

Old flames die hard

In a village outside of Hanoi, a new pottery museum offers a contemporary reimagining of Vietnam's artisanal heritage while offering a peek into the country's storied and, at times, complicated past

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I enter Bat Trang through the village's shabby periphery. Nondescript terraced houses line the dust-encrusted streets. Pesky potholes rattle my motorbike. But as I drive closer to Bat Trang's ancient core, scenes showcasing the village's artisanal heritage catch my attention. Lithe young men secure slender jars on kei trucks. Weatherworn women hawk pocket-sized ceramic zodiac animals. Parking attendants gesture towards *Lo Bau* (Dragon's Kiln), a monstrous 19th century wood furnace. Today the beast lies dormant, but a century ago the dragon fired clay at 1300°C. Now the fossil is the oversized centrepiece of a small museum.

I haven't come to dig up old relics, but to check out the new Bat Trang Pottery Museum, which opened in April 2022. I've not had breakfast and there's half an

hour to kill before meeting the founder, so I duck into Bat Trang's labyrinthine alleyway network, an ancient neighbourhood on the banks of the Red River. *Banh Cuon Co Nghi* boasts a limited menu and simple wooden benches – tell-tale signs of decent local fare in rural Vietnam – so I stop for *banh cuon* (steamed rice pancakes with minced meat and mushroom). "I've been making *banh cuon* for 22 years," cackles Dao Thi Nghi, the cook, after splashing milky rice batter on a hot steam cloth and rounding out the bubbling pancake with a ladle. "I'm a culinary artisan!" I assume she's joking until she nods at her certificate from Vietnam's craft village association. In Bat Trang, artisanship is brandished with pride.

Back on my motorbike, I burrow out of the alleyway warren. I skirt around Bat Trang's pottery market, a trove of bargains – if you know how

Previous spread: Bat Trang Pottery Museum
This page, clockwise from top left: Ha Thi Vinh, museum funder, founder and director; upper level view of the museum's ground floor; clay sculptures inside the museum
Next page, clockwise from top left: a plate of *banh cuon*; ceramicware shop in Bat Trang; Dao Thi Nghi making *banh cuon*

to haggle – and arrive at the museum. The architecture is unlike anything in Vietnam. Several top-heavy and tiered columns sprout from the ground, merging at the top to form a canopy. The exterior walls are terra cotta brown, the quintessential colour of clay. The building is static, of course, but the swirling tiers conjure motion. I spoke about the building's inspiration with Hoang Thuc Hao, founder of 1+1>2 Architects, the firm behind the design, before coming to Bat Trang.

"The pottery wheel has been used in Bat Trang for many generations," Hao explained. "We brought that into the architecture." The firm 1+1>2 is known for projects that communicate with their surroundings. In mountainous Ha Giang province, the studio built Dao Lodge, which was inspired by the architecture and clothing of the Dao ethnicity. In central Hanoi, they used bioclimatic features from 1960s Vietnamese modernism for VIASM, a mathematics institute. According to Hao, modern architecture can build on the heritage of a place, but the designs "need to understand the cultural context."

THE UNCONVENTIONAL LAYOUT of the museum showcases Bat Trang's rich heritage across several floors. The ground floor leads to a handful of alcoves where artisans display their work. A rooftop café affords views over the Red River, once used to export pottery to Hanoi by boat. The floor in between hosts a permanent exhibition that recounts Bat Trang's long history, with antique pottery, archaic craft tools and models of various ancient kilns (including *Lo Bau*). Records indicate that Bat Trang was established in the 14th century, but villagers believe that the pottery tradition stretches back much further.



“When the emperor (Ly Thai To) moved Vietnam’s capital from Ninh Binh to Hanoi in the year 1010, his potters came with,” says Ha Thi Vinh, the museum’s funder, founder and director. Vinh’s achievements are impressive. She’s the director of Quang Vinh, a company that employs hundreds of people and exports pottery all over the world. She’s also on the board of the Vietnam Association of Crafts Villages. According to her, pottery artisans chose this spot on the Red River after receiving spiritual omens. It probably helped that Ly Thai To’s newly established capital was just a few kilometres upstream.

Vinh, who was born here in the 1950s and can trace her artisanal family history back 15 generations, says that two important factors shaped Bat Trang. The first is that the craft predates the village, so there is a long and unique history of generational know-how. The second is that Bat Trang lacks fields for rice cultivation, so people couldn’t live off the land. “The villagers had to use their skills to survive. They had no other choice,” she says.

