

# FINE ART SYMBOLS ENGRAVED ON THE ARCHITECTURE UNDER THE NGUYEN DYNASTY AND THE CURRENT ARCHITECTURAL WORKS

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*Artistic symbols in sculptural language contribute to clarifying the architectural works to which they are attached. These symbols help us to identify the function of the architectural work from a long view. Belonging to the architecture under the Nguyen Dynasty, the artistic symbols still have a profound influence to this day. Therefore, it is extremely necessary to continue decoding and promoting the values of traditional culture and art.*

**Key words:** Symbol; traditional art; the Nguyen Dynasty.

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## 1. Introduction

Cultural symbols in architecture considered as "signs" and tools of thinking that evoke associations, help people discover hidden meanings. "Bieu" is the part of the figure exists in real space to convey the "meaning" part inside. The symbols on the spiritual architecture play a role as signals and commands to motivate people to obey voluntarily. Many symbols also have educational value related to behaviors in all human interactions with people, forming "cultural

patterns", helping to adjust and orient back to social life. . In the formation and development of the visual arts in general and architectural decorative sculpture in particular, the symbol represents the cognitive and creative capacity of people and contains values for the community and society.



*Figure 1: Statue of phoenix, Dien Tho Palace, Hue Imperial Citadel (Source: Author)*

Symbols contain hidden values that cannot be seen in a specific, quantifiable way, but only by being felt and "understood" in the cultural conventions of each specific culture that reflect the needs of the cultural and spiritual needs of mankind. Symbols in sculpture used to decorate architecture through specific images to represent abstract meanings that are often difficult to predict. For example, the decorative phoenix bird on the roof system, in addition to their noble meanings, also allows us to realize that this is an architectural work for women, such as Dien Tho Palace (Hue Imperial Citadel) where the Queen Mothers lives, or Tinh That, is the place of practice for nuns. There are often statues of spiritual animals such as Nghe, lion, etc., in front of spiritual architectural works such as temples, pagodas, and shrines, to warn, deter and regulate behavior of human before entering the dignified space. The symbol also has a transcendental function to help people access elements in the spiritual field, orient and evoke the souls of religious believers. Thus, symbols also play an important role in establishing the space of architecture, they contribute to the division of spaces: secular, sacred, dignified, specialized... Icons in sculptural language on architectural works that affect the visual, psychology, emotions and perceptions. They act as intermediary "mediators" to help people understand abstract things that are difficult to perceive by human eyes

## **2. Overview of the research**

The article *Sculpture of communal houses* by Thai Ba Van [7], gives a general overview of the development of Vietnamese communal house sculptures via the dynasties: Ly, Tran, Mac,

Le... in a continuous flow of line art. The author analyzes the village communal house sculptures with structural thinking, layout and artistic language, thereby helping us to perceive the important role of the element of "tuong" (meaning, content) in artistic values.

In the book *Classical Sculpture of Vietnam*, Nguyen Quan and Phan Cam Thuong[4] analyzed the styles and trends of Vietnamese Buddhist art. There are many symbolic tendencies, such as feminine - idealized, realist, decorative - monumental and spontaneously expressive. Thus, the authors believe that it is possible to recognize art styles as well as symbols of each period of traditional art.

Research work *a way to approach history* [2] by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Tran Lam Bien is a book that collects many research articles on ancient Vietnamese fine art, in many aspects such as communal house architecture, Vietnamese pagodas, Vietnamese fine art. The study decipher decorative symbols of ancient Vietnamese art. The material has been systematized to provide useful scientific explanations and an overview of the spiritual and cultural aspects of the traditional visual and decorative arts of the nation. Therefore, the Vietnamese visual background was built on the peasant pedestal: "*Since then, the artistic lines have become rhythmic, flexible, repetitive, lyrical and full of symbolic elements...*" [2, p. 215]. Thus, the decoration projects are the boats that carry people's aspirations. The outer beauty is just to suggest the inner beauty, which is spiritual beauty. This is one of the important premises to deeply analyze the "secret" or symbolic elements hidden deep in the artwork..

