmine tea sent to him from family members still living in Vietnam. While sipping the warm amber liquid and inhaling its sweet aroma, we spent a little time getting to know each other.

“My dream as an artist in Pennsylvania,” he told me “is to teach the Vietnamese style of painting to our Vietnamese youth so that they may understand their culture and be able to share it with future generations.

Born in North Vietnam in 1953, Tuoc’s family moved to the south after the division of Vietnam into two countries and the establishment of the communist government in the north. He grew up in the large capital city of Saigon, now called Ho Chi Minh City.

An Early Interest in Art

One of 10 siblings, Tuoc was always interested in art. His uncle taught painting at the University of Fine Arts in Saigon so Tuoc was able to take classes with his uncle and develop his skills. His parents had different aspirations for young Tuoc and discouraged his painting. They wanted him to get a university education. Tuoc’s persistence and his obvious skill eventually won them over.

After high school, Tuoc was drafted into the army where he remained until the end of the war in 1975. He didn’t pick up his brush again until 1976. The newly established government in Vietnam had strict ideas about what an artist could paint. Before he was able to practice as an artist, Tuoc had to attend government classes to learn what images and ideals were acceptable to include in his paintings. The government was establishing theater troupes to travel around the countryside, offering educational plays and performances. Vietnam is a very diverse country with over 60 different clans or ethnic groups. The actors in these troupes wanted to portray the people of the region they were visiting. Tuoc’s first job was in a factory designing clothing for these actors.

Tuoc would paint images of village men and women in traditional dress and the tailors would make the costumes from his paintings. He also illustrated billboards for the government, with images announcing traffic safety tips and slogans about work production. While we talked and enjoyed our tea, he showed me several pictures of the paintings he had done while still living in Vietnam.

After two years working for the government, Tuoc and his brother set up their own painting business. They continued to paint billboards and signs for small companies such as restaurants and coffee shops.

Traditional Uses of Painting

Another source of income was through the painting of funerary portraits. In Vietnam it is typical to commission an artist to paint the likeness of a deceased parent or family member. This painting becomes part of the family altar where offerings of thanks and prayers of guidance and protection are made to the ancestors. Tuoc became particularly skilled and sought-after as a funerary portrait artist. The duty to mourn one's parents in death is felt so strongly by Vietnamese, that it is considered a sacred obligation.

The traditional time of mourning for parents is three years. When death is about to take place, the entire family assembles around the dying relative. A strict silence is observed. The eldest son or daughter bends close to record the last words of advice or counsel. At this time, the eldest child suggests a name for the dying person because it is considered unfortunate to continue the same name used in life after the relative has died. In the past, the family might build elaborate funeral houses with statues representing the deceased. Today, the funerary portrait serves the same purpose of showing respect for one's ancestors and keeping them alive through memory.

The Vietnamese writer Le Van Sieu explained the importance of traditional funeral ceremonies by saying "Funeral rites ...are based on the concept of the indestructible soul and the close relationship between members of the same blood line. Assuming this responsibility, generation after generation, retains the strong fabric of our society." Many Vietnamese living in America today practice Catholicism or some other form of Christianity. The tradition of the funerary painting continues and is often on display during a funeral service.



Teaching others to Paint

The Tran Brothers maintained their business for nearly ten years. Tuoc and his brother also offered private classes to young adults aspiring to be professional artists in Saigon. He said, "I just recently began to teach painting in the United States but taught for several years in Vietnam and while I was living in the refugee camps in Malaysia. In particular, I enjoy teaching our youth."

"I am getting older and will eventually die. Our kids need to learn this part of their culture. It is easy for them to forget since they have left Vietnam. They are caught between two worlds: being American in school and being Vietnamese at home. It is very hard for them to feel good about their Vietnamese identity when they have so much pressure to be American. Learning to paint in the Vietnamese style will help them understand who they are and where they come from."

Coming to the United States

In the late 1980s, Tuoc spent a week in prison for drawing an image that was considered unacceptable by the government. From this experience, he realized the extent to which his artistic freedom was curtailed and he began to dream of escaping to a free country where his children could have a bright future. He left in 1989 and spent three years in refugee camps in Malaysia before finally receiving permission to come to the United States. In September 1991, he arrived in Ohio. He moved to Pennsylvania in 1992 to be with family and friends.

Tuoc now lives in Harrisburg with his wife and three children. His first job was with Midstate Billboard drawing images for their billboards. He left his position to help his nephew open his new grocery business. He now works on the maintenance crew at Trinity High School. All three of his children love to draw.



Funeral Practices

The Vietnamese attach great importance to two traditional family obligations: to care for their parents in their old age and to mourn them in death. Mourning begins even before death is imminent. Men usually take the name “Trung” which means faithfulness or “True” which means loyalty. Women are usually called “Trinh” which means devotion or “Thuan” which means harmony.

According to ritual, when the parent has died, the children do not, as yet, accept the idea of death. They place a chopstick between the teeth of the deceased and place the body on a mat on the floor in an effort to “bring it back to life”. The next rite in this tradition is for the eldest son or daughter to take a shirt the deceased has worn in life and to wave it in the air and call upon the soul of the dead to return to the body. The corpse is bathed which symbolizes washing off the dust of the terrestrial world; hair is combed and nails clipped. Money, gold and rice are placed in the mouth of the dead to indicate that the deceased has left this world without want or hunger. The corpse is then wrapped in white cloth and placed in a coffin. Members of the family form an honor guard around the clock until a propitious time for burial is selected.

During the period of mourning, descendants wear special mourning clothing. These garments are made of crepe of ample cut with a seam in the middle of the back. All are required to cover their heads. In times gone by when Confucianism was still a dominant influence in life, mourning the dead was considered more important than the affairs of the living. A mandarin has to resign his position and retire to his home. He was expected to erect a tomb where the parent was buried and there conduct memorial ceremonies. Mourners could not marry, comb their hair or have a haircut. They were not permitted to eat good food or enjoy any form of entertainment whatsoever.

Recently, however, the severity of the mourning period has been abolished to a large extent. After the funeral the descendants return to work and are no longer required to interrupt their business affairs. Clothing for the mourning period has been modified to only a piece of black cloth worn around the arm, lapel or the head. Wedding ceremonies during the mourning period are still banned, but if the families have already approved of the engagement, special dispensation may be obtained through the proper rural or urban authorities.

Sources: <http://asiarecipe.com/vietorigin.html>

http://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/vietnam/05_life/05g_funeral2.php