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Keynote Address: *A Tale of Two Museums* Laurel Kendall, American Museum of Natural History



Laurel Kendall
Photo provided by Chia Ning.

A Tale of Two Museums

Laurel Kendall American Museum of Natural History

This is the story of how two museums, one in New York and one in Hanoi, collaborated to produce the first comprehensive presentation of Vietnamese culture in the United States. *Vietnam: Journeys of Body, Mind, and Spirit*, the product of three years of hard work and intense collaboration between AMNH and the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology (VME) in Hanoi, opened at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York on March 15, 2003. While *Vietnam: Journeys* touches on the war, its focus is on contemporary Vietnam. While Dr. Nguyen Van Huy, Director of VME, and I were the curators of record, members of both institutions worked together—in Hanoi and in New York—on all aspects of the brainstorming, planning, design, and implementation of this exhibit. Collections and scholarly expertise came from VME, while AMNH was responsible for designing and producing a dramatic and compelling product.

We chose the theme of Journeys because it connotes a wide range of human experiences, from ordinary travel, to the journeys of shamans, gods, and ancestors, to journeys through life itself. Thematically approaching the material in such a way allowed us to present a broad portrait of contemporary Vietnamese life, including a sampling of Vietnam's 54 ethnicities. Experts on the VME staff were asked to suggest possible “journeys” that could be represented with objects, photographs, and video.

When we began to plan this exhibit, VME researchers were already working with ethnic traders in the market of Sapa town, where the journeys of ethnic traders, tourists, and backpack travelers became stories retold in the exhibit. The journey of ceramics from kilns in northern Vietnam's Red River Delta to both domestic and global markets emerges as another story. In the street-side toy markets set up during the Mid-Autumn Festival in Hanoi, researchers had observed

how handcrafted toys, masks, and lanterns were being replaced by cheap plastic imports. The festival became part of a “journey through the calendar year” with the toy market reproduced in the exhibit and animated by video. Thanks to a generous grant from the Ford Foundation, VME researchers were able to conduct additional fieldwork and find further acquisitions for the exhibit. In planning this work, we weighed the feasibility and visual impact of potential journeys against the exigencies of attempting to represent all of Vietnam, north, south, and center.

Major brainstorming sessions took place in Hanoi, and object lists and label copy were reviewed during my several visits there. AMNH conservators Vuka Roussakis and Judith Levinson, trained VME staff, to prepare condition reports and pack the objects that would be shipped to New York. In December 2002, as we neared the finish line, designer Gerhard Schlanzky presented his design renderings for review and critique by the entire VME staff while label editor Lauri Halderman got sign-offs from individual researchers on her edits of their label copy which had been back-translated into Vietnamese. I had already gone through a similar process, a year earlier, in preparing essays for the exhibition book, and working with VME staff as they developed label copy.

Training for VME staff was an important part of this project. AMNH staff offered workshops on exhibit design, label-writing, museum communications, and exhibition photography. In fact, our aim was to turn every work experience into a learning experience. Nine members of the VME staff came to New York to work with us in designing and installing the exhibit and editing the several moving media clips displayed in the hall. Interns received additional training in conservation, registrarial work, exhibit design, and museum education, depending on their backgrounds and VME needs. They also visited several museums in New York, Boston, and Washington and discussed their impressions in a weekly seminar. Most internships ranged from two to six months, but Nguyen Thi Thu Huong, from the VME foreign relations office, spent two and a half years with us as a liaison between the two museums while she earned an M.A. degree in museum anthropology from Columbia University. Not only did Thu Huong translate the constant stream of email between New York and Hanoi, but she also mediated our two institutional cultures and the different constellations of personalities on each side, a culture broker *par excellence*. Our post-doctoral fellow, Hien Nguyen, also made bi-lingual conversations possible and contributed as a passionate researcher.

VME staff were absolutely essential in ensuring that objects were arranged and displayed properly. A large Thai mortuary tree, collected by Mr. Vi Van An, was assembled, months before the exhibit, in the empty exhibition hall and precisely documented before being disassembled and stored until the show opened. A set up for a Tay shaman ritual was digitally imaged and jpegged to Mr. La Cong Y, an expert on the Tay at VME, a few days before the opening of the exhibit. He approved the arrangement, suggesting that a blue

paper elephant be moved further to the left. AMNH preparators went to work securing the objects. The floor of this exhibit was a large Vietnamese grass mat which, on a bi-national shopping expedition, we located in Chinatown, NY. Chinatown-purchased merchandise, identical to those now used in Vietnam, was a source for the many plates, cups, and trays used in various ritual set-ups.

