

Foreword

Geography is everything. Viet Nam stands at a unique position in Asia, straddling East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Excavations have shown evidence of trade and cultural exchange with Viet Nam's neighbors stretching across centuries. Viet Nam's history—from its early cultures and bronze age to the height of its porcelain trade in the region centered in Hoi An in the sixteenth century—tells the story of a nation that was at certain times under the influence of great empires, while at others, at the epicenter of its own empire.

Arts of Ancient Viet Nam: From River Plain to Open Sea is the first exhibition of objects from museums in Viet Nam to tell the history of Vietnamese culture from as early as the fifth century B.C. through the eighteenth century. While most Americans recall the Viet Nam War (referred to as the American War in Viet Nam) as their most vivid memory of the country, the exhibition instead focuses on the long and rich cultural traditions of the country. It illustrates the history of trade—as seen in materials such as crystal, carnelian, and lapis lazuli—and of cultural exchange—most evident in the transmission of religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism. These complexities are explored in the four sections within the exhibition: early cultures (1st millennium B.C.–2nd century A.D.); Oc Eo, a settlement in the Mekong Delta from the first through sixth centuries; Champa, the kingdom in central Viet Nam from the seventh century; and finally, Hoi An, the harbor town at the center of a flourishing porcelain trade with China, Japan, and Europe. The exhibition and this accompanying book reveal new scholarship that has come to light through recent excavations in the past few decades.

This project was first conceived by the curator Nancy Tingley twenty years ago, well before the United States had “normalized” relations with Viet Nam. We are pleased that it has finally come to fruition, largely through her fortitude and a number of key individuals. We would like to acknowledge the roles of Vishakha Desai, President of Asia Society and former Museum Director, and Emily Sano and Rand Castile, former Directors of Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, for initiating the project and shepherding it in the first years.

In Viet Nam, the stellar efforts of Dr. Le Thi Minh Ly, Deputy Director, and her associate, Nguyen Hai Ninh at the Ministry of Culture, have ensured that this exhibition has happened. Each of the nine lending museums has given us its full support, and we are honored to be able to present their works in our museums here in the United States. We are grateful to Mr. Phan Quoc Quan, National Museum of Vietnamese History, Ha Noi; Ms. Tran Thuy Phuong, Director, Museum of Vietnamese History, Ho Chi Minh City; Mr. Vo Van Thang, Da Nang Museum of Cham Sculpture; Prof. Dr. Truong Quoc Binh, Director, Viet Nam National Fine Arts Museum, Ha Noi; Mr. Van Dinh Thanh, Director, Thua Thien Hue Historical and Revolutionary