

The Irony in Respect

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When beginning my Folio, I knew I wanted to base my artwork around my experience with racism, xenophobia, and discrimination. This issue has always been present in my life and significantly impacted my outlook of life and people's values. For as long as I can remember I have received critiques about my looks, culture, and stereotyped into the image of an 'Asian person'. I still struggle with these comments but have learnt to be resilient and comfortable with who I am. For this reason, I wanted to focus my folio on the acts of respect in Vietnamese culture as a way of giving back the respect we have lost through racism.

During my Summer Arts Scholarship during January in Canberra, I met talented artists. Sydney Farey, an Asian Australian artist who practices with multi-media inspired my passion to base my folio on my culture and experience with racism. Her work draws together elements of Eastern and Western culture with a focus on her personal experiences/narratives. She started the movement 'Sweet and Sour' with the notion of providing Asian Australian individuals a space to express their thoughts and experiences with xenophobia, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic. After multiple conversations with this artist and how she expressed her emotions and views through her work, I found a connection with her which inclined my focus on respect for Asian culture.

The four main elements of symbolism I have included in my final artwork design is the Dragon, Phoenix, Turtle, and Unicorn. These animals symbolise Vietnamese national unity and strength which was an aspect I wanted to explore. The over-arching message for my final artworks was the journey and experiences of my heritage and the harmony between the past and present. I drew together traditional Vietnamese aspects such as classic Chinese porcelain designs and contemporary ideas like Xenophobia. The two bowls I constructed and decorated depict the sacred Vietnamese animals, which in unison express the strength, beauty, and honour of my culture. The harmony of the Dragon and Phoenix represent the strength of Vietnamese culture and Asian customs in general, as well as the rebirth of a new generation where all cultures are respected. The turtle and unicorn on the other bowl symbolise my internal peace and acceptance for who I am and where I come from. It was important that I incorporated the use of Vietnamese symbols surrounding these animals to enhance and reinforce the idea of respect and cavity.

My main ceramic piece was the platter which shows the transition of my heritage in Vietnam and culture in Australia. This image fortifies the sacrifices and difficulty past generations had to endure to be able to ensure the continuation of Vietnamese culture. The pattern used for the platter resembles the Willow pattern, however, uses aspects which are relevant to my story and the experience my family have endured. The phoenix signifies my journey of being a first-generation child who is privileged enough to experience a new life, unlike past generations. It also symbolises rebirth, the gold cracks in the plate exemplify the rebirth of a new generation as well as growing stronger after being brought down. The star pattern symbolises the parts of the world my family live and the strong bond I have to all the people in my life. The purpose of displaying these designs on crockery is to express the importance of Vietnamese culture and share it in a way which is appreciated universally, this allows respect to be acknowledge through peoples love of Vietnamese food.

The outcome of my ceramic artworks came out beautifully. The designs which were used for the bowls portrayed the message I was trying to convey without being too obvious. A lot of symbolism is shown through my work and holds personal meaning which was an aspect that I wanted to include. I managed to include a lot of detail into my work and made the designs look very traditional which resembles ceramics which are very common in Vietnamese culture, honing into my heritage and customs. The overall shape and outcome of the bowls and platter were polished and finished to a professional standard, resembling proper Asian crockery. Although I found painting on rounded/shaped objects difficult, I accomplished a finished product that I am passionate about. I have developed extensive knowledge and skill from working with ceramic ware and grown to love creating ceramic pieces. I've learnt that art can be created in many different media, forms, and pieces whilst still conveying remarkable meaning.

In-depth research about my heritage through websites and conversations with family members, revealed the significance of food in Vietnamese culture. Vietnamese people express emotions through actions rather than words, which my mother would practice through food. When visiting Vietnam in April this year, I got to reconnect with my heritage and learn more about my ancestors and culture. I came to realise that food is a major aspect of Vietnamese culture, it showcases the country's flavours, traditions, and is shared globally. Every morning in Vietnam, I would eat a bowl of noodles (pho) as most locals do. The simple idea of a bowl of noodles sparked an interest in ceramics which was the direction my folio took. Another major practitioner which influenced my work was ceramics artists, Ah Xian, whose work I viewed in Canberra during my scholarship. Ah Xian tells the story of his life through his work using traditional Asian styled ceramic patterns. He uses big statement pieces which display symbolism which was what I wanted to do with my finals. Gerry Wedd is another artist who influenced the design of my ceramic pieces in particular culture, philosophy, family, heritage, and beliefs. He is a ceramic artist who uses elements from the Willow Pattern but depicts past Australian events/history. He applies a contemporary style and look to his pieces (cartoon-like and modern) which influenced my style. I decided to create designs which had a cutesy style but also reflected traditional Chinese/Vietnamese crockery.

The complete journey of working on my final has forced me to learn more about my heritage and culture, I have learnt so much more about who I am as a person and where I come from. This has made a remarkable impact on my outlook of the world and allowed me to express my opinions on the topic. Focusing on my emotions surrounding racism has been challenging because I've learnt to suppress it for the entirety of my life, but finally being able to process these emotions and display them artistically has relieved me from this burden. It has also allowed me to show people the effects of their words and the importance of respect, not only to Asian people but to all of society.