Over the centuries, word of Bat Trang’s artisanal prowess spread. Kings and dignitaries commissioned the villagers to produce ceramic wine jars, elaborate crockery and durable bricks baked at ultra-high temperatures. These bricks now embellish temples and

palaces across the country, including the imperial citadel in Hue in central Vietnam. Vinh revived traditional brick-making methods for the museum’s floor tiles, which she claims are indestructible. “We say that if you bury a Bat Trang brick, you can dig it up a thousand years later and it will be completely intact without a single speck of mould,” she says with a laugh.

IT WASN’T UNTIL THE SECOND half of the 20th century that times got tough in Bat Trang. In 1954, global geopolitical tensions caused Vietnam to split in two. Bat Trang became part of North Vietnam, which pursued communist economic policies that prohibited private enterprise. Vinh skirts over the details, which are politically sensitive, but comments that artisans like her parents had to work

Clockwise from left: Nguyen Thi Lam of Lam Duc’s; Nguyen Thi Lam’s family home; a bowl of *mang muc*; Nguyen Thi Lam’s family altar



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for state-owned enterprises (SOEs) on diminished salaries. This muzzled the entrepreneurship that had once made Bat Trang “one of the wealthiest villages in Vietnam. In Bat Trang,” Vinh adds, “there are just too many stories to tell.” As Vietnam reunified in 1975, restrictions on enterprise relaxed in 1986, enabling Vinh to launch the successful business she runs today. But in other parts of the village, the scars of the past run deep. After visiting the museum, I head back to Bat Trang’s alleyways. I stop for lunch at Lam Duc’s, which specialises in local dishes like *mang muc* (shredded baby bamboo with dried squid). “The government took almost everything,” says Nguyen Thi Lam, the 78-year-old head chef and homeowner, lamenting the economic reforms of the 1950s. “My family had 15 properties,

The other pottery museum in Bat Trang

Between the pottery market and the Bat Trang Pottery Museum is **Bat Trang Museum by National Artist Vu Thang**. One of Vietnam’s most celebrated pottery artists, Vu passed away in 2016. Though he had not received an honorary title award from the government, Vu Thang is known for an extraordinary series of 12 ceramic boots, which were inspired by Italian fashion, but showcase traditional craft techniques. Unfortunately, the museum only displays one boot at a time. It’s also possible to purchase select pieces of Vu Thang’s art. The museum is free to visit.



This page: Bat Trang House by architect Vo Trong Nghia

but in the end, we were only left with this house.” Built 120 years ago in a style befitting the boulevards of Hanoi’s French quarter, the two-storey house looks out of place in a tangle of Vietnamese alleyways. We eat in front of Lam’s family altar and study a photo of the house. Lam points at the semi-circular protruding balcony and says that the railings came from France, and only two sets were ever made. “The other you can still find in (Hanoi’s) Old Quarter,” she says. “Bat Trang is full of stories.” Lam concludes, echoing Vinh’s parting words.

While driving out of the village, I have time to reflect on the day’s conversations. I pass the Bat Trang House, a home designed by Vo Trong Nghia, an award-winning modern architect. The house is known for the perforated ceramic wall that protects it from sun, wind and rain. I stop for a moment to contemplate this façade, which prompted *Wallpaper* to name it “Best New Private House” in 2021. Both Vinh and Lam are brimming with stories about Bat Trang’s past. But as innovative modern buildings like the Bat Trang House and the Bat Trang Pottery Museum attest, the story is far from over.



Malaysia Airlines flies between Kuala Lumpur and Hanoi 7x weekly.



Travel tips

Bat Trang is 15km southeast of Hanoi’s Old Quarter. A Grab car to the village takes 30 mins and costs VND200,000. Taxis will cost a little more. It’s also possible to rent a motorbike or take a public bus – ask at your hotel.

All the places mentioned in this story are visitable. A ticket to the **Bat Trang Pottery Museum** costs VND50,000 per person. You can pay an extra VND70/50,000 per adult/child to try your hand at throwing some clay.

Visiting **Lo Bau** (Dragon’s Kiln) usually incurs a small fee.

To lunch at **Lam Duc’s**, which costs VND250,000, call at least one day ahead.

Banh Cuon Co Nghi is open all day and there’s no need to make a reservation. A plate of *banh cuon* costs VND40-60,000.