



The name Co Do Village may not be too familiar to people in northern Viet Nam, but when someone mentions its other name, the painters' village, most will say they've heard about its reputation as a beautiful village artists flock to for inspiration.

I recently found time to go there, and could see the poetic natural beauty of the village, which has given many local farmers a passion for art.

From the entrance to Co Do Commune in Ba Vi District, on the outskirts of Ha Noi, a 500m pathway surrounded by green paddy fields and dotted with rusty cone hats of weather-beaten farm workers led me to the village.

Co Do has resided for centuries by the Red River, famous for its alluvial red soil. The residents have preserved the traditional northern village's ancient beauty, with small tile-roofed houses and bamboo clumps.

The long dyke that passes through serves as the main road. Watching children joyfully ride their bikes home from school on the dyke and herds of cows graze tranquilly along its sides made me appreciate the calm life of the village. I don't get that often, living in the city.

As elderly people in the village said, its culture has been formed and developed through many dynasties. This land gave birth to several famous people who were acknowledged in history as national heroes: Princess Thieu Hoa, the sixth Hung king's daughter, who worked to establish a traditional handicraft village for weaving silk; and Nguyen Ba Lan and Nguyen Su Manh, who made the literary and examination traditions of Co Do Village richer.

Farmer artists



In the old days, the village was famous for weaving silk and making rice vermicelli. Today, the tiny village, located 70km from Ha Noi, is home to 3,000 people and is known as the painting village, because of an increasing number of villagers who know how to paint. It is also famous nationwide for giving the world more than renowned 30 painters, including Nguyen Sy Tot, Tran Hoa and La Vuong. It is also a training ground for young artists.

In the village, farmers consider painting an everyday hobby that helps them relax.

When they finish their farming, they take up the paint brushes, mix pastel colors and start to paint. Sometimes their easels are very simple: Just a thin, small board, on which paper is placed. Children are seen here painting on the wall, on their house's yards and on the soil base of their gardens, near the riverbank, with chalk, charcoal and bricks.

They draw and paint whatever they see: a cat licking its legs, a mother growing rice or houses with red tiles hidden in bamboo clusters. In the summer and on weekends, they take art classes

run by local painters.

Hoang Tuan Viet, president of the Co Do Fine Arts Club, is among the village's young and renowned painters. He grew up taking those classes, with a passion for painting in his blood.

Viet began painting when he was 10, like most children in the area. His first teacher was the late, renowned painter Sy Tot, who started the village's reputation for art. Tot was one of the first students at the Viet Nam Fine Arts College.

Viet remembers that in his first pieces, he painted the things that were familiar to him: chickens and buffaloes. Years have passed, but he is still faithful to the tradition of painting rural landscapes with oil, do paper and pastels.



He has taken part in various national exhibitions and has sold paintings across Viet Nam, and in

Canada and the US.

A teacher at Co Do's high school, Viet has trained many children at the free painting classes he hosts in his small garden and at the local museum. He does this with an aim to preserve the village's traditional craft.

"I'm trying to pass my love of painting on to the younger generation," he said. "From starting at these rustic, homemade classes, I am very happy that many kids have grown up to become art teachers, and many more are studying at art colleges and universities throughout the country."

Local inhabitants are proud of the 2-storey museum dedicated to Sy Tot built in 2006. It has 100 of his most famous paintings on display, depicting the lives of farmers, workers and soldiers. Some of his pieces, such as Be Con (Embracing Child) and Tieng Dan Bau (The Sound of the Monochord Musical Instrument), are being preserved in the Ha Noi Fine Art Museum. Children who study painting come to the museum to burn incense for the founder of the village's art tradition.

"Here in the village, we have spent years teaching our children morals through pictures and poems," says local painter Tran Hoa, a member of the Viet Nam Fine Arts Association.

Hoa's paintings have been displayed in foreign countries, like Austria and the Netherlands.

"Many asked us why so many people here know how to paint," the 70-year-old painter said with a big smile. "Maybe the steam from the Hong River, mixed with winds blowing on the dyke every afternoon, has provided endless inspiration for the villagers." — VNS