



THIS SPREAD, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT AN STORE OFFERS PRODUCTS INSPIRED BY THE OWNER'S TRAVELS; HANDCRAFTED CERAMICS FROM HIEN VAN CERAMICS

Off the high street

Inspired Hanoians are blending creativity with entrepreneurial zeal, turning the city into a unique destination for boutique shoppers

Words by Joshua Zukas Photos by Nic Shonfeld



Even as multinational high-street chain stores sweep through other Asian cities, Hanoi stands proud as a stronghold of boutique charm. Family-owned businesses line the streets and international brands have barely made an imprint. For example, in a city of over 7.5 million, there's only one McDonald's, while fashion brand H&M only has three outlets.

What the city does have in spades, though, are trendy cafés, independent eateries and, more recently, a mushrooming of boutique shops – thanks to entrepreneurial creatives whose ideas are impacting the cityscape. In turn, Hanoi's chequered history – visible everywhere in the form of jumbled urban planning and mismatched architecture – also manifests within the city's creative spots.

“Hanoi has a particular energy that successful designers know to use in a creative way,” says Spanish fashion designer Diego Cortizas, who set up his own label, Chula Fashion, in Hanoi more than a decade ago.

Here, we meet four Vietnamese designers, whose unique products reflect different facets of the city's cosmopolitan but distinctly Vietnamese outlook.



AN STORE: A COSMOPOLITAN OUTLOOK

The stylish aN Store enjoys a regal corner of the city, among the grand colonial structures of the Hanoi Opera House and the National Museum of Vietnamese History. In many ways, the lovely leather accessories, linen clothing and home décor items found on the shelves here also bear global design influences, albeit with a distinctly Vietnamese edge.

The shop's founder, 42-year-old interior designer Nguyen Mai Phuong, first started by selling bespoke leather handbags to friends while working on interior design projects. When demand for her creations grew, she decided to launch the physical shop in 2014.

According to Phuong, rising affluence and an appreciation for unique products has birthed a generation of Hanoians who are helping support the city's boutiques. "Our country is still poor. Most people want cheap things," she explains. "But it's starting to change. I see an increasing number of young people coming to aN Store."

This growing affluence is also leading to a more global outlook. Phuong's own creativity is marked by her travels. "I've always liked handicraft products and I admire Vietnamese craft workers," says Phuong, who utilises Vietnam's rustic, monochromatic palettes in her handmade products. "But in recent years, I've had the chance to travel more. Everywhere I go, I find people with ideas that I want to bring back and use in my products."



Asked why Hanoi is such a hotbed of creativity, Phuong muses, "I think part of it is a spillover from the activities around visiting artists, composers and musicians." A growing economy and a valuable geopolitical position have made Vietnam an important ally for many countries – and Hanoi is the diplomatic capital, with embassies and foreign cultural centres arranging events. Clearly, local creatives no longer need to travel very far in search of new sources of inspiration. [fb.com/aN1708](https://www.facebook.com/aN1708)



THIS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT
 NGUYEN MAI PHUONG FOUNDED AN STORE IN 2014; AN STORE OFFERS A WIDE VARIETY OF LEATHER ACCESSORIES, LINEN APPAREL AND ARTISANAL HOMEWARE; HIEN VAN CERAMICS IS LOCATED IN A COLONIAL-ERA MANSION IN HANOI'S OLD QUARTER; OWNER BUI HOAI NAM SON COMES FROM A FAMILY OF ARTISANS AND UTILISES CENTURIES-OLD TECHNIQUES



HIEN VAN CERAMICS: KEEPING IT IN THE FAMILY

"I want to connect the past and the present through ceramic art," explains Bui Hoai Nam Son. Light streams into his boutique through antique French shutters, as he sits encircled by ceramic zodiac animals and large vases.

Son comes from a family of artisans, and in 2013, he began studying ceramics with his father, Bui Hoai Mai. Under his tutelage, Son practised a range of traditional techniques, including wheel throwing, utilising wood drape moulds and using his hands to pinch and sculpt clay. Most significantly, the 28-year-old also learnt *men tro*, a form of glazing that uses ash from burnt rice husks, which now characterises his work. Ceramicists employed this technique in the 11th century, but it fell out of favour due to the unpredictable nature of the process.

Yet, despite the risk of making mistakes, Son believes that using *men tro* helps set his work apart.

"The glaze is really what makes Hien Van Ceramics different and special," he says, referring to the shop he established in 2015, after first supplying a line of products for hotel and museum gift shops. Though feedback and sales had been encouraging, Son wanted his own physical store, so he could better connect with his customers.

While Son's ceramic art has long been popular with visitors, a permanent location in Hanoi's commercial quarter has also led to a loyal following of locals. He believes that despite the rise of online shopping, there are still a significant number of young Hanoians looking for handmade items of high quality and limited quantity. "People are getting fed up with mass-produced products." fb.com/hienvanceramics

Photo by BAO KHANH PHOTOGRAPHY (The Railway Hanoi)

EXPLORING HANOI'S NOOKS



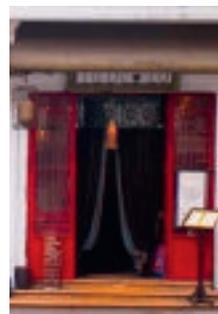
LOADING T

Located in the same refurbished building as Hien Van, this café serves a unique blend of Vietnamese coffee with cinnamon. Don't forget to try the egg coffee, a Hanoi speciality. fb.com/cfloadingt



THE RAILWAY HANOI

On the opposite side of the tracks from Zo is this charming café and bar. Their menu includes ginger-infused cocktails and a selection of local craft beers. fb.com/therailwayhanoi



TADIOTO

Around the corner from aN Store, this Hanoi institution features upcycled interiors and a Japanese-led menu, which includes Tadioto's own line of craft beer: Nhan Dan. fb.com/tadiototongdan



**ZO PROJECT:
PRESERVING CRAFTSMANSHIP**

A few blocks west of Hien Van Ceramics, Zo Project sells products made with traditional papermaking techniques, using fibres from Do tree bark. The cosy one-room shop, which looks directly onto the city’s railway tracks, has been here since 2016 and is decorated with rustic handheld fans, watercolour postcards and paper art that spills out onto the pavement. Tran Hong Nhung established Zo after an inspiring visit to a papermaking village in 2009.

“These artisans have an incredible skill, but it was sad to see that their products didn’t have a place in today’s market,” says the 37-year-old Nhung. “To keep it relevant, I knew I needed to innovate not only the designs, but also the functions of the paper.”

Artisanal families are an important force in Hanoi’s creative evolution, but outside the city, craft villages have played an equally important role for centuries. According to Nhung, papermaking villages in Bac Ninh Province in the northeast have supplied northern Vietnam with stationery for the last two hundred years. This remains true today, but most craft families have now been absorbed into industrial-scale factories.

Refusing to allow this craft to disappear, Nhung founded Zo in 2013 to celebrate, preserve and expand time-honoured techniques. Her current line includes practical stationery items like notebooks and calendars, but also whimsical creations like earrings and lampshades. Nhung has also set up tours of the villages to establish links between shoppers and artisans.

“I see the trend of consuming more sustainable products from Hanoians and I think it is really good news,” Nhung says, when discussing one reason she feels that Zo has been successful and has a growing clientele of Hanoians, especially a younger crowd. “Social businesses have become more popular for Hanoians. The young generation is concerned about our tradition and the environment at the same time.”
zopaper.com



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT
ZO PROJECT IS DECORATED WITH RUSTIC HANDHELD FANS AND OTHER PAPER ART; THE SHOP DIRECTLY OVERLOOKS THE CITY’S RAILWAY TRACKS; OWNER TRAN HONG NHUNG WANTS TO PRESERVE TRADITIONAL CRAFTSMANSHIP THROUGH INNOVATIVE DESIGNS





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT
 INDIEHAND'S OWNER VI THI THU TRANG IS DEDICATED TO CHAMPIONING THE DIVERSE CULTURES OF VIETNAM'S DIFFERENT ETHNIC GROUPS; THE STORE UTILISES TRADITIONAL TECHNIQUES TO CRAFT CONTEMPORARY ACCESSORIES LIKE BAGS AND LAPTOP CASES; CUSHIONS FROM INDIEHAND SPORTING TRADITIONAL ETHNIC MOTIFS



**INDIEHAND:
 CELEBRATING DIVERSITY**

Established by Vi Thi Thu Trang in 2015 among the broad boulevards and leafy squares of Hanoi's French Quarter, Indiehand's clothes and accessories don't draw upon Hanoi's rich craft history; nor are they influenced by the city's burgeoning international art scene. Instead, 27-year-old Trang draws inspiration from Vietnam's broad ethnic diversity.

There are 54 officially recognised ethnic groups in Vietnam and many more subgroups, each with their own distinct motifs. For example, the Hmong, one of Vietnam's larger ethnic minority groups, have a well-developed dyeing tradition that produces fabrics of bold reds and teal blues. The Thai, the predominant ethnic minority group of Son La Province, where Trang is from, are famed for their weaving skills.

"I was inspired by the Thai people who live near my hometown. They make beautiful brocade fabrics," says Trang, sporting a stylish bob and round sunglasses.

She has harnessed traditional clothing techniques to craft accessories that appeal to everyday shoppers: scarves, bags, laptop covers and phone cases. As the shop's name suggests, everything here is made by hand.

In this way, by using a wide range of materials and techniques that celebrate Vietnam's diversity, Trang believes she can help keep minority craftsmanship alive by ensuring there's always a market for it.

"The true value of our products is not just in the design," she says. "It's also the culture of the people who make them that are so vital to our future."

fb.com/indiehand.asia ■



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Singapore Airlines flies daily between Singapore and Hanoi



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