

# THE Ao Dai

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More than a 1,000 years of art & culture come together in the exquisite work of Vietnamese artist, designer and teacher, Si Hoang.

Fashion as an expression of culture is one of the things Sean Martin wanted to capture in his photo essay on Vietnam. "There's more to Vietnam than the war and beautiful beaches. You can sense a lot of depth, a lot of culture. You know it's there, and that's what I wanted to photograph."





Tracking it down proved difficult. Martin met with editors of Vietnamese magazines, followed up on contacts and worked the phones, all while coping with the language barrier. Finally, during the last week of his stay, a name came up: Si Hoang.

"My contact said he designed pottery and traditional dresses, and that he had this store I should go see. I didn't think too much of it at the time, but I went and I knew right away I'd found what I'd come to Vietnam for."

Born in 1962, Le Si Hoang is one of Vietnam's most famous artists and designers. He is widely credited with re-popularizing the ao dai, the traditional Vietnamese long dress. He has travelled to Belgium, Berlin, Las Vegas and the Philippines on cultural exchange tours, showing his modern ao dai designs and other works to receptive western audiences.

Despite the acclaim, Si Hoang keeps a low profile in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon), he is first and foremost an artist who draws inspiration from Vietnam's long and colourful past. He is also a respected teacher. He holds Bachelor and Masters degrees from Fine Art University, Ho Chi Minh City, and currently teaches at Architecture University, Polytechnic University, Technical & Pedagogy University and the Fine Art Association. He's won several major awards, including the Vietnam Fine Art Award in 1998 and Best Ao Dai Designer award in 1991 and 1995.

What originally brought him recognition, both in his own country and in fashion circles around the world, are his modern interpretations of the ao dai.

The ao dai (pronounced ao yai in the south and ao zai in the north) has been around for centuries. The modern form – a contoured, full length dress with raglan

sleeves and slits down the sides, worn over loose-fitting trousers – dates from the 1930s. It was worn on ceremonial occasions such as weddings and funerals, with different variations for men and women. Colour traditionally reflected the wearer's age: white or pastels for young people, rich vibrant colours for more mature people.

In 1989, Si Hoang did something that has transformed the ceremonial ao dai into a fashionable garment. He hand-painted a traditional design on a dress worn by a young woman named Vu thi Xuan Quy in the Miss Ao Dai contest. It must have impressed the judges, because the girl took second place. It also caught the eye of other participants and audience members. People began asking Si Hoang to design and hand-paint ao dais for them. In 1991, he opened his own shop to handle the growing volume of business.

Si Hoang draws on his skills as an artist and his knowledge of Vietnamese culture to create original paintings on his ao dai. "There are 53 different minorities or tribes in Vietnam, and each has a different design. Si Hoang has an understanding of the culture and designs of the past, and he's been able to bring them forward in his own ideas," Martin says.

He has also redesigned the garment for everyday wear, making it more comfortable and easier to put on. "He uses delicate patterns and all hand-made fabrics, mostly 100% silk, but the lines are still elegant and simple," Martin says.

Today, the ao dai is all the rage. People of all ages can be seen wearing the ao dai to work, to school, to family occasions. Many young designers in Vietnam's emerging fashion industry are making their reputations as ao dai designers. It is Si Hoang, however, who is widely regarded as the leader of the resurgence.



## Resistance Training

By Andrea Michaud

When winter temperatures hit hard, you may find it difficult to maintain your fitness routine. But feeling physically fit can be a big part of your sense of well-being and confidence, so it's important to continue. The goal of your exercise program should be to reduce body fat and increase lean muscle tissue, while improving or maintaining good health. Along with cardiovascular exercise and proper nutrition, resistance training is an essential part of a well-rounded workout program. So what is resistance training and what are the benefits?

Resistance training involves moving a muscle through a full range of motion with the added resistance of free weights. It's also called weight training. You achieve muscle endurance and toning by increasing repetitions. A repetition is one full range of motion. It refers to how many times an exercise is repeated in one set. For example, if you do three sets of 10 repetitions on a bench press, it means doing 10 bench presses, resting and then repeating two more sets of 10 bench presses each. For maximum results, you should use enough weight to cause muscle fatigue.

Regular resistance training can build and tone muscles while increasing strength and endurance. It can also decrease the risk of osteoporosis, develop coordination and balance, prevent injuries resulting from weak muscles and help maintain lean body mass, which is especially important if you're trying to lose weight.

Since muscle weighs more than fat, the true indicator of your fitness level is not how much you weigh but your percentage of body fat. Fat requires no calories, but muscles are calorie hungry and your metabolism will run higher to maintain muscle tissue.

Everyone has an opinion on muscularity. How much is attractive? Men tend to want increased muscle size and definition, while women are more concerned with overall muscle tone. Some women fear that resistance training will make them look excessively muscular. The fact is, women can make remarkable gains in strength and muscle tone without developing muscular bulk.

Variety is the key to maintaining a fitness routine. Update your program regularly to maximize its effectiveness and keep your interest. Add resistance training to increase your lean body tissue and lose weight more effectively.

The bottom line? Pick up those weights and get lean.

In recent years, he has expanded his business to include more of Vietnam's traditional arts and crafts. The first floor of his three-storey shop on Ly Tu Trong Street is dominated by handcrafted pottery. For more than a

on floor cushions while sampling a selection of pastries and teas, including rare lotus teas. The entertainment features live runway shows of ancient and contemporary Vietnamese costumes, along with traditional music.



The musicians play a variety of instruments: the sao (bamboo flute), t'rung (bamboo xylophone), Sun Lute and Moon Lute. Then there's the dan da (stone lithophone), which consists



thousand years, artisans in the village of Bau Truc have used natural red clay to make distinctive, hand-turned jars, pots and cookers. But the art form was gradually dying, a victim of modern

manufacturing methods and cheap supplies of plastic and aluminum. In 1997, Si Hoang revived it by incorporating traditional glass bead decoration on the simple red pots. He has successfully combined two ancient arts to create a new art form, the bau truc decorated pot, which is proving popular with both Vietnamese people and foreign visitors.

The third level of Si Hoang's store (the ao dai collection is on the second level) houses a real treasure: a tea salon. Here, patrons sit in well-appointed comfort

of stones of varying shapes and sizes, cut or carved into relatively flat bars that offer different tones when hit. Played together, they create a solemn, resonant sound. The dan da is on loan from the local museum, and estimated to be about 2,000 years old. It's one of the many surprises in Si Hoang's shop, and part of his passionate commitment to keeping a thousand years of Vietnamese culture and tradition alive in the 21st century. ❀



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