In the book *Vietnamese Patterns from prehistory to the first half of the feudal period*, Assoc. Nguyen Du Chi symbolizes the images decorated in the historical periods of Vietnamese fine art. This is a valuable and rich book of documents and illustrations. It gives readers an overview of patterns and decorative projects. The author also shows that the meaning of symbols always plays an important role in Vietnamese decorative patterns. Therefore, the study of symbols always requires learning and analyzing the "secret" values hidden inside, through the "codes" expressed on the outside.

The book *Fine Arts of the Nguyen Dynasty in Hue* [5] has provided valuable information on the formation of workers, statues... Policy to encourage the development of handicrafts and fine arts under the Nguyen Lords outlines the Overview of the faces of artists and craftsmen. Each worker ward has its own style of displaying decorative projects, and the way of expressing the "secret" element is also very unique. The authors also commented that "the topic of decorative sculpture in the Nguyen Dynasty is limited, but the variation and representation of it in different forms is limitless" [5, p.137].

The book *Hue Fine Arts from the perspective of meaning and decorative symbols* [6] by Nguyen Huu Thong is a research work on symbolic language and metaphorical decoration in the Nguyen Dynasty in Hue. The author has inherited and continued to systematically decipher the decorative images of the Nguyen Dynasty. In addition, it also provides the origin of the term symbol to help readers have more useful information to study the "secret" element hidden in the artistic image.

Thus, many researchers of traditional Vietnamese art have laid the foundation for discovering the mysteries of traditional art symbols. Continuing to decipher and promote traditional cultural and artistic values in the current period is extremely necessary. In line with the Party and State's policy: "*Building a culture imbued with national identity*" and "*Culture must develop on par with the economy...*".

### **3. Research approach and methods**

#### *3.1. Approaching research towards Art Anthropology*

The artistic symbols are governed by the religion, indigenous beliefs and cultural character of the inhabitants. Researching the process of creating and appreciating art of the population community and explaining the process of cultural acculturation have a direct impact on symbolic language, evaluate artistic value, expressive meaning, unique characteristics in decorative projects.

#### *3.2. Applying field research methods*

The artistic symbols exist in real space - three-dimensional space, so the use of field methods, surveying and field study of architectural works is necessary to analyze the system of themes and projects, summarize symbolic values to build a holistic view and thinking.

#### *3.3. Research in the direction of Fine Arts*

Using theoretical systems, theories and specialized knowledge in sculpture to apply the method of analyzing the structure of symbols according to the genre, material and function of the architecture they are associated with. Analyzing topics, layouts and content is the way to find their basic value system. Using dialectical methodology, historical materialism, considering art as a form of social consciousness in the context of the country's history as well as the history of art culture. In addition, the author also uses an interdisciplinary research method. The application of general knowledge of many different fields to have a more comprehensive view of the role and meaning of art symbols in people's spiritual and material life and religious influences. religion, acculturation and historical influences.

## **4. Results**

### ***4.1. Situation***

Today, many works of temples, monuments and memorials are built with the great investment of the state and the people. Thus, the role of the artistic symbols in the above works is not merely the "accompanist" that adds to the aesthetics of the architectural shapes, but they are also the "soul" of the work, "sanctify", "transform" the spaces in which they are present. In fact, there are spiritual architectural works thanks to the talented hands of artisans and sculptors whose aesthetic and spiritual values are multiplied. However, there are also many works where the existence of artistic symbols becomes objectionable and less aesthetic in contrast to architectural shapes. The reason partly comes from the lack of aesthetic philosophy hidden in the decorative styles, even the decoration projects, patterns and motifs that are the quintessence of ancient art of many generations distorted, misunderstood and lost their original values. The hidden content that the symbols carry on themselves is the soul of the work. If the decorative projects are removed, there are only inanimate and inanimate layers of lime mortar. Of course, it is undeniable that the essence of art is creative exploration, but the inheritance of aesthetic values that have been affirmed for many generations cannot be ignored. When the symbolic meanings in decorative sculpture are forgotten, it will reduce the value and lose the humanistic philosophies of decorative projects. As a result, many spiritual architectural works become distant, strange and lost the "sacred", "precious" needed. It is not possible in the name of exploration and creativity with external forms of expression, but forgetting the inner content of decorative patterns. For example, the Ben Duoc temple project (built in 1993), in Cu Chi district, Ho Chi Minh City, On the roof system, the project "Dual dragon moon" was replaced by "Dual dragon star" loses the memorial meaning of the temple. Later, people had to remake it with traditional decorative motifs of the Nguyen Dynasty with porcelain mosaic material instead of fiberglass, which has no vitality with time. Obviously, it is not advisable to be emotional when turning to the past in the name of modernity. Each period of traditional art of the nation has its own language and expression values. Therefore, when returning to the philosophical values in the traditional art treasure, it is necessary to have sobriety, seriousness, as well as an understanding of the meaning of the symbols of his father.

