

# Overview of the history of painting and lacquer art in Vietnam

## Abstract

Traditional Vietnamese lacquer is recognized through professional and historical forms. First of all, decorative painted relics, associated with religious beliefs, have served in spiritual life through worshipping items in pagodas, temples, communal houses, and palaces. Architectural columns and horizontal lacquered board are applied in hammocks, couplets, animism, four holy creatures, flowers of the four seasons, eight precious items of Buddhism, Baguio, palanquin, hammock, long communal house, worshipping paintings, decorative paintings... Especially Vietnamese lacquer painting through actual labor, practical works, research, and application of traditional techniques in the artistic creation of artists, has formed the appearance of traditional Vietnamese lacquer art in the past over the course of more than two thousand years of history.

**Keywords:** Vietnamese traditional lacquer, history of painting, lacquer art

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## Introduction

During 20 years of research and teaching at Ho Chi Minh City University of Fine Arts, the author has found lacquer paintings really interesting and essential thanks to their special materials that are not only sparkling but also familiar in daily life when drawing lacquer paintings, authors are required both artistic feelings and meticulous, patient, and careful characters.

General research on lacquer paintings has been conducted to figure out the formation and development of Vietnamese lacquer paintings based on traditional South-East Asian lacquers. Research has shown that South-East Asian countries were the origins of lacquer arts. This is a traditional art of South-East countries in which local people create worshipping items in palaces, and pagodas to apply lacquer ware with handicrafts. With special lacquer materials, Vietnam has become one of the leading countries in exploring and performing new, unique materials with many famous Vietnamese- French artists. Vietnam is regarded as an epitome of South-East Asian countries to be researched for further understanding of the formation, development, diversity, and trends of lacquers paintings.

## Results

### Painting from prehistoric times to 1858

Prehistory is the indigenous period of Vietnamese culture, which determines the formation, development, and positioning of national culture and art. About 4000 years ago, the inhabitants of Vietnam, from the Red River basin to the Dong Nai River basin, entered the Metal Age with three major cultural centers Dong Son, Sa Huynh, and Dong Nai. In particular, the Hung Vuong era (Dong Son culture), had built a high civilization, before the Han people invaded. The inhabitants of the time lived mainly by growing rice, vegetables, and fruit trees. Initially, people made fields with stone pickaxes, but bronze plows and cattle were used as traction by the Dong Son time. The craftsmanship developed and the profession of making stone tools which existed before the Dong Son period was then transformed into jewelry making. Bronze making was highly developed in the Dong Dau period, and there were large and beautiful bronze objects such as bronze jars, and bronze drums the profession of forging and iron casting began to appear by the Dong Son period. Pottery is quite prosperous, and carpentry and painting left many traces on wooden

furniture such as trusses, columns, boat-shaped coffins, oars, wooden boxes, ax handles, and spindles..., these all reached a high technical skill.

In 1961, archaeologists unearthed in Viet Khe a hundred bronze and painted wood artifacts contained in a boat-shaped carpentry coffin. Some paint products such as paint bowls, rectangular paint boxes, and wooden cores, inside and outside are painted black or red in two layers; paddles in black paint, and outside in yellow paint (Figure 1).

In 1969, scientists also found many painted artifacts in other tombs in Vinh Quang commune, Hoai Duc district (old Ha Tay), in La Doi boat (Hai Hung) tomb. In 1972, the most important and unexpected discovery was the excavation of an ancient tomb in Dong Tuyen, Dong Son commune, Thuy Nguyen district (Hai Phong). Some artifacts like paint tools, including a bowl, used to store or recline paint, red-brownish painted wooden beaks, and some pieces of the wooden plank that were put together based on order, which is quite similar to the paint filter table currently in use.

