



BEAUTIES IN PRINTS FROM TONKIN

Petra Müllerová

Celebrating feminine beauty must be one of the undying motifs of creative art throughout the world. In the iconography of Tonkin wood-cuts, sets entitled 'Beauties' are traditional and extremely popular themes. Several integrated four-piece sets have been preserved, and in the 1980s a unique three-piece set was discovered. Both the Dong Ho workshops (in the province of Bac Ninh) and the Hanoi workshops on Hang Trong Street have dealt with the motifs of feminine beauty on a constant basis. The above-mentioned artistic centres differ mainly in the printing techniques they use and, to a lesser extent, in the choice of themes they handle. The Dong Ho workshops traditionally create coloured wood-cuts (i.e. they create the print gradually from several colour plates). The Hang Trong workshops, in contrast, print¹ the motif from one plate, which the artist subsequently colours. The differences in technique between both artistic centres can also be seen in the dimensions of the prints: the direct-coloured wood-cuts from the provenance of Dong Ho tend to be 25.5 x

¹ Black is used to make the print, which goes on to form the contour of the depicted motif.



37.5 cm, with few exceptions, which makes them suitable to decorate normal dwellings. The wood-cuts from the Hang Trong workshops are usually larger, e.g. 30 x 100 cm, 45 x 160 cm, or 55 x 180 cm, and are designed to decorate larger dwellings and religious buildings.

The four-piece set called 'To nu' (Beauties) was created at a Dong Ho workshop by the artist Nguyen Dang Che based on his own design². This set first appeared in the second half of the 1990s, when the artist

² Only two artists currently produce wood-cuts in the village of Dong Ho: Nguyen Dang Che and Nguyen Huu Sam. Both of them come up with the artistic design themselves, produce the matrix, pick the colours for the printing and the type of paper, and finally print the wood-cuts themselves over several stages.



found a theme inspired by the traditional celebrations of Hoi Lim³. The prints are all a uniform 83 x 28.5 cm; the actual picture is on a monochromatic, light ochre background with dimensions of 62 x 22 cm, and around the actual picture is a frame painted with crushed pearl. The vertical edges of the frame are 4.5 cm wide, the upper edge is 13 cm wide, and the lower edge is 10.5 cm. Taking into account the overall dimensions of the print

These celebrations have been practised over several centuries in the period starting on the fourth day of the first lunar month and ending in the latter half of the second lunar month in most villages of today's province of Bac Ninh. Singing groups take part in these celebrations; as a rule they are divided into women's and men's choruses, and they compete in amorous group duets known as Quan Ho. The celebrations also include chess tournaments, traditional one-to-one wrestling, competitions to build high bamboo swings and swinging, etc. The condition of all the celebrations is that participants wear the traditional national dress typical for the area from which the group of competitors have come.

and the fact that the lower and upper edges are much wider than the upright edges, we can assume that bamboo poles or wooden rods are meant to be attached to the upper and lower edge of the print in order to tanten (even out) the print and provide an aesthetic complement to the work. In terms of technique, the black paint is printed on to thick newspaper decorated with crushed pearl painting along the sides. The print from the plate is coloured in using the same colour. The artist's seal has been put in the corner of each print. All the prints in the set are symmetrically balanced: two thirds of the picture area are occupied by figures, while the remaining third is given over to symbols of the seasons of the year. The girls on all the prints in the set are dressed in the attire traditional for northeastern Tonkin (the area northeast of today's capital, Hanoi): multi-layered, long flowing dresses creating a graceful line (they are not, then, dressed in the well-known traditional attire called *ao dai*, which is a long double-tailed tunic complemented with trousers that clearly protrude from the tunic⁴). Considering the clothing gives the impression of lightness, we can assume the material depicted is meant to be silk⁵, which is an attribute of higher social classes. Surprisingly, the dress is not complemented with shoes. The girls have their hair braided into the traditional turban, adorned with a flower on the side. Each girl is holding specific accessories and the individual prints are complemented with their own different flowers.

The shading used on the clothing of the figures, and the creative impression of the material lightly rippling in the wind is a distinct technique not applied in colouring wood-cuts until the last few years of the twentieth century. In contrast, the classic elements portrayed in the prints include the slightly inclined head, and the position (the beckoning) of the hands and fingers, including the long nails. The set evokes a natural atmosphere in which the girls are moving gently.

The set begins with a print called 'Girl with a Fan and Sprig of Peach Tree'. The girl occupies about four fifths of the left part of the picture; she

⁴ See the catalogue *Pictures from the Land of the Dragon King*, pp. 27-31, for more details.

⁵ I am also led to believe this by the fact that the provinces of Bac Ninh (the source of the artist's subject matter) and Ha Dong are the traditional centres for the production of silk, considered prestigious products for centuries.

is holding an open fan with both hands. The upper right-hand section of the picture is balanced symmetrically by the sprig with the peach-tree blossom, a typical symbol of spring.

The second print is entitled 'Girl with a Dish and Bamboo'. The woman is standing symmetrically in the middle of the picture. She is holding a dish in her right hand, also resting two fingers of her left hand on it gracefully. Bamboo branches are painted in the upper left-hand part of the picture; one of the branches penetrates into the upper right-hand corner of the picture and two of its leaves gently overlap the sun. Bamboo is a typical symbol of summer.