### ***4.2. The role of symbols in traditional Vietnamese architectural works***

Artistic symbols in sculptural language contribute to clarifying the content of the architectural works to which they are attached. These symbols help us identify the function of the building as soon as it is observed from a distance, such as the dragon image is densely decorated on Thai Hoa Palace, the Ngo Mon Gate of Hue's royal court that carries the meaning of the

concept of kingship, indicating the spaces reserved for emperors. Therefore, symbols on architectural works are "informational", they contain the content and function of the architecture. Author Nguyen Du Chi has commented: "All of these things prove that our ancestors from the past not only used decorative patterns as a necessity, but also knew how to use the signals of the law and of a necessary order in society" [1, p.111]. Standing in front of religious buildings, we can easily identify their functions such as: "wheel turning the Dharma wheel", "swastika", "lotus flower"... symbolizing Buddhism; "cross word", "dove", "cross", "alpha & omega" are symbols of Christianity... Thus, in addition to aesthetic and spiritual values, the symbol also has the function of receiving representing the architectural work and the decoration itself on the architecture is an art symbol. There are sculptural symbols that are not directly attached to the building which contributes to *the establishment of functional spaces* and clarify the content for the architectural work.



*Figure 2: Nghe in front of the courtyard of Court ritual, Hue Imperial Citadel (Source: Author)*

Each participant contributes to the general layout plan and to express the content of the work. Cultural symbols in sculptural language have the effect of conveying messages and warnings, helping people to be aware and prepare their minds when entering functional spaces. For example, a pair of Nghe couples are often placed at the front gate of communal houses, temples, pagodas, shrines... Nghe is a legendary mascot in the minds of Vietnamese people. It is very familiar as the image of a stone dog standing guard at the village gate or gate. family. The

dog is a close friend of the Vietnamese people, helping to guard and protect material values, while Nghe is the guardian god of spiritual values. Its teeth are sharp, the head and feet have many spears, and the eyes are open in the full of power. With such a majestic appearance, Nghe is a mascot used to suppress all evil spirits and demons. The ancients believed that Nghe controlled the human soul, knowing the difference between good and evil. In addition, there are pairs of Nghe couples placed at the gate of the three gates, the shrine area, the flaming knives, the mane, the flag... are all close to the body, mouth closed, gentle appearance, airy face Thinking with a solid. Quiet layout allows us to think of the solemn space inside. Is it possible that the memorial nature of the worship space inside has affected the shape of the Nghe ? The conveying content of each space is different, which has dominated the layout form and artistic tricks. In other words, the symbolism in architectural decorative sculpture reflects the connotation of the architectural work. They are important elements contributing to the establishment of functional spaces for architecture. It is clear that the content of the architecture has dominated the form, the external appearance of the symbol, to express itself in the spirit and perception.

A traditional architecture itself also contains symbolic values. Architecture is not only the art of handling space such as living space, spiritual space, memorial space... but also cultural space, expressing the values and spiritual trends of the times. The image of the Vietnamese village associated with the beauty of the temple has long been ingrained in the hearts of many Vietnamese. From the outside, the Tam Quan gate is also a symbol of Buddhist significance. The Three Quans contains the profound philosophy of Buddhism. The temple architecture also carries on itself countless other hidden symbols. It can be said that the temple is a "museum" of culture and art of the village, because it preserves traditional art symbols and traditional cultural values of the Vietnamese nation. What will happen if we separate the decoration style on the temples where the expressive value and the desire are hidden in the artistic symbol. The symbolism in these decorative projects contains the spirit of the nation. Therefore, "The vitality of national art is hidden in the consciousness and subconscious of each Vietnamese person. It is because of that feature that Vietnam has kept its eternal identity and also by keeping its identity, the country has been preserved" [5, p.200]. Therefore, the symbols on the traditional architecture contain the traditional aesthetic values of our nation.

