

Hanoi's embroiderers have seen their fair share of ups and downs, but they remain part of the fundamental fabric of the city. The story of Hanoian embroidery begins over five centuries ago in a remote village called Quat Dong, in what was once Ha Tay Province. According to local lore, a villager named Bui Cong Hanh was sent as a Vietnamese ambassador to China. When he came back he brought with him the secrets of the Chinese weaving industry, which he taught to people in the area. Soon news of his skills spread and King Le Loi asked to see his work. The king was so impressed that he gave the artisan his surname and since then the father of Vietnamese embroidery has been known as Le Cong Hanh.

The beauty and quality of the Quat Dong's embroidery products grew in reputation and became popular with royalty, mandarins and dignitaries. 17th century Hanoi, then known as Thang Long, was bustling with life, attracting artisans from all over the region. Among these skilled craftsmen were embroiderers that helped build the Old Quarter. Among many guild streets there was Hang Theu (Embroidery Street) where embroidery artisans from Quat Dong Village gathered to work and sell their products.

In the beginning, weavers in Vietnam embroidered pagoda curtains, ceremonial cloth and clothing for the ruling classes. As the products became more and more popular, many residents from Thang Long as well as those from other provinces started to learn techniques from Quat Dong craftsmen, and the skill spread to other parts of the country. As the artisans of Quat Dong fanned out over Vietnam, they brought their art with them wherever they went. But those who stayed home have preserved the craft for generations.

The village, only 20km south of Hanoi on Highway 1, is now home to nearly 500 households with more than 1,000 people working in the embroidery industry. Hundreds of private companies now employ thousands of workers here. One of the most famous companies is owned by Hoang Thi Khuong in Hamlet 1, Village 5.

Hoang Thi Khuong is well-known not only for her skillful hands and beautiful products but also for her commitment to the old art. Born in 1965 to a mother who was also a skillful embroiderer, Khuong lost her ability to walk due to a severe fever when she was small, but she now makes her hands compensate for her feet. With the help of her mother, Khuong began embroidering difficult patterns at a very young age.

"With embroidery, aptitude is important but patience and enthusiasm will decide your success," Khuong said. "It is in fact a hard job that strains your eyes and breaks your back... I have taught many students who became apt embroiderers, but they could not make a living doing it because they lacked patience or the love for the job." It usually takes 3-5 months for an artisan to complete a portrait or landscape embroidery painting. However, some require a year.

Not very far from Quat Dong is Dong Cuu Village, also in Thuong Tin District, where local people have also inherited skills from the ancestors of Le Cong Hanh. But here, embroidery is much more deeply entrenched in tradition. While Quat Dong embroiderers have switched to modern products for tourism or exports artisans in Dong Cuu are still producing pagoda curtains, ceremonial cloths and clothes for folk bands.

In recent years, as festivals and relics have been rekindled, Dong Cuu's products are regaining their market. The village now has more than 100 private enterprises and about 90 percent of households have at least one person employed in the trade. One of the most skillful artists in the village is award-winning artisan Vu Van Gioi. After learning embroidery from his parents, Gioi soon became an expert in imperial mantles and he now spends much of his time restoring them.

"I think we have a responsibility to restore and preserve the works of our ancestors," Gioi said. "Many people in my village have been invited to embroider mantles for kings and we must preserve their works to remind our children of our ancestors." Besides studying old local works, Gioi has traveled throughout the country, studying the various artistic styles of different periods and regions. He has successfully restored many imperial mantles belonging to the Nguyen Dynasty.

Quat Dong embroidery has won the hearts of many people around the world, but embroiderers' lives are still difficult. According to Ta Van So, vice chairman of the Hanoi's Embroidery Association and also a veteran embroidery designer, although Quat Dong's products are exported to many countries, their makers still don't make enough money.

"With just VND900,000-1,000,000 a month, artisans cannot live on this traditional work and will have to turn to other jobs," So said. "Many works require tens or even hundreds of days, but they only sell for VND500,000-1,000,000 each." However, in this rural village where the only other choice is the low wages of farm work, villagers chose to struggle with the art instead. Artisans like Gioi still have to work outside jobs to "invest" in their passion.

Hoang Thi Khuong left her home village in 1991 for [hotels in Hanoi's Old Quarter](#) to embroider Kimono for Japanese customers. There, her skillful hands won over many foreign customers and more and more orders drove her to return to Quat Dong to establish her own workshop. "I hardly have time to relax now," Khuong smiles.

"Order upon order keeps coming year-round. I was lucky to be born in this village and be able to do the work I like. But the price of products is still very minor compared to the time and effort we devote to them."

Source: [Get Vietnam Visa](#)