



# A collector's guide to buying well in Vietnam

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In this second part of our feature on collectables shopping in Vietnam Dennis Coleman explores the pitfalls when looking for early European and Asian decorative arts to take home

Let's begin with 'bronze', a very loosely used term, which originally meant an alloy of copper and tin but often encompasses a greater range of composites. This is not the central issue, rather, it is how it has been fashioned and hand-crafted that is perhaps of greater concern. Bronze cupids and classical torch bearers are, by the reputable dealer's own admissions, not generally from the French Art Deco period, but rather produced locally. Those that are the genuine article will have a more solid, intricate and flowing look about them. Good bronzes have clean and clear incised lines and there should be no lines of misalignment as is the case where two halves of a modern mould have been joined together.

Some of the modern pieces, on

close inspection, are made up of separate castings and are hollow, being welded together as opposed to the soldering and pinning of the past. Running your fingers over the surface or viewing the object in the sunlight will often reveal these practices. Always look under the base of any object. If wanting to do this with a three-foot high torch bearer with an exquisite glass shade, wisdom and courtesy dictates that you should ask the proprietor to disengage the lamp first, or you might end up with a hefty bill for a pile of fragmented glass!

But seriously, examining any 'antique' objects from the underbelly will often reveal a feeling about the age as well as some factual information. Hollowed stems of bronzes and threaded modern bolts



- 1 Shopping at 21 Le Cong Khieu Street
- 2 A mix of original and imitation ivory
- 3 Collection of pipes found on Le Cong Khieu Street. These are known as 'Darkie' pipes, similar examples from African/American dealers dating to 1920s are available, these are probably made from bone
- 4 Ornate three bracket hanging lamp, late 19th century
- 5 Collection of imitation Gallé lamps
- 6 Early photograph and 'Darkie' pipe
- 7 Japanese inspired ceramic wall vase
- 8 Mounted deer head for sale in an antique shop, Le Cong Khieu Street
- 9 Original mantle clock with finely bevelled glass and bronze work with moving eyes
- 10 Rebadged 'Darlie' toothpaste box, a response to the politically incorrect title used up to the 1980s in Vietnam



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or screws attached to the base are a dead give away. Another point is that truly crafted bronze sculptures, as opposed to factory 'punch-outs', are flawed. This is a sign of individuality – with genuine pieces imperfections were often filled with bronze plugs. I saw a magnificent Art Deco nymph, arms outstretched, atop a marble plinth, with evidence of a plug, confirming that it was an authentic piece. Unfortunately, it was beyond my budget at the time.

As with bronzes, glassware requires close inspection. There is no quick way to become an expert. It requires reading, handling and viewing to develop a feel for a genuine piece. There is the consideration that many modern reproductions scream 'crass', but craftsmen are becoming more skilled at producing reasonable copies. A factor that may assist in determining if a piece is old hand-blown glass, is to look for imperfections such as bubbles, although this is not totally foolproof. All hand-made glass will bear a rough and intact pontil mark from where it was broken off the pontil rod in the glass blowing process. This may not be an indicator of age, but rather of quality.

Look for signs of wear on the base, as worn areas are indicators that a piece has been used and around for a while. Erratic scratching in all directions may indicate attempts to fake aging. Perfect proportions may also indicate a mass produced rather than individually crafted item. However, with elaborate glass fittings and glassware, quality

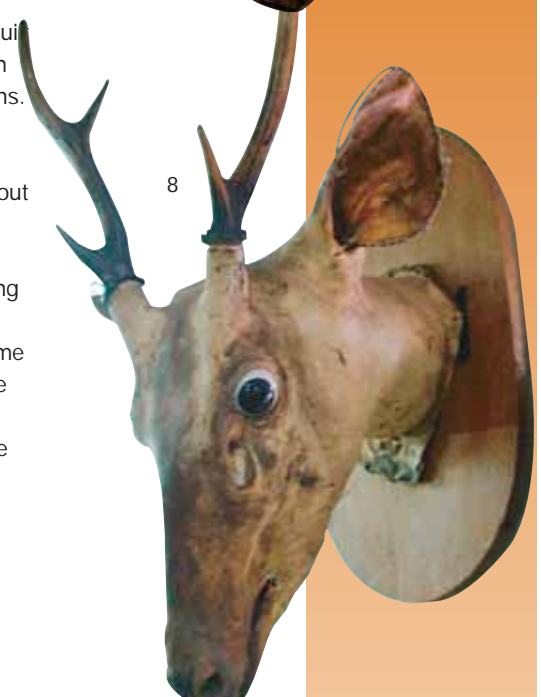
and hand craftsmanship is probably a greater factor in sensible buying than the relentless quest for an authentic piece.

You will see French inspired glass in Vietnam so be aware that when it comes to genuine Gallé and Daum glass expect to pay somewhere in the five figure range. Gallé glass lamps use the cameo or layered approach whereby the pattern is built up in layers and then cut back with the use of acid to reveal the designs. The modern varieties, although in some instances attractive, are generally stiffer in design and without the subtle merging of colours. The originals have a contrast with the shine in the uppermost layers, being in contrast to the lower frosted layers. The mushroom-shaped dome will normally be lipped under at the rim while the glass base will be wasted elegantly. Signatures in the modern look-a-likes are generally



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- 11 Hindu Temple, among the traditional decorative forms is that of a European boy garbed in fashions from the 1920s
- 12 National Opera Theatre, Saigon, is possibly the most magnificent French colonial building in Asia and is in Le Loi Street, close to Le Cong Khieu Street
- 13 Selection of bronze figures and lamp bases with original glass shades

stuck on and can be removed with acetone, though don't try testing this in the shop! The originals have the signatures etched into the glass.

There is much to learn in this field if you are a serious purveyor of beautiful glass but if content with a reproduction of reasonable merit at a realistic price, then various articles may be available in Le Cong Khieu.

If your knowledge of Vietnamese ceramics is limited, it is better to avoid this collecting area. There is the minefield of fakes and then the issue of customs. You need to be fully conversant with Vietnam's customs laws if you plan to exit the country with the goods – supposing they are the 'real thing'. Various comments on related internet sites suggest that if the item bears a modicum of resemblance to authenticity you may be required to report to the Department of Culture in Hanoi to be certificated, taxed or perhaps fined. Then there is the risk of confiscation. Another thing to consider is what some sites refer to as alleged set-ups, but that contentious area will be left firmly to the imagination here.

Netsuke and other items of ivory are all probably new or from illegal sources. So if you don't particularly want to line Robert Mugabe's pockets (exports from Zimbabwe somehow are allowable) or buy imitations made from vegetable resin, or at best, bone, then this area of collecting is best left alone as well.

Try to find mementos that are easy to carry and are fun reminders of a country that holds such delightful experiences for the traveller. Old black and white photographs, for instance, are nostalgic reminders of a Saigon long gone and if mounted properly make a fine decorative feature to mount on your wall back home. Many are inscribed on the back – in some instances providing some clues as to the fate of the far flung Diaspora now known as the Viet Khieu.

In short, if original and highly crafted is what you're after, be prepared to study and to part with large sums of money after establishing good relationships with the more reputable dealers. If you're just on the look out for attractive art or souvenir pieces, that's also fine, as long as you know what you're getting and paying is appropriate.

**Suggested reading for those with an interest in ceramics**

*Treasures from the Hoi An Hoard: Important Vietnamese Ceramics From A Late 15th/Early 16th Century Cargo*, Auction catalogue, 11-13 October 2000, Butterfield & Butterfield, San Francisco USA

*Vietnam Ceramics* (Hanoi Vietnam: Fine Art Publishing, 1996)