### ***4.3. Studying the symbolic meaning on the architecture of the Nguyen Dynasty***

It can be said that the fine art decoration on the architectural works of the Nguyen Dynasty became cultural symbols in visual language. They carried on them content containing profound meanings. The symbolic value of the decorative arts of the Nguyen Dynasty also contributed to

clarifying the appearance of culture and art of the Nguyen Dynasty. Ngo Mon Gate and Thai Hoa Palace are two important architectural works of Hue royal court. First, the southern main gate of Hue Imperial Citadel is not only a entering place for the king and dynastic officials, but also a platform towards the square in front of Ky Dai, where major court ceremonies happen such as Truyen Lo ceremony (calling names of new doctors), Ban Soc ceremony (distributing calendars), military parade... Second, the place where the throne is located and important events of the court take place: dynastic ceremonies,...The decorative patterns on these two buildings, in addition to the function of witnessing the great events of the court, they are also symbols of Art emphasizing the role of architectural space, so the metaphorical "secret" element in the sculptural block shows the identity, status and personality of the owner who enjoy the beneficiaries of the architecture. During the Nguyen Dynasty, there were cultural acculturation phenomena, but with the strength of traditional culture, the decorative styles of foreign origin gradually were distilled according to the thinking and aesthetic of the Vietnamese. Phap Lam material originating from abroad made in Hue. It has its own characteristics such as dithering, enamel painting to create random soft blurs. Especially, Hue Phap Lam is included in architectural decoration such as Ho Lo vases on the roof system, lotus buds on the three gates. That is the difference between Hue Phap Lam and other types of Phap Lam from abroad. Sometimes, artistic images from other cultures become a source of creative inspiration for the ancient craftsmen. For example, some imported patterns and motifs appear like grape leaf patterns on the Nine Gods, or decorative patterns in the form of flipped leaves at Dien Tho Palace, or patterns on stone fountains in Hanoi. Kien Trung Palace... through the talented hands of artisans of the Nguyen Dynasty became an art symbol with Vietnamese culture, contributing to the wealth of the national treasure of decorative art. With a dynasty influenced by Confucianism like the Nguyen Dynasty, many decorative patterns originating from China are understandable. On the carved, engraved, embossed, chiseled plates of the decoration projects are soaked with sweat and still leave the traces of the talented hands of the old artisans. Although the decorative themes in Hue have reflected the influence of the religions profoundly, but within the limitations of the stereotypical decorative themes such as: "birds - animals". "Flower - Tree", "Four Spiritual animals", "Bat Buu" are the limitless ways of transformation and charisma in the process of expression" [6, p.18]. Based on that spirit, although the artistic symbols of the Nguyen Dynasty were dominated by Confucian content, they were not "souless" copies, on the contrary, they were a dynamic transformation in the works of decoration project. It is thanks to their creative thinking and their own way of sensing images that the artists of the Nguyen Dynasty transformed imported decorative themes into new artistic symbols with their own variations, contributing to the variety of decorative schemes. After all, through the creative talents of the artisans, the art symbols of imported origin transform to become the symbols of the high artistic value. They are not

mechanically stereotyped versions of foreign elements, but are also created to suit the Vietnamese culture. Art symbols are always created in each specific space and situation to create new variations to enrich the treasure of artistic symbols. With its own values, the art symbol of the Nguyen Dynasty is both a continuation of the national art tradition and new variations, suitable to historical circumstances and the inevitable development of Vietnamese art history.

#### ***4.4. Some solutions to inherit the value of traditional symbols***

In order to inherit the tradition of decorative sculpture of his father, it is first necessary to understand the deep meaning of the symbolism hidden in the decorative motifs and images that the forefathers have sent. The Nguyen Dynasty is the last feudal dynasty close to our time, so the artistic symbolism of the Nguyen Dynasty still has a far-reaching influence to today. The study and inheritance of the Nguyen art tradition is still a topical issue. Therefore, Nguyen's art and architecture still retain their values and have eternal vitality in the flow of national fine art.