Developing journeys

When we began to plan this exhibit, VME researchers were already working with ethnic traders and artisans in the Sapa market on the Sapa border, in a town that opened to tourist traffic in the mid 1990s, creating a brisk market in ethnic handicrafts. The journeys of ethnic traders, tourists, and backpack travelers became one of the stories we reproduced in the exhibit with manikins in ethnic costume—not as static romantic images—but poised to offer souvenir hats and bags to visitors, much as one would see them on the streets of Sapa.

VME researchers have also been documenting the manufacture and distribution of handcrafted toys and the popularity of new plastic toys during the Mid-Autumn Festival in Hanoi. Toy makers from villages in the Red River Delta have been invited to the museum to put on workshops where city children make their own toys and learn to appreciate these handicrafts as part of their holiday tradition. We were able to tell this story about traditions and changing tastes as part of a journey through the calendar year, a journey that culminates in the celebration of the full moon of the Mid Autumn Festival. We were able to create some of the fun of the Mid Autumn Market. The exhibit included a display of masks, some traditional, some familiar to our audience such as Donald Duck and Santa Claus, and some from Japanese anime and Chinese swordsman movies to suggest the cosmopolitan worldview of a Hanoi child.

Our exhibit included literal and material journeys. Bat Trang village, in the Red River Delta near Hanoi, has been producing and exporting ceramics for several centuries. The only antiquity in the exhibit was a large plate made about 500 years ago in the Red River Delta of Vietnam and subsequently traded to Indonesia from whence, long after, it was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The dish was probably made for common dining in a Muslim family.

VME researchers had also been working in Bat Trang village, documenting the return of a global market for Vietnamese ceramic and a healthy market for domestic wares. In better times, people can now afford to buy large ceramic planters and in the new year season, one can see bicycles loaded with these wares in the streets of Hanoi. Mrs. Nguyen Thu Tuoc and Mr. Nguyen Van Thanh took their bicycle to the river where boats from Bat Trang village dock. The bike was loaded with ceramic and pushed to the market. When everything was sold, they could ride it home. They agreed to sell the bicycle and a full load of wares to VME for the exhibit.

The work on *Vietnam Journeys* meant many journeys for all of us. I've lost track of how many visits I made to Hanoi to work with Dr. Huy and his staff in conceptualizing and planning the content of the exhibit, preparing the exhibition book and developing label copy. In 2000, we met with individual researchers who were asked to suggest "journeys" in their areas of expertise and to suggest the objects and photographs that would make the journey visually presentable. After several days of conversation, themes were written on index cards and we "storyboarded" our outline of the exhibit. Sections would be discarded—when no satisfactory material could be found, or added when new opportunities presented themselves—but the basic shape of the exhibit was set in place at that first meeting.

From early on, we realized that to give an accurate representation of Vietnam, we would have to include more information and material on the south and center of the country than VME had in its collections. VME's strength was in its coverage of the north of Vietnam where festivals could be easily and inexpensively documented in Hanoi. However, effort was made to tell a fuller story. Researchers took on new documentation and collecting, most successfully in our presentation of an exhibit featuring a bride and groom from Ho Chi Minh City. Presentations of the Khmer New Year, a southern pilgrimage, and of a lineage ritual in a southern community were unfortunately cut when we had to reduce the show to accommodate a smaller gallery, and it was my choice (I take full responsibility) to remove material that I considered less well-integrated into the overall story of the exhibit or less well-represented with engaging artifacts. Although the exhibit does include many representations of ethnic minority cultures from the south and center—including the Chinese Vietnamese dragon that greets visitors at the entrance to the exhibit, Vietnamese Americans from the south report feeling underrepresented. Were this exhibit to be organized today, with VME researchers having engaged in southern projects and made good ties with colleagues in southern museums, we could have provided a more satisfactory representation of the south.