According to ancient customs, people buried the dead with their personal belongings that they used when alive. These paints are confirmed by researchers to be those of ancient inhabitants of the Northern Delta. Its native character is quite evident in the use of two basic colors black and red, the core mainly created from wood, the decorative scheme of concentric circles and the frills of chrysanthemum, the very special almond shape which was frequently displayed as motifs on Dong Son bronze drums. "If in the period from the 4th century BC to the 10th century AD, painted objects were mainly used as funeral accessories, then from the X century onwards, they were mainly used as a coffin".<sup>1</sup>

From the above civilization center, compared to other places, despite the difference in time, and each region has its own unique due to ecological conditions and ethnic characteristics of each region, they all reached a high level of development in bronze, ironwork, showing proof that there might have been close cultural exchange relations going on. Paints are mainly concentrated and are found in the Northern Plains. Wood artifacts painted in the sites of many provinces are dating back to before BC, proving that paint has been used quite commonly and the paint industry has a long history. With the above archaeological relics, most scientists and researchers in the country agreed to determine the imprint of the paint profession of the ancient Vietnamese residents who have existed for over 2,000 years.

After a thousand years of Northern domination, the autonomy of the country's history began when Ngo Quyen defeated the Southern Han army at Bach Dang River, establishing an independent state. According to legends and historical records, Tran Ung Long a martial general of King Dinh Bo Linh, used the sap of the gardenia tree to plaster boats to cross the river to fight the enemy. He wanted to cross the river, but unfortunately, the boats were all sunk by the enemy. It was at that time he came up with an idea... Knowing that there was a pair painted in the village, he let the soldiers in to borrow all kinds of baskets, and then mix the paint resin with powdered soil to plaster into the gaps of the boats so that water could not enter. With that ingenious idea, the boats were able to transport the troops to the river safely...<sup>2</sup>

The flourishing period of the independent and autonomous feudal state through the Ly (1010-1225), Tran (1226-1420), Le So, and (1427-1525) dynasties along with the rapid development speed and widespread influence of Buddhism, has made religious architecture flourish. Pagodas and towers were built all over the country, especially in the Northern region. Along with it, many palaces and temples were also built, showing that national unity, the persistent preservation of clan community traditions, and economic development are important prerequisites for paving the way for the future of the painting profession. During this period, painted furniture was used a lot for interior decoration, architecture, worship, and utensils for the aristocracy.

In the first year of the Ly dynasty, King Ly Thai To built the Thang Long capital on a large scale with many architectural "ingenious carvings of jewelry, unprecedented beautiful earthworks" (Viet history summary). Including a painted four-story palace, columns painted with dragons, phoenixes, magnificent fairies, silver-tiled pedestals, exquisite temples, and sky-high towers.<sup>3</sup>

"Among the items of the Vietnamese emissaries, there is a Dinh Giai palanquin, which was painted in glossy black".<sup>5</sup> However, paintwork only molds in a few simple types and within a certain range. The Dai Viet feudal state had very strict regulations on the use of paintwork, about which the decree of the Tran dynasty clearly stated:

Palaces must not be covered with gold paint... from the Ton-That to the five ministries of the palace, they can use the palanquin, horses, and hammocks. In particular, the royal palanquins are shaped in the form of a phoenix, while the general of the country has their palanquin shaped in the shape of a bird"

The paint color on some objects also has a meaning of class, or the identity of each person who uses it: "The king who watches the court, sits on the gold-plated chairs", and the soldiers with "armor, helmet painted in blue or red to give them a strong appearance to protect the city".<sup>4</sup> During the Le Dynasty, an inspection was ordered (in 1428) to make filling and household books. Previously, the king ordered the inspection of local products such as copper, iron, mulberry, thorns, silk, paint... now he gave the local authority the ability to do those tasks 1469): "However nowadays in the markets, most people buy and sell hats that looked similar to the citadel soldiers' ones, making it difficult to distinguish the soldier's one, thus the decision to ban those was of necessary".<sup>5</sup>

According to many documents, during the reign of Le Nhan Tong (1443 - 1460), the person who was honored as the first master of painting was Tran Lu, a native of Binh Vong village in Thuong Tin district (Hanoi). He twice went to China (Hunan province) to learn more techniques of gold and silver inlaid, to disseminate to the villagers, and to improve painting techniques. His disciples set up worker wards and spread out everywhere to do their jobs.

He was given the title Tran Thuong Cong and had a temple in his hometown.<sup>2,3,6,7</sup> Is Mr. Tran Lu the ancestor of Vietnam's painting profession? This has not been confirmed because like other ancestors, they were only considered to be the ancestors of the trade wards and villages (Figure 1).

A prominent feature in this period (in the XVII - XVIII centuries) was the shaping of the political and cultural institutions of the village, communal houses, pagodas, people's houses, and village planning. The village communal house has meaning in people's spiritual life. It is a place to worship Thanh Hoang village god, administrative offices, and festivals for villages for people to continue worship and wishes for paint craftsmanship to have its ability exploited and continue promoting its decorative role (Figures 1&2). If in the previous period, the pagoda was the main object of worship, now the village communal house and the churches, worshipping professions, and temples are set up everywhere. The traditional painting profession has become closer to people's lives and left a very strong impression in worshipping statues such as the portrait of the Empress Dowager at Tra Phuung Pagoda, the statue of the thousand-eyed, thousand-armed Guanyin Buddha in Ha pagoda (Vinh Phu), But Thap pagoda (former Ha Bac) (Figure 3). The genre of painting also captured many people's interest and was expressed in the form of motifs, decorative patterns in temples, and pagodas such as Lo Hanh communal house, Dau pagoda (former Ha Bac), Mia pagoda (former Ha Tay). Paint craftsmanship was not only used by the ruling classes at this time as a symbol for their heavenly throne but also is received by all classes of people as enjoyment of beauty, the noble and durable: "goldenly beautiful and exquisite just like honey"!



Figure 1 Tools for making paint (Viet Khe tomb).



Figure 2 Altars at Tho Tang Temple.

Painting is respected and widely developed throughout the East, South, Doai, and North. "The East has the village of Ha Cau (Hai Phong) which is famous for its two professions of painting and sculpting; The North Dinh Bang (Bac Ninh); Son Nam Ha area has Cat Dang mountain village (Nam Dinh); Ha Tay area (in the old land

of Doai) has painting villages: Chuyen My, Boi Khe, Binh Vong, Ha Thai”.<sup>8</sup> The outer worker wards such as Binh Vong ward, Nam Ngu ward, Thang Long ward, Lang Gie ward, Cat Dang ward... have shaped and concentrated many skilled workers, from which they spread everywhere.



**Figure 3** Statue of Quan Am with 1000 eyes and 1000 arms at But Thap Pagoda (the Vietnam Museum of Fine Arts, Ha Noi, Vietnam).

Skilled workers were recruited by the feudal courts into the king’s palace to serve. Others gather in groups of workers and find themselves in temples and pagodas to decorate Buddha statues, painted with gilded altars, palanquins, etc., or seek out rich families to make murals, couplets, sofas, thrones. The number of workers growing up in the profession has multiplied, creating new work in many localities. Each place created many innovations and unique techniques for their wards and kept the profession of making their treasures.<sup>7</sup>

Painting has become a noble profession, loved by everyone through folk songs:

My heart wants to marry a painter  
 Working by himself, better than a blacksmith.  
 Or:  
 One coin a basket  
 Don’t give up the buffalo job  
 One coin, one gourd  
 Don’t give up painting...

From here, when it comes to the name of a famous product, it is often associated with the local name that specializes in that category. “For example, when it comes to Dinh Bang (which is also called Bang village locally), Tu Son, and Bac Ninh, people immediately imagine that the black paint of Dinh Bang ward is beautiful, which few places can produce. For other regions it could be talking about the fine goods of Cat Dang (Nam Dinh), the fruit basket of the Bang market (Ha Dong), the baskets of the Dau market (Nam Dinh)<sup>8</sup> all the above-mentioned examples show the local crafts of that region.

Painted craftsmanship not only served religious architecture but also served the needs of people, from kings, mandarins, and soldiers to civilians. Thus, techniques, forms, and decorative arts flourished. Especially by focusing on the restoration of communal houses, temples, shrines, and statues, the art itself has added and increased the variety and value of worshiping objects with items such as palanquins, coffins of dragon boats, and phoenixes, tables, bowls,

trays, candlesticks, or the products that people generally use which are covered with paint such as trays, plates, tables, chairs, boxes, cabinets, sofas, incense pipes (Figure 4).



**Figure 4** A General’s altar decorated with traditional painted products.

Those objects were not only just decoratively painted to be just mere items but have been turned into special goods and brought to life by their aesthetic elements. The technique of painting gold gloss is further enhanced next to oil-based paint products, and the crafts were gradually getting better from time to time. Through the survey, the paintwork of the XIX-XX centuries was painted in many layers, in red or black or covered with gold and silver to create a shimmering, fanciful gloss. The painting technique is sophisticated, and aesthetic value was further enhanced by combining the paint with the technique of inlaying pearls, horns, ivory, etc., all of which make the product even richer and has more artistic value. Preservative value is also paid attention to when it comes to enhancement at the stage of shaping (the “grinding” factor is only used in the process of making the body or flattening the surface of the product before painting and shading). In Dang Trong, there are Phu Xuan (Hue) and Binh An (Binh Duong) which are places where many painters migrate to live and set up a career, creating a premise for craft villages here such as Tien Son, Dia Linh, Tien Non, Duong No (Thua Thien - Hue) and Tuong Binh Hiep (Thu Dau Mot - Binh Duong). Hue is the place where the traces and relics of the painting profession are preserved most largely and completely. This is possible because Hue was once the capital of the Nguyen Lords (1802 - 1945). Here, the painting industry thrived at the beginning of the dynasty when the court requested artisans from all over the country to come to Phu Xuan to build palaces and produce goods to serve the needs of the dynasty (Figure 5).



**Figure 5** Hue Citadel Palace.

In Binh An (Binh Duong), some areas formed after large migration waves such as Tuong Binh Hiep, Phu Cuong, Tan an lacquer villages.



(Thu Dau Mot) have made traditional painting jobs in Vietnam. This is growing continuously. Good painters and products of Binh Duong craft villages not only meet the needs of local people but also supply products and spread throughout the South.

### From 1858 to 1985

This is a period that oversaw important transformation and differentiation in Vietnam's modern history, starting with the fact that the French colonialists invaded the country in 1858. Nguyen Dynasty - the last feudal dynasty in Vietnam put the country in a new situation: interaction with the West and Chinese cultural influence created a diverse arts scene. However, traditional art is still preserved through architectural works, sculptures, and decoration of communal houses, pagodas, temples, and shrines... especially in the communal house of Bac Bo village. Statues of Buddha, saints, mascots, herbs, etc. that were carved on lacquered wood, bronze, and stone still hold important positions. Craft villages, craft streets, worker wards, and folk painting lines still maintained their work and craftsmanship.

The French came to open a series of schools such as the School of Ba nghe Thu Dau Mot (1901), now the School of Fine Arts Binh Duong; Bien Hoa School of Fine Arts Decoration (1903), now Dong Nai College of Fine Arts Decoration; Gia Dinh School of Drawing (1913), now the University of Fine Arts of Ho Chi Minh City; Indochina Fine Arts School (1925), now the Vietnam University of Fine Arts; National School of Fine Arts (1949), now Hanoi University of Industrial Fine Arts. All those schools have nurtured and trained many talented artists, who laid the foundation for modern Vietnamese art.

“An important event at the beginning of the construction of modern Vietnamese painting was the appearance of lacquer paintings. From traditional painting techniques to artistic lacquer painting is a big turning point - which marked the era of new material with unique characteristics that can be applied to painting”.<sup>9</sup>

The decisive factor for Vietnamese lacquer ware began with the establishment of the Indochina Fine Arts School, in which there was special attention care from painter Victor Tardieu (1870 - 1937, the founder and principal) and the painter Joseph Inguimberty (1896-1971, one of the first instructors since the school's founding). Some students at the school such as Tran Quang Tran, Pham Hau, Le Pho, Tran Van Can, Nguyen Khang... together with artisan Dinh Van Thanh, researched and developed the advantages and features of our country's paints through testing to develop a reddish-brown paint color (called cockroach wing's color paint in Vietnamese) by mixing paint with turpentine in a certain ratio. Thanks to this new type of paint, the artists were able to mix with other paint to decorate clothes or use for lacquer painting. On the other hand, they also study the laws of shaping space, near and far, composition, rendering and even the rules of using colors learned in Europe to apply to this precious traditional material. From the Indochina Fine Arts School, from the studios, the lacquer art quickly spread to the traditional painting villages from the North to the South, creating a magical reunion between painters and artisans in all three fields: decoration, application, and painting. Especially in applied lacquer, the painters quickly received and learned lacquer techniques (especially the grinding and drawing stage) to make sophisticated lacquer ware products and utensils, which were known, appreciated, and trusted by customers from all over the world. Application art with familiar folk themes in fine art paintings such as apricot - orchid - chrysanthemum - bamboo; unicorn - phoenix; plum - bird; spare parts - cranes ... can now appear even on tables, altars, chairs, beds as well (Figure 6).



Figure 6 Black Mother-of-Pearl Closet given by author.

The type of decoration also raised a step higher when it comes to high-art lacquered events. At the Paris International Exhibition of Fine Arts and Technology (Paris Artwork) in 1937, the art of making “our paint” by Vietnamese artists and painters made a lot of impressions and resonances with visitors. In about ten years (1935 - 1945), lacquer art has had unique and subtle changes in technique: white eggshell is used to describe soft flesh, golden color to describe the natural beauty of rays of sunshine, the noble golden color to describe plants, water surface, clothes, characters... In addition to the colors black, red, brown, and yellow, there are now added new dithers like blue and green (Figure 7).



Figure 7 Partition for Decoration created by Le Pho painter.

The fanciful and profound nature of lacquer has been expressed in paintings by artists through topics such as village activities, scenes of young girls playing on the lake, scenes of communal in festival time, scenes of moonlit nights... The success of the August Revolution in 1945 and the resistance war against the French (1945 - 1954) opened a new direction for Vietnamese painters. They had to leave the studios in the city, the “rich” palettes, the strokes of the pen, the sadness in the image of a girl, with many worries and concerns to join the flow of people to the war zone, to the front, to the fields and the factories...

Since then, lacquer masterpieces have appeared consecutively, with artworks such as: Slapping water in Dong Chiem (Tran Van Can), Besides the lotus pond (Nguyen Gia Tri) (Figure 8), Ancient Dance (Nguyen Tu Nghiem), Passing by the Old Village (Le Quoc Loc), Remembering Northwest's night (Phan Ke An), Heart and Gun barrel (Huynh Van Gam), The mountain team changing shifts (Hoang Tich Chu), Fishing on a Moonlit Night (Nguyen Khang), Bamboo (Tran Dinh Tho), etc... are proofs of achievements for Vietnamese lacquer painting in this period.



**Figure 8** Besides the lotus pond created by Nguyen GiaTri.

When it comes to exhibitions, lacquer is not only noticed but also resonates greatly with many. Many lacquer products and works contributed to national art exhibitions from 1955, 1958, 1960, 1962... and many foreign exhibitions from 1956 to 1960, including art exhibitions of the 12 socialist countries in Moscow in 1958 or the international art exhibitions in Eastern European countries since 1962 afterward, those are proof that lacquer art has won the hearts of not only domestic and but foreign viewers alike.

After 1975, the country had just stepped out of a major war for peace to be established, and as the process of healing from the war wounds is still in the first steps, troubles arose as pressure from outside forces arose in the North and South West as well. The wartime “subsidized” planned economy, which was quite effective for serving in the war, is now revealing its disadvantages to the general development of society. The desire for reform economic and sociocultural innovation is a requirement of the working people in this period. After a long period with all its focus and enthusiasm for the service of the resistance war and national liberation, people need to have their new, more diverse, and everyday needs catered. As a result, during this time, the basic requirement of art creators is to expand freedom and democracy in artistic activities.

The complexity of the struggle for artistic innovation was enormous and the artist chose active discussion as to their language of expression. Although they are just called “experiments”, a lot of artworks in these genres appeared: Realism, Surrealism, Cubism, Co-presentation, and Innocent ..., consequently making the face of art more diverse but not “more eye-catching” when compared to the already familiar aesthetics motif of the past. The large creative force of the anti-American resistance war generation always has works that attracted the attention of colleagues and the public. They had a sense of professionalism and skills that were forged well through their own experience of work and battle and a creative self-consciousness in the “common” of society. These compositions have been successful in each of their individual work, but have not become a style or an author at this stage.

By the early 1980s, the subtle impact of market factors at that time had a certain encouraging meaning, helping the creators to find an outlet for their creativity, and at the same time created conditions for them to create more liberally, overcoming the general administrative orientations that made art stiff and close-minded. Gradually getting rid of their creative role as a civilian, the authors have gained a passion and eagerness to learn from artistic achievements from the outside world. Though the market economy is still in its infancy, it had welcomed the experimentation of innovation in languages and art forms for all creative subjects.

Materials are scarce and in short supply, but lacquer painters still work hard to find more nuances with new expression techniques. Artists tend to go into the monumental genre, aggregating many historical events into one composition. Many new experimental studies in expression as well as in material, reflecting revolutionary reality through many topics during the two resistance wars and the construction of socialism on large frameworks with diversity in style. This was one of the notable features of lacquer painting. Although the number of authors and artworks in this period is still little, the combined strength from painters from three other regions was helping to make lacquer art richer in terms of themes and expressions.

Meanwhile, the presence of handicraft cooperatives at this stage played a very important role for lacquer workshops and traditional painting villages. Many lacquer factories have launched a series of applied lacquer products, fine art paintings with many new types and designs, serving the needs of domestic and foreign customers.

These are Lien Minh cooperatives (Vu Ban, Nam Dinh), Cat Dang (Y Yen, Nam Dinh), Tan Hong (Tien Son, Bac Ninh), Tuong Binh Hiep (Thu Dau Mot, Binh Duong. Many cities and provinces had developed lacquer profession, where the strongest are Phu Tho, Ha Tay, Hanoi, Nam Dinh, Bac Ninh, Ho Chi Minh City, Binh Duong... For lacquer products, the mechanism of centralization and subsidies also has positive factors: the cooperatives are all managed by the state and have a monopoly on raw materials and products sold by the state. The art makers did not have to worry about the output of the products, the artisans gradually changed from art makers to art teachers... Therefore, the paint products always had to adhere to the traditional techniques, and the stages involved. From painting to making, tempering, drawing, painting, mosaic, optical, lacquering ... all artists must follow the rigorous process of the painting profession, resulting in high-quality products at this time. This time can be said to be the golden age of applied lacquer with high export turnover due to the state’s trade relationship with socialist countries through the protocol. The largest market at that time was the Soviet Union, Eastern European countries such as Poland, Romania, the German Democratic Republic, and France, Italy, Canada... The international art exhibitions, with the continuous participation of Vietnam lacquer ware goods, especially the exhibition at Erfurt in Germany since 1962 (regular exhibition every 4 years) has proven that Lacquer application, besides the trust of domestic customers, has gained more prestige in the world market.

### From 1986 up to the present time

Since the “open door” innovation policy was implemented, artists have had the opportunity to access many creative trends in the world, from genres such as Impressionism, Abstraction, Expression, etc. Surrealism, Cubism... to modern art trends such as Installation, Performance... with extremely diverse materials and diverse forms of expression. It could be said that whatever was happening in the world, the same thing occurred at almost the same time in Vietnam, but on a much smaller scale. Art trends in the world are catalysts and stimulants that help artists in their search for new artistic values. These new art forms have given the current art situation in Vietnam a more diversified and vibrant look.

The renovation period has lifted almost all the difficulties and at the same time created conditions for the development of all kinds of fine arts in terms of language and operation direction. It also has helped encourage new creations with good ideas about real life and encourage the individual creative role of the artist, in turn, step by step starting to get rid of the old-fashioned “civil servants” outlook and uphold civic responsibility that they once held towards the country.

With the diversification of art in the exchange and integration of innovation, it is not uncommon for painters to start their pursuit of new trends and abandon the old ones. On the other hand, before the diverse colors of many art styles, inevitably, imitation is more easily bound to happen, creating the possibility that the country's national art identity could be lost during the process! Faced with that situation, Resolution 5 of the 8th Party Central Committee has blown a new wind to culture - art with the right directions, igniting an unprecedented atmosphere of composition:

Democracy and freedom for all cultural creations and activities are ensured to better cultivate talents, and uphold the responsibility of artists and artists to the public and the current times, to build and develop a better culture that is imbued with a national identity that can help overcome the obsession with money to the point of disregarding morality or human values. It is after achieving those things that acquiring the quintessence of ethnic groups in the world, enriching Vietnamese culture can also be achieved as well.<sup>10</sup>

The generation of artists in the anti-French and anti-American period still proved to be energetic with topics bearing heavy memories of the revolutionary war and emotions from the vibrant reality of life, which all demonstrated bravery, creative thinking, and solid professional qualifications. Lacquer has been more creative in expression, layout, color, and simple patterning, highlighting the central theme in artworks such as: For the Peace of the Country (Le Thi Kim Bach); On the roads of the country (Tran Huu Chat); Woodcutting (Vu Duy Nghia); Soldier's mother (Hoang Tram), Bamboo (Tran Dinh Tho) (Figure 9), etc.



**Figure 9** Bamboo created by Tran Dinh Tho.

Meanwhile, the young generation who grew up after the unification of the country, especially since the doi moi period, have dared to explore and create, without hesitation in applying and experimenting with materials boldly. In terms of content, in contrast to previous generations, they drew many fictional, imaginary, and personal paintings. They tend to focus more on the inner life, on private feelings such as love, gender, and the human condition. It was at this time that many people want to return to the village culture in the good old days through which to find Vietnamese identity. It is a rural image with festivals and folk games, with traditional customs and art. Whereas other painters want to express the national identity in spiritual life, belief, in the philosophy of Yin - Yang with Eastern origin, there are also young, extroverted artists who challenge themselves with global social realism issues such as environment, pollution, violence, lifestyle... In general, young people have many emotions, from nostalgic escape from reality to facing and joining

life. Their artistic content is therefore diverse, with many layers of metaphors and symbols, reflecting the complex nature of peacetime, society, and human thinking in the early XXI century.

In terms of language and artistic conception, Expression-Abstract language plays a major role in youth painting. Breakthrough in experiments with new materials and techniques on lacquer has been forming the "modern lacquer" language of Vietnam with different styles of artists such as Dinh Quan, Vu Thang, Le Quang Ha, Nguyen. Kim Quang, Nguyen Van Chuyen, Duong Sen, Vo Nam, Mai Anh Dung, Lam Chi Trung, Nguyen Phan Nam An...

Lacquer application art was on the same tracks with its developments in genres, types, and diversity of designs and materials as well. In economic - technical exhibitions and handicraft exhibitions in Giang Vo, Hanoi from 1986 to 1990, the artistic achievements of this type were expressed and shown through the richness of materials and art.

In addition to traditional paint materials, the lacquer market also recognizes the presence of Japanese paints material such as Polycite, Toa; Nam Vang paint; Cashew paint, varnishes, or other industrial paints. Those artworks, with their high techniques and unique decorative purpose, were proven themselves to be as elaborate and accurate as machine-made counterparts, with beautiful subtle hidden art motifs behind their deep black layers of paint. In addition, there are also lacquer products that have their combination with other materials such as bamboo, ceramic, stone, glass, etc., which helped further contribute to the pinnacle of the lacquer art industry in Vietnam in terms of technique and quality.

Since the 1990s, when the country saw itself entering a new market mechanism with the participation of many other economic sectors, export lacquer goods, as well as all other handicrafts goods, had been struggling for a while. On the other hand, as a result of socialist countries in Eastern Europe disintegrating, the industry lost its usual protocol as before. With those new changes, the government no longer subsidizes the art, at the same time extinguishes the old cooperative model, making private production a norm in this period. Lacquer application art not only has had conditions to develop quickly and strongly in all aspects to meet all needs of industrial social life but also the opportunities to exchange, integrate and seek export markets, however at the same time it also have to face many obstacles in competition and product quality.

## Conclusion

Through a brief overview of the process from traditional lacquer to artistic lacquer, Vietnamese lacquer ware from prehistoric times to the present has always accompanied the development of Vietnamese history, culture, society, and people, with milestones such as painted burial objects in Dong Son culture, worshipping statues, painted worshipping objects in the Buddhist monarchy, and applied paints in the Confucian monarchy. Vietnam lacquer ware from the beginning of the twentieth century has now found a new artistic mission, which is to turn the traditional art form material into current painting material with the introduction of lacquer painting based on traditional painting techniques. From here, one can see that the Vietnam lacquer industry has always had a dialectical relationship for its development through pairs of complementary categories: application - art; artists - painters; materials - the art of expression... When it comes to folklore, lacquer art has not only become the strength of many local regions but also has become a hereditary profession for many. Over many generations, this type of art has always existed and accompanied lacquer painting as an indispensable element to make the face of the whole Vietnamese lacquer art industry.



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## Conflicts of interest

Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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