After two wars against the French colonialists and the American empire, many temples, towers, pagodas and shrines were destroyed. After the country was completely reunified, along with economic and cultural development, a need for spirituality and gratitude arose from the people. In the country, many new temples, shrines, mausoleums, and graves have been built with the desire toward the ancestral roots or paying tribute to the people's heroes and martyrs. The artistic symbols on traditional architecture have not been lost. The roof dragons, sword heads, and decorative patterns continue to be promoted and inherited. Therefore, it is necessary to have the contributions of ancient art researchers, cultural researchers, and lovers of Vietnamese traditional art to collect and compile documents and images of Vietnamese artistic symbols through the ages. These materials will be useful research, reference and learning materials not only for students at art schools, traditional vocational training classes but also for people doing fine arts.

The subject of *copping the ancient symbol* of art students should be replaced with the subject of Ancient symbol studies. In addition, teaching of this subject should invite the ancient art researchers. Through that, the lessons are not merely copying versions of patterns and textures, or simply practicing copying skills, but also an opportunity for students to enrich their knowledge of ancient fine arts and understanding symbolic meanings of decorative motifs. This will contribute significantly to the spiritual architectural works that have the presence of decorative sculpture.

Design lectures on traditional Vietnamese art in high school art programs; organize for students to visit ancient architecture and art works so that they can feel the beauty of traditional art, and nurture their love and discover traditional art values.

In order to have temples and monuments using decorative elements that are ancient with higher artistic and aesthetic value, there should be the presence of knowledgeable people in this field at the appraisal council of art design. Invite experts in the field of ancient art research to participate in art design as well as participate in criticism in design contests of spiritual architectural works that are and will be built.

## **5. Discussion**

Until now, traditional art symbols still have strong vitality. People's demand for spiritual spaces is increasing day by day. Many temples, shrines, communal houses, pagodas, etc. are still newly built, in which traditional symbols are used with the participation of artisans, architects, sculptors in design and construction. That reveals that the symbol of traditional national art in general and Nguyen's art in particular with its own values still attracts and dominates the spiritual life of the people.

Currently, the construction of spiritual architectural works in Vietnam using artistic symbols is rampant, even misunderstanding their original symbolic meaning. That has broken the relationship between architecture and sculpture. As a result, many spiritual architectural works become less dignified and less aesthetic. The Nguyen Dynasty has a large number of architectural and fine art works spread the country. The number of monuments that have survived today is quite large, so their influence on the constructions using artistic symbols is understandable. For that reason, it is practical to have more research works on the Nguyen art symbols to contribute to preserving and promoting traditional artistic values.

The training at most of the visual arts schools now overlooks the subject of *Ancient Inherit Studies* or there is no consensus on the content, teaching methods and practice. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct in-depth studies on traditional art in order to make scientific and objective assessments of the artistic value of art symbols, contributing to the theory and Vietnam's traditional art history. The study of decoding art symbols is very necessary. They play an important role in the material and spiritual life of people and help us to feel the cultural and aesthetic level of the community or of a nation.

## **6. Conclusion**

Art symbols in decorative projects of traditional Vietnamese art contain hidden contents reflecting the thoughts, feelings and will of the ancients. The unique values of the artistic symbols are recrystallized from the traditional cultural values of the nation and handed down from generation to generation in the historical development process. Through that, it is possible to identify the personality, soul and feelings of an entire community. Therefore, decorative

patterns, motifs and projects become symbols containing the spiritual values and humanistic ideas of Vietnamese traditional art when associated with architectural works. Artistic symbols have contributed to the spiritual values of the spaces and environments in which they are associated.

Thanks to that, communal houses, temples, pagodas, shrines... become more dignified and sacred. The Vietnamese people always look up to spiritual and cultural values. During the course of the history of the nation's traditional fine arts, the spiritual values of the art symbols are kept in communal houses, pagodas, etc. in the villages where are "the museum of fine arts" of folklore and artistic image through sculptural language, society, history, culture of people, community.

Today, the preservation and promotion of the values of the artistic symbols is considered as a responsibility to preserve the national identity. Researching, disseminating and promoting Vietnamese fine art symbols in architectural works using traditional decorative patterns is the responsibility of artists, architects and those who love traditional art.

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