The ancestral altar

Reproducing an ancestral altar in New York may have been our most challenging task. Ethnographies about China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam all mention the importance of ancestors in East Asian Life. When I lived in a Korean village, I saw ancestor veneration rituals in the household where I lived. I learned first hand that the ancestors were an important presence in daily life and that the ritual obligations of sons to tend deceased fathers and grandfathers—the virtue translated as "filial piety"—was both an emotional and a moral act. But what about Vietnam? The ancestors were very much a part of descriptions of traditional Vietnamese society. When I first visited Vietnam 1991, I encountered many familiar elements of East Asian Culture including remnants of the Confucian tradition—but this was also a society that had experienced a revolutionary transformation. In the years

of war, national struggle, and poverty that preceded the opening of the market in 1986, many aspects of traditional culture had been discouraged as wasteful of both time and money, and "superstitious." I was aware that in China, during the Cultural Revolution and for many years thereafter, people were afraid to openly honor their ancestors. I wondered if this was also the case in Vietnam. It was therefore a revelation to me when I visited a Vietnamese home in a government flat and saw a carefully tended ancestor shrine given a place of prominence in the main room. I learned that in the years of austerity, while people tended to scale back on rituals honoring their ancestors, they had never abandoned them.

A sense of obligation to the ancestors could be seen in the lively market in votive goods, made out of paper to be burned and transmitted to the dead, who could share with the living the expanding horizon of consumer goods made available in the new market economy. Planning the exhibit, one of the VME researchers took me to the home of a votive paper maker, Mr. Tho, in a village in Ha Tay Province near Hanoi. We asked him what sorts of things people were buying and burning for their ancestors, and he pulled his order forms off of a peg so that we could copy them. We placed a large order with duplicates to replace objects that would inevitably fade under exhibition lights, and filled a case with contemporary votive goods. The display includes clothing for all ages of ancestors, a two story furnished house complete with VCR, everyday kitchen equipment, jewelry, a boom box, and the masterpiece, a life-sized Peugeot bicycle that many visitors take for the real thing.

When we began to plan our exhibit, we decided to begin with a celebration of Tet as the auspicious start of a journey though the calendar year. And of course, we would have an ancestral altar. Dr. Huy and his staff described ancestor veneration as perhaps the most important activity of the new year. The altar is cleaned and beautifully decorated for Tet, the ancestors are invited back into the home, served festive food, and each member of the family makes a solemn report to them. We were able to illustrate this in a video of the new year celebration in Dr. Huy's own home.

Curators dream grandly; in our exhibit, we wanted to show two altars. One would be a very traditional carved wooden altar such as one might see in a home in Hanoi's old quarter. A very gracious woman, the relative of a member of the VME staff whom I came to know as "Ba Mien" welcomed us on several occasions to study and photograph and measure her altar, something we soon realized we could never reproduce, although in the early stage of this project, there was some fanciful thought on the AMNH side about casting and simulating it in New York.

The second altar we wanted to exhibit would be more modern and improvisational—to suggest that a lived tradition is adaptive. This is the family altar in Dr. Huy's own home. A close examination of the exhibit video of Dr. Huy's family's New Year celebration reveals coffee perking on the altar because Dr. Huy's father was very fond of coffee.

Like all curators, we had to trim our plans when confronted with the finite reality of exhibition space. We could

only have one altar. What sort of altar should it be? This question was the beginning of my education. I wasn't really prepared for the solidity and significance of large wooden altars. In Korea, where I had worked before, the set-up for ancestor veneration is usually temporary and a paper tablet is burned at the end of the ceremony, an arrangement very well suited to a lifestyle where life is lived at floor level, where beds are rolled up and tucked away during the day and meals are eaten off of portable trays. A proper traditional Vietnamese altar, like this one at VME, is an elaborate arrangement—actually three separate tables. In the exhibit, we would have to compromise, as many Vietnamese families do, with an altar that is only one table.

Accompanied by a member of the VME staff, I went to a street in Hanoi that specializes in furniture, ancestral altars in particular. It was just before the Tet holiday and business was booming. But what I saw was of very poor quality and disappointing. However, I did learn something interesting, that the measurements for small, medium, and large altars were standardized in such a way that the numbers of measurement had particularly auspicious properties according to an old Chinese scheme of carpentry. These were not simply pieces of furniture, they were made to bring good fortune into the family.

Toward the end of the day we found a carpenter/carver who did beautiful work and could make an altar to order. There was one problem though. When we asked where he procured his wood, he described a secret forest source that would be gone in ten years. The American Museum of Natural History could not commission such an altar. From this encounter I mistakenly assumed that all of the wood used in ancestral altars was endangered, that it would be ethically irresponsible to buy one. "What are we going to do about the altar?" was a nagging question until the final months of preparation.

