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## Promoting traditional elements in Vietnamese lacquer products

**Abstract.** It can be said that traditional Vietnamese identity has been preserved and developed by many generations. Fine art has proved this statement through many traditional and contemporary works of art. They are not only the works for purely artistic purposes but also Vietnamese cultural and artistic values of the period, contributing to the richness of traditional cultural treasure trove. Lacquer is considered a long-standing traditional art of Vietnam. Because of having been inherited and developed by many generations, it possesses a unique role reflected in the works and products in many historical periods. Vietnamese contemporary applied lacquer products not only make life more beautiful but also bring new artistic values, creating a combination of aesthetics and function in the same product. Although it contains traditional elements, it still carries the breath of the times, existing in modern life and each living space.

**Key words:** Lacquer, applied lacquer, lacquer art, and traditional culture.

In the historical flow, the cultural element is demonstrated in preserving a nation's unique identities. The Vietnamese cultural tradition that is a matter of identity has been formed for a long time and nourished by many generations, creating its beauty. In particular, traditional fine arts have contributed to helping Vietnam's cultural identity affirm and preserve glorious values.

The remaining traditional lacquer products indicate that the lacquer craft has existed for more than 2000 years. The relics, bibliographies, especially pavilions, pagodas, temples, palaces, private houses, and antique collections, prove a treasure trove of precious lacquer works and products. Each of them has the beauty of the valuable traditional material

of lacquer tree. Thanks to the skillful technique of Vietnamese artisans, it becomes not only magnificent by decorative material and the depth of clear yellow (color of cockroach wings and sea snails) but also powerful and flexible with the color of eggshell blended with other modern colors.

All of them create the familiarity of traditional material, helping the lacquer material present in the life of Vietnamese people via many spiritual worship items such as worship statues, doors (of temples) painting in fresco, the horizontal lacquered boards, pair of wood panels, altars, thrones, trays, and eight weapons, bringing sacred and reverent worship spaces. The paint and technique painting red and black on the surface of religious items

while the text and motifs will be overlaid by gold and silver plates are applied the stone reliefs, embossed paintings, carvings on the rafters and gable walls. The purposes are to ensure durability, prevent the product surface from weather and environmental impacts, and decorate motifs in architecture. These factors create the magnificence and majesty of palaces and mausoleums. The King's living utensils that were sophisticated and detailed indicated the authority of this upper class in feudal society. Exhibitions of Vietnamese lacquer works and lacquerware in countries worldwide have praised a traditional craft through works and products of high aesthetic and economic value. All of them are saved and add the evidence of beautiful art.

Vietnamese people are known for their ingenuity, so handicrafts are valuable assets of the economy and a cultural treasure. In ancient art, lacquerware was mainly used in worship or decorating palaces, pagodas, and village

communal houses. Craftsmen make lacquerware with enthusiasm and sophisticated techniques. In the book "A Journey to Tonkin in 1688", William Dampier mentioned lacquerware in North Vietnam in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century as follows: "The lacquer works made here are not inferior to other types. Artists apply many separate layers of paint, so it is imperative to wait for the previous layer to dry before applying another one. The color turns to light black if the product is exposed to air. Thanks to the varnish and other substances mixed into the paint, the color of items will be warmer. When the final layer has dried, it is ground to become smooth and shiny like a glass sheet by rubbing it carefully with a fist or palm. They can create the paint in different colors and use it to make a kind of glue considered the best in the world. However, it's cheap and is prohibited from export. It's also used to make varnish" [5].



*Photo 1: Statue of Quan Am Thien Thu Thien Nhan (Quan Yin or Avalokitesvara with thousand arms and eyes), painted wood, 17<sup>th</sup> century, But Thap Pagoda (Bac Ninh).*



*Photo 2: The sculpture of Bat Bo Kim Cang, painted clay and wood, 18<sup>th</sup> century, Mia Pagoda (Son Tay).*



*Photo 3: Tuyet Son Statue (Historical Buddha statue), painted clay and wood, Keo Pagoda (Thai Binh).*

