



ROMANCE WITH VIETNAM

Today's Vietnamese artists storm the Western art market with their vibrant colors, flights of fancy and reasonable prices.

BY BOBBIE LEIGH

Contemporary Vietnamese painters are hitting the art world's radar screen—and collectors are taking notice. "Many people who buy these works have no previous association with Vietnam," says New York-based art dealer Judith Hughes Day. Rather, they are captivated by the way the artists blend Western techniques with distinctly Asian motifs, using mediums such as oils, watercolor, woodblock printing, canvas, silk and handmade paper.

Vietnamese art is essentially pluralistic, with no single style or subject, but it has a distinct sensibility that reflects the artist's pride of place and love of country. Although the subject matter—occasional references to Vietnamese folklore or Buddhist

traditions—may puzzle some viewers, the influence of painters like Monet, Pissarro and van Gogh is obvious. In 1925, Victor Tardieu (1867–1937), a classmate of Matisse, established the Ecole des Beaux-Arts de l'Indo-Chine, Hanoi's first official art academy, which trained students in traditional Western genres and created the educational basis for much of the Vietnamese painting seen today.

While some painters reflect that classical training, others go beyond with exceedingly adventurous and inventive paintings. Yet, in both instances, the work is as fresh and appealing—and at times as mystifying—as the country itself. Following is a sample of rising stars on the Vietnamese contemporary art scene.

PHAM LUAN



Collectors can't seem to resist the brilliant, sunny landscapes and street scenes of self-taught painter Pham Luan. His oil paintings—of school girls in white tunics pedaling their bicycles, shopkeepers selling their wares on busy streets beneath sun-dappled trees and the vibrant red flowers of banyan trees in full summer bloom—convey a deep affection for Hanoi's Old Quarter. There's no war-torn Vietnam in these works, just the spirit and grace of the past and present, depicted with thick brushstrokes, bold use of color and deep understanding of the play of light and shadow. Mere

dabs of color convey images of people, who are an integral part of his landscapes. "His goal is to share an idealistic, romantic view of one of the grandest cities in Asia," says Chicago-based dealer Julie Subra Manian.

Luan's works have a strong tactile quality due to his lively surfaces of thick oil paint. He developed his technique from books, mostly about French Impressionists. "To create such impressive paintings, they had to work with all their hearts and with a deep love of nature and people," he explains. "Indeed, I have learned a lot from them."

Pham Luan employs a vibrant palette to convey his love for his hometown, Hanoi. In his oil on canvas "Morning in the Flower Village," 2001, vividly limned flowers surround a barely visible human figure. In "On the Way to School" (facing), 2001, oil on canvas, Luan ensures that the glory of Vietnam's land- and cityscapes live on, unmarred by the inescapable advent of modernization.

