

A Stitch in Time

By Shalini Mukerji

If the bullet-marked walls of the 'purple forbidden kingdom' in Hue (recognised by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site in 1993) preserve memories of imperial glory, the dusty streets of the old city just outside the palace walls pulse with living legends. Foremost amongst them is Mr Le Van Kinh, silk embroidery artist and calligrapher who continues the legacy handed down by his father, a third-generation artisan who embroidered for the Nguyen kings. Mr Kinh's story, like that of other traditional craftspeople and tea connoisseurs, begins when Hue became the national capital of united Vietnam in 1802 under Gia Long, the first ruler of the Nguyen dynasty, and artisans from crafts villages migrated to Hue to work for the new kings and nobility. As a political and cultural aesthetic developed, distinct from that of the predecessors, embroidery – along with tea and bronze casting – became a sublime art. The "golden hand," people say of him; "Folk artist," is how Mr Kinh introduces himself.

Mr Kinh's unassuming two-storey workshop and studio-in-residence, Duc Thanh, only reveals itself once you climb the wooden staircase to his sun-filled study where every inch of wall is mounted with exquisite hand-stitched paintings. Using traditionally dyed silk threads, he depicts vignettes of a simpler life, of Vietnam outside the wars. Assuming pride of place behind Mr Kinh's desk is his first solo project, begun when he was eight years old – an embroidered painting of the royal palace. These 'paintings' are rendered with such exquisite craftsmanship that viewing them is a tactile experience.

He draws our attention to an embroidered verse in Vietnamese, a painting in which words stitched in black silk thread appear to float. There's one in English too:

*Spring goes, a hundred flowers fall.
Spring comes, a hundred flowers bloom.
In front of the eyes, life passes
On my head age soon comes.
Don't say when spring goes all flowers fall.
Last night, in the front-yard, a branch of plum flower.*

"It's an old poem about traditional values. It teaches you about life," Mr Kinh says of this poem, 'Cáo tật thị chúng' (Report of My Illness), composed by 11th century Zen master Mãn Giác (1052-1096) at the moment he left this life. Mr Kinh chose to embroider this poem about transience and hope



An embroidered painting of the royal palace, by Mr Kinh



Mr Le Van Kinh

in 1990, when a group of American journalists suggested he embroider Vietnamese poems for tourists. As word got around the world came to Duc Thanh, just as we did one afternoon when Mr Kinh asked my father to translate this poem into Hindi. He has already embroidered this poem in 18 languages and wants to embroider it in seven more.

Mr Kinh's most treasured possession is a teapot, a royal gift, which his grandfather bequeathed to him. "To me, amongst all his grandsons and sons, to me! It was his way of saying I must carry on this family tradition." Mr Kinh teaches the demanding art of embroidery to those who have the time. The art requires not only draughtsmanship from the artist, but also the dyer's skills and some part of the poet, so that images appear vibrant although muted colours are used. If the piece is viewed from different angles the colours appear to change and they emote life.

Before we leave, Mr Kinh etches a character in the 'Chữ-nôm' or 'Southern Script' adapted from Chinese, in use until quite recently in Vietnam. This one word encapsulates a sentiment understood throughout the world: 'Happiness'; the grace we carry as we depart.



Happiness in different languages

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Photos by the author