

VIETNAM LACQUER PAINTING: A LINK BETWEEN ORIENTAL LACQUER CRAFTS TRADITION AND WESTERN PLASTIC ART VALUES

Dr. Trieu Khanh Tien
Deputy Dean of Painting Faculty, Vietnam University of Fine Arts (VNUFA)

In Vietnam, before the invention of techniques used in lacquer painting, lacquer served different purposes; referred to as *annamite lacquer*. Lacquer usage can be traced as far back as the Dong son period. Traditionally *annamite lacquer* was used as a varnish-like coating on objects. Decoratively, it was often mixed with red powder or used in combination with silver and gold. Tran Lu (also known as Tran Thuong Cong, born in 1470), is considered the founder of lacquer industry in Vietnam. As a mandarin of the Le Dynasty (1443-1460), he studied Chinese lacquer in tributary visits to China. Returning to his village of Binh Vong (Thuong Tin district, Ha Tay province), considered the location of the first lacquer in Vietnam, he bought back techniques in how to use lacquer. The lacquer industry developed during the Ly Tran Dynasty, as a decorative art mainly connected with Buddhism. During the Nguyen Dynasty lacquer gained popularity as it became accessible to daily life demand.





Vietnamese lacquer