I assumed that some sort of furniture could be mocked up—like the altar in our Mother Goddess Temple—to suggest the space occupied by an altar without claiming a literal presence. My colleagues in Hanoi were horrified by this idea—OK for the mother goddess, not good enough for the ancestors. When designer Gerhard Shlansky presented his plans for the exhibit to VME staff in Hanoi, we spent at least as much time discussing the altar as we spent, in total, on the rest of the exhibit. Gerhard presented his design in powerpoint so that it was projected onto a screen and could be readily altered to fit the recommendations of the VME experts.

Everyone acknowledged that customs varied from house to house and that every altar represented a mix of old and new, but absolutely everyone felt that there was a right and proper way to do it, and that was what we had to strive for in representing Vietnam to the world. The altar was described as the spiritual foundation of Viet or Kinh culture. I recognized an old Confucian notion here, the moral imperative to do the rituals properly as an expression of moral and civilized behavior. "Doing" meant not only the conduct of persons but also the proper arrangement of objects in time and space. Doing it right was particularly important in public display. This is a very weighty charge to put upon museum curators and de-

signers.

So we went, as a team—AMNH people and VME people together—to Hang Quat Street where altars of reasonable quality and altar fittings are sold. We found the proprietress of the factory that supplied the entire street. These altars were—fortunately—made not of hardwood but of cultivated jackfruit whose bitter taste discourages insects. We ordered a large altar of the best possible quality. We wanted it to look "antique." "No problem," people commission antique-looking altars all the time. One problem was solved.

A proper altar should be framed with elegant calligraphy expressing appropriate sentiments, like the altar at the VME. We had found two couplet boards in the VME storage but the sentiments "The mountain scenery is most beautiful, In the long river a school of fish flies by" were not appropriate for an altar—we hung them outside the enclosure where the altar was set up to attractively frame the doorway.

Dr. Huy asked a skilled young calligrapher to make us some paper couplets. The artist, Le Quoc Viet, accepted the commission and suggested we mount the paper couplets on scrolls. He was back two days later saying that the scrolls were a bad idea, fine for art but improper for a ritual setting. He was uncomfortable about using paper couplets with an elegant altar—carved wood would be better.

Dr. Huy gave up his Sunday to go to the country and buy a set of boards for the exhibit, but he was not satisfied with the sentiments they expressed. Viet, the artist, returned with a set of paper couplets that seemed just right, and Thu Huong—our intern and cultural liaison—triumphantly carried them to New York. So now we had a set of paper couplets that read: on the right, "Through study, tradition is passed on." the one on the left, "A family tradition of frugality and hard work produces good descendants." Above the altar, artist has written, "Luck is everywhere in the house. On an auspicious winter morning in the 11th month of the horse year, I bathed and respectfully inscribed this."

We wanted our altar to not only be ritually correct but to suggest a living altar, adorned not only with the proper ritual objects, but with flowers, food (in museum simulation) and bright red boxes of new year sweets. Everything had to be arranged just so, and our team of experts from Hanoi arranged, discussed, and rearranged many times. Chung cake, the special stuffed and wrapped holiday food, was a special problem. While AMNH preparators can cast anything, they do need a model. Hanoi chung cakes are large and beautifully formed. In New York City's Chinatown these cakes were either large but bulky and unaesthetic, or beautifully formed but too small for a Hanoi altar. At the last possible minute, Thao Pham, one of our Vietnamese American interns, asked her family in Texas to send us a proper Hanoi chung cake by Federal Express. Our preparators just had time to cast and paint it before the exhibit opened.

To my eyes, the completed altar was a satisfying mix of old and new that carried one of the exhibit's key mes-

sages: a living tradition is just that, a mix of old and new, and a compromise with spatial and other quotidian limitations. Dr. Huy still wonders if we shouldn't have used an antique altar and Viet, the artist, still thinks we should have used carved boards rather than his own beautiful calligraphy. When I see the altar, I am reminded of how easily even well-intentioned curators can bumble in setting objects into cases, not realizing that for those who live a culture every day, seemingly casual arrangements can be important assertions of spiritual and cultural values. And when I think of the labor and conversation invested in this small corner of the exhibit, I sense the power of an ancestral presence.

Through our trans-Pacific journeying, AMNH received a crash course in Vietnamese ethnology from several patient instructors, and VME people went home steeped in new ways of conducting teacher-training workshops and improved ways for organizing a museum shop. We saw this exhibition as a journey on the path toward reconciliation and healing between the United States and Vietnam. We have shown that in our present moment, Americans and Vietnamese can work together to produce something wonderful and also have a great time in the process.

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An attentive audience listens carefully!
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