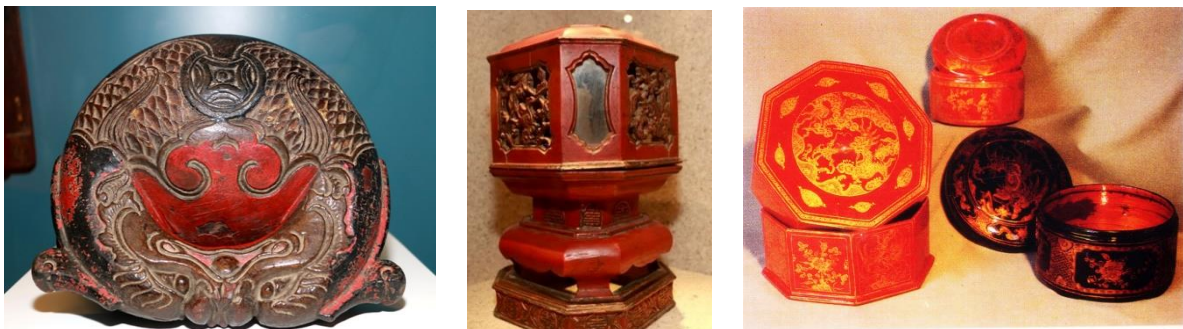
From the Ly, Tran, and Le dynasties to the Nguyen dynasties, the painting profession developed widely in the Dong, Nam, Doai, and Bac Province to serve the needs of society. (The center of Dong Province was Hai Dong Town, including a large cultural area to the East of Thang Long. This area started from Hung Yen to Hai Duong. The North ex-

tends to Hai Phong and Quang Ninh, and the South widens to Thai Binh. Nam Province was the Son Nam Town. It consisted of three provinces of Ha Nam, Nam Dinh, and Ninh Binh. Doai Province had Phu Tho and Vinh Phuc in the North and Ha Tay in the South. It also adjoined Thang Long - Hanoi. Bac Province was the land of the Kinh Bac Town, in-

cluding two provinces of Bac Ninh and Bac Giang.) In Dong Province, Ha Cau village (Dong Minh, Vinh Bao, Hai Phong) is famous for its two handicrafts: painting and statues. In Nam Province, Dinh Bang (Tien Son, Bac Ninh) is renowned for its smooth and glossy “Then” paint. Nam Ha area has Cat Dang lacquer village (Y Yen District, Nam Dinh), and Nam Thuong area has Dong My lacquer village (Thanh Tri, Hanoi). In Ha Tay (former Doai Province), there are many lacquer villages such as Chuyen My, Boi Khe, Binh Vong, Ha Thai, and Van Giap. Vietnam’s lacquer craft was introduced into the South thanks to Lord Nguyen, forming famous craft villages such as Trieu Son, Dia Linh, Tien Non (Hue), Tuong Binh Hiep (Binh Phuoc).

With the absorption of the precious things in the traditional lacquer craft, artists and painters have brought to lacquer craft not only artistic products but also capable of expressing emotions like other materials in painting. It’s even more unique because the paint is durable and attractive, a brilliant and

solemn beauty. According to researchers, traditional Vietnamese lacquer is a symbol of both culture and goods. These two functions develop together to form two trends: fine arts and handicrafts. Researcher Nguyen Thi Hai Yen commented: “For the Vietnamese, whether lacquer is in the form of handicraft products or artworks, it is familiar and imbued with classical spirit and wisdom through the hands and emotion of artists. Only when we read each page of history can we see that the existence of lacquer is magnificent because it has developed for thousands of years. It’s too hard for any other material to keep it up.” [8] To promote the identity and ethnicity in the design of modern lacquer products, it is indispensable to understand the following factors: *Creativity, uniqueness, diversity, use of natural materials, handcrafted element, industrial design, traditional element following contemporary space and concept, promotion of Vietnamese culture, and works and products with economic and business value.*



*Photo 4: Traditional lacquer products: wooden bell, wooden lanterns (that were painted red and black on the surface while motifs were overlaid by gold plates), and a set of painted wooden boxes, 19<sup>th</sup> century.*

***The first is about creativity.*** Art is the individuality and the uniqueness that an artist creates in his work, making it different from other people’s works and revealing its soul and even nationality. Exploiting the traditional elements is abstract, but it can be “felt” rather than simply seen.