The third print is called 'Girl with a Hat and Willow Leaves'. It depicts a girl standing in the right-hand third of the picture, with her head slightly inclined so that the flat round hat the girl is holding in her right hand is optically balanced with her whole figure. A flower is portrayed in the fingers of the girl's left hand, lying more or less on the flow-line between the girl's eyes and her hat. Small willow leaves are painted in the upper part of the picture, and in this case they are clearly a symbol of autumn⁶.

The last print in the set bears the name 'Girl with a Book and Pine Tree'. The girl is standing almost symmetrically in the middle of the picture, holding a book in her bent left arm and a writing instrument in her right hand. The girl's head is slightly inclined downwards. A pine branch, the obvious symbol of winter, fills the upper third of the picture.

We can see from this set of prints that the artist has managed to fuse two traditional themes in one work: feminine beauty and the symbols of the four seasons. The set, executed in a single shade of colour, reflects the demands of current customers (mainly foreigners) for monochromatic wood-cuts.

⁶ For other symbols of the four seasons of the year, see the catalogue *Pictures from the Land of the Dragon King*, pp. 21-25

The second four-part set, also called 'Beauties' was also created by the artist Nguyen Dang Che at just about the same time. He made the matrix with the motifs of the beauties after his own design. Here we can find the clear influences of the traditional interpretation of female beauty, including traditional accessories in the form of clothing, hairstyle, garden seats, and flowers. The set is printed on stronger, light ochre newspaper with dimensions of 109.5 x 33.5 cm. The picture itself takes up an area of 84 x 25.5 cm, around which the border of the print is emphasized with white crushed pearl (the upper edge is 14 cm thick, the lower edge 11 cm, the upright edges 4 cm). The black impression of the matrix is partially coloured and, especially, shaded in the same colour. A woman with particular attributes is depicted on the lower two thirds of each print; heavily stylized symbols located almost in the centre of the picture take up the upper third of the print. The set has been conceived so that the two girls are grasped as a pair of pictures: the girl with the flute pairs up with the girl with the round guitar, while the girl with the violin makes a pair with the girl with the angular guitar. The mirror composition of the lower two thirds of the picture hints at the fact that these are pairs of pictures. All the prints are uniformly signed in the lower right. Greater inspiration from traditional sets of beauties is visible in this set⁷.

The first print in the set depicts a 'Beauty with Flute'. The girl is dressed in the traditional attire *ao dai*: wide long trousers can be seen under the double-tailed tunic, done up at the neck with a button. The tip of one shoe and the sole of the other protrude from the trousers. This attire is complemented with a traditional turban, in which the girl has braided her hair. The hairstyle, with the hair flowing asymmetrically down the side of the girl's face, is called 'cockscomb'. In her hands, the girl is holding a flute with a tassel. In the lower left section of the picture, partially covered by the figure of the girl, a garden seat has been painted, and on it a vase with a flower.

The second print in the set represents a 'Beauty with Round Guitar'. Again, the girl is dressed in the traditional *ao dai*; this time two buttons to

⁷ cf. The monochromatic set of Beauties in the catalogue *Pictures from the Land of the Dragon King*, pp. 28-31

fasten the tunic can be seen. The hairstyle is the same as in the first print. In the lower part of the picture on the right, i.e. as a mirror image to the previous beauty with the flute, a garden seat is depicted again, and on it a vase with a flower. The girl playing the two-stringed guitar partially overlaps the seat.

The third picture in the set is a ‚Beauty with Violin‘. A girl in the traditional attire and with a ‚cockscornb‘ plays the violin. The garden seat and vase with the flower are portrayed in the lower left-hand side of the picture here.

The final print is entitled ‚Beauty with Guitar‘. A girl in traditional clothes, with the classic hairstyle, plays an angular guitar. A garden seat with a vase and flower on it again stands in the lower part of the picture on the right.

The artist of both the sets presented here managed to combine traditional iconographic elements (women, symbols of the four seasons, musical instruments) very smoothly with modern trends: enhanced interest in monochromatic prints, fine shading, and greater demand for scroll-format pictures from customers. The frames painted with crushed pearl are probably meant to replace silk, to which traditional scrolls (especially those designed for members of the upper classes) were attached. Glancing at the frame from a sufficient distance, you could even mistake the painted crushed pearl for silk. It comes as no surprise, then, that both sets enjoy great popularity with domestic and foreign clients alike.

Bibliography:

Dang Duc:

Them mot bo tranh To Nu. (Another Set of ‘To nu’ /Beauties/.) In: Van hoa dan gian 1983/,p.76

Do Phuong Quynh:

Traditional Festivals in Vietnam. The Gioi Publishers. Hanoi 1995. 220 pp.

Huu Ngoc:

Tu Dien Van Hoa Co Truyen Viet Nam. (Dictionary of Vietnamese Traditional Culture). NXB The Gioi 1995, 827 pp.

Müllerová, Petra:

Pictures from the Land of the Dragon King. Náprstek Museum, Praha 2000, 104 pp.

Vu The Binh (editor):

Non nuoc Viet Nam (Vietnamese Land.) Ha Noi 1999, NXB Du lich, 755 pp.