

SUNDAY

Việt Nam News®

● THE NATIONAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE DAILY

Happy New Year
2011

Double issue



Scenic view: Visitors to Japanese artist Toba Mika's latest exhibition of katazome paintings. VNS Photos Trương Vĩ

On the eve of her new exhibition to celebrate Hà Nội's 1,000th year, Japanese artist Toba Mika reflects on her love of Việt Nam. **Minh Thu** reports.

Japanese artist finds muse in Việt Nam

Just once in her long career as a painter has, Toba Mika felt truly stuck.

Up until the early 90s, Mika, from the Japanese city of Aichi, was busy painting flowers and plants. Then she ran out of ideas.

"It seemed that I was finished as an artist. Then I came to Việt Nam and this country's beauty opened up a whole new world for me."

Việt Nam was a kind of miracle for Mika and has provided constant inspiration ever since her first visit in 1994.

The artist, who studied in Kyoto and currently works as professor at the Kyoto Seika University of Arts, has since returned to Việt Nam every year, visiting different regions of the country to create her art.

Prompted by her love of Việt Nam, she has created over 100 paintings depicting the country's develop-



Keeping katazome alive: Japanese artist Toba Mika with one of 35 landscape paintings on show at an exhibition entitled Nara and Hà Nội - Connection of Eternal Capitals to mark Hà Nội's millennium at Văn Miếu (Temple of Literature) and the Hà Nội Fine Arts Museum. VNS Photos

ment. Many of those scenes she painted were later to disappear and this makes the artist nostalgic.

"The beauty of Việt Nam's landscapes has always attracted me. The simple daily life of the peo-

ple and the changes taking place in a developing country are what I could not find in Japan. It is Việt

Dye hard

"Traditionally, the katazome technique was used to dye kimonos, but people now do it another way."

Nam's beauty that makes me revisit the images of a vanished Japan."

Mika specialises in katazome paintings. This is a Japanese method where fabrics are dyed using a resistant paste applied through a stencil.

She uses silk made using Japan's traditional techniques and her colours are also meticulously produced. These materials preserve the paintings, as does Japan's relatively dry climate.

The katazome tradition

has a long history in Japan. It is one of the most intricate design techniques in the world and combines design eloquence with the extraordinary artistic skill of Japanese craft people.

Katazome was originally used for the costumes of *kyogen*, a Japanese classical performing art, and the technique became even more popular in the Edo period, when commoners adopted it for their own clothing.

This uniquely Japanese tradition mixes many elegant Japanese design elements including flowers, birds, animals and legends.

In Japan, people are worried about the decline of the *katazome* art form. According to Mika, the number of artisans producing the rice-glue and paper essential to *katazome* is smaller than ever. She is one among the few artists trying to preserve the art.

"Traditionally, the *katazome* technique was used to dye kimonos, but people now do it another way. The other problem is that kimonos are easily damaged. The colours last longer in my paintings."

Katazome art and the Vietnamese landscape are constantly changing. Painting is the way Mika protects and holds onto what she loves.

In her *katazome* work, Mika draws landscapes only. She explains that it is not always necessary to have a person in a painting. It's enough to have laundry hanging to dry by a window, a bicycle left leaning by a wall or a randomly placed chair to suggest the presence of people and life.

"Besides, the landscapes in Việt Nam are spectacular. Each scene is vivid enough without the appearance of a person."

All of Mika's artworks are on a large scale. This stems from the screen painting tradition in Japan.

"One can use these paintings as curtains. I want my paintings to be more useful than a normal painting hung on a wall. It makes my paintings more immediate to the public."

Mika has returned to Việt Nam this time to showcase 35 paintings featuring its landscapes as well as several images of Japan's Nara City. The exhibition, entitled *Nara and Hà Nội - Connection of Eternal Capitals* celebrates the 1,000th anniversary of Hà Nội and 1,300 years of the ancient capital of Nara. She hopes to bring the cities closer through *kata-*

zome.

This is Mika's fourth exhibition in Việt Nam. The first was in 2003. She has also showed in HCM City, and the central city of Huế.

This special exhibition doesn't just contain works showing a changing Việt Nam. There are also new works dealing with the Japanese city of Nara.

"As I walked through the mountain and fields in Nara, I had strange feelings of déjà vu. The scenery of Việt Nam came back to me," she says.

Speaking about her paintings, Mika said that each painting had a life of its own.

"I love them all. However, there are some paintings I do love more. *Japanese Street* is one of those. I painted it in the central city of Hội An. This work demonstrates the cultural exchange and friendship between our two countries."

Trần Khánh Chương, chairman of Việt Nam Fine Arts Association said that the strength of her work lay in the structured quality of the building she depicted.

"The buildings, bridges and ships which are drawn to dominate the entire screen create a robust quality of form and have a distinct presence for the view-

er."

Mika herself speak fondly of the country which has been the source of so much

"One can use these paintings as curtains. I want my paintings to be more useful than a normal painting hung on a wall. It makes my paintings more immediate to the public."

inspiration.

"Việt Nam is safe and the people are very hospitable. Whenever I venture out to remote villages

throughout the country, I'm warmly received even though I don't know the language," she says. "Once, a taxi driver thought that I was a Vietnamese."

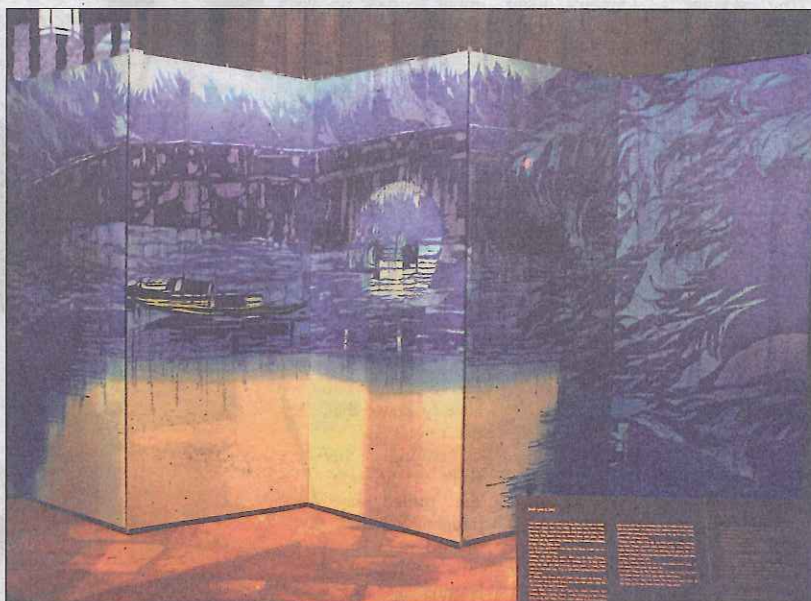
"Việt Nam is also a promising country with a young population, I hope you will preserve and develop the time-honoured traditional culture of the ancestors," she adds.

Several years ago, when Mika visited Huế City to paint *Early Morning Huế*, she

met an 85-year-old sitting near an old bridge. Mika returned the following year and the year after that. The old woman was still there, looking not a day older.

"She is always happy to see me again and I am happy to see her as well. She has invited me to her house to drink tea many times," says Mika. "And although neither of us knows what the other is saying, we still understand and love each other." VNS

Toba Mika's works are on show at the Văn Miếu (Temple of Literature) and the Hà Nội Fine Arts Museum until December 25.



Sea view: *Early Morning Huế* is one several panoramic paintings of Việt Nam by Mika, who says that Việt Nam helped to rekindle her career.



Nature worship: On display at Mika's exhibition are paintings of Việt Nam and the artist's home city of Nara.