Ancient decorative patterns are included in the designs to match the form, function, and profound content. The most important

thing is that they have been created and used as decorative forms for a long time, making the identity of an era, nation, or specific region or period. They are also inherited and absorbed by many generations, forming Vietnam’s identity. Specifically, the Ly, Tran, Le, and Nguyen dynasties’ patterns and unique patterns of a minority ethnic group, or a period of ancient culture, are always imprints for the continuous cultural flow. For



example, artist Pham Quynh Anh is so creative that she uses patterns of ethnic minorities in the tea serving trays with lacquer material on a ceramic base. In this work, she has utilized the beauty of colors, forms, and pattern

rhythms on Hmong costumes, generating aesthetic values that are traditional and simple via gorgeous skirts and modern via product design.



*Photo 5: The tea serving trays using patterns of ethnic minorities, artist Pham Quynh Anh (2018).*

**The second is about uniqueness.** In each product, the traditional element is unique and possesses nuances of materials, techniques, and pattern features of each ethnic group as well as locality. Uniqueness is known as a standard for new creations because it will promote our products to countries around the world, helping them learn

about the extraordinary things of Vietnamese culture. Thanks to that, the works are enhanced in value to become highly artistic products and be symbols of the traditional craft of Vietnam. Ethnicity is the quintessence that every artist ponders and searches hard in the nation's cultural treasure and expects to express in the visual language in his works.



*Photo 6: Candlesticks and lacquer plates with human figures of ethnic groups and ancient patterns (Museum of Hanoi University of Industrial Fine Arts).*

In every era, if an artist is Vietnamese and knows how to love, feel, touch, think, be angry, and always concerned about the “soul of the nation,” he not only creatively designs simple forms expressing personal emotions but also combines individualism and soul of the nation, making each work exceptional.

**The third is about diversity.** It's an important factor in traditional products, is reflected in various forms and decorative patterns in composing. This has marked the diversity and tradition in the creative process of designers.

Many studies show that countries can only build strong enough internal resources

based on solid spiritual foundations: the nation's cultural identity and the unity in cultural diversity. Except for following the requirements of ideological content, visualization, and functional properties, the designer is free to decide everything for the design of art products in general and lacquer in particular. As a result, the works must be diverse so that users have a wide variety of choices. These elements further clarify the role and im-

portance of cultural heritage in globalization and international integration. For instance, in the set of lacquer vases called Ethnic Girls and made of composite, the image of ethnic girls is not a new thing because many authors have exploited it. However, the novelty is reflected in the way the product is shaped. The flower vases come in various forms and colors, bringing a new look in a general idea of national tradition promoted through creativity.



*Photo 7: The set of lacquer vases called Ethnic Girls and made of composite, with the image of girls from ethnic minorities. Author Dang Mai Anh (2007).*

**The fourth is about making use of natural materials.** Ethnicity is not only in form. It is abstract and can be felt through the unique features of products. This factor is expressed by combining traditional materials and techniques with modern decorative elements to create harmony.

Contemporary applied lacquer art has shown the artist's personality and national

identity through the materials of traditional crafts. Ethnicity has been more clearly revealed in decorative arts and design. Artisans have created beauty for society thanks to natural material, national culture, talent, and experiences. This makes contemporary applied lacquer art both have its distinctive form and contain a national identity.



*Photo 8: Lacquer plate and lacquer basket combined with hand-woven rattan. (Museum of Hanoi University of Industrial Fine Arts).*

**The fifth is about the hand-crafted element.** From the perspective of culture and history of traditional professions, each prod-

uct crystallizes physical and mental labor. It's also a combination between sophisticated crafting methods and modern technical inno-

vation. Many traditional works are highly artistic, contain the special features of the national culture, and show the nuances and characteristics of each profession.

Applied art creates pieces that are imbued with handicrafts and have both functional value and aesthetic value. Many types of products are produced for consumption and decoration in homes, pagodas, and workplac-

es. They are combined between exquisite crafting methods and artistic creativity. Unlike industrial products mass-produced by machines, handicrafts, which have high value in creative art, are only produced manually by craftsmen with skillful hands. Therefore, the hand-crafted element is one of many things that need to be promoted and preserved so that the products are friendly and traditional.



*Photo 9: A set of decorative lacquer vases are inspired by the fishing baskets of Vietnamese farmers.*

***The sixth is about industrial design.*** It is an indispensable factor in the process of industrialization and modernization. When creating applied products, artisans always put functional and aesthetic values into them to meet customer demands, so lacquer items bring artistic creativity and have practical applications in life.

In the trend of globalization, increasing the industrial nature of design products is an inevitable process. Therefore, we shall actively integrate to take advantage of opportunities and promote industrialization and modernization. Products need to be mass-produced to serve human life. Besides, it is vital to grasp the strength of science and technology in the production of lacquer products. It can be said that despite having the participation of modern technology, the traditional culture is always present and is the core of each applied lacquer product.

***The seventh is about the traditional element suitable with contemporary space and concepts.*** In semantics, decoration makes an

object or a specific space impressive by arranging shapes, lines, colors, and materials, creating harmony and matching the owner's ideas. The beauty of applied art is the adaptation of the visual language with the external form of the works, not just a generic and non-directional transformation.

Therefore, before starting to create a contemporary applied lacquer product, designers are required to brainstorm with a series of following questions: "Where will this product be used? How to use it? Which space has the environmental characteristics suitable for the product? Who are the target users? What are their requirements? What materials will be processed and combined with lacquer material? What is the given subject about?" It means they shall understand some key points to develop ideas and create gorgeous works that can coordinate and adapt well to specific spaces and users. Thus, in terms of the psychology of creation, the applied lacquer products shall meet the purpose and requirements, and artists are unable to create, impose their

subjective thoughts freely, and reveal their individuality. It can be stated that traditional factors can control both creators and customers in the process of making lacquer products.

***The eighth thing is that the applied products shall have economic and business value.*** With the point of view of sustainable development, it's significant to pay attention to the economic growth rate, especially the degree of improvement in living standards, cultural aspects whose core is the cultural identity, and environmental factors.

Due to the growth of an expanding market economy, commercialization is an inevitable process for all products. Therefore, our primary duty is to find solutions so that commercial business is effective, and each "good design makes the business thrive," like the saying: "Good design, good business" [7].

Currently, commerce has become not only a scientific field but also a unique synthetic art and subject at schools. However, market access and application of technology have not been promoted yet. The artists only know how to create the works. They have not yet marketed and promoted their products to society and have not had a system of technological manufacturing combined with the creation stage. As a result, the good designs are limited. To deal with this problem, it is necessary to perfect many aspects so that each product can retain the pulchritude of traditional material, possess modernity, and become a valuable commodity.

***The last thing is about promoting Vietnamese culture.*** Design art is always present and applies creative things in life. It has been commercializing. Therefore, commerce is also an art, and traders of all fields are trained to be experts. Artists are considered experts in promoting the image and culture of Vietnam through each work of art. At that time, each

lacquer product will hold the soul of the nation.

Lacquer is known as a typical material of Vietnam. It is a harmonic blend of two aspects: classic and modern, with traditional characteristics such as smooth, shiny surfaces, depth, and material layers. Moreover, the painted surface may accommodate all modern shaping methods (in a gentle or powerful style), and ornamental motifs can be real or abstract, reflecting the modern element.

### **Conclusion**

With the goal of developing a socialist-oriented market economy, Vietnam has increasingly reached out to the world and introduced numerous high-quality products to worldwide customers in the globalization trend and the transition to the new age. Vietnam's applied lacquer goods, in particular, have a international presence. They haven't faded. On the other hand, they still comprise the core value and features, and they're gradually transforming.

Tradition is always maintained and expressed through each product, which is respectable and precious. It's vital to promote this strength so that modern lacquer can bring traditional elements and integrate itself into contemporary artistic life. This helps the lacquer art inherit the experiences and essence in the past and develop harmoniously to satisfy contemporaries' aesthetic taste and style. The beauty of Vietnamese lacquer accumulated over many historical periods always possesses a traditional identity that every Vietnamese is proud of. It can be said that the beauty of the decorative materials, the iridescence of mussel shells and eggshells, the depths of scarlet, and the blue under the clear yellow paint contain the aftertaste of ancient times. All of them echo and catch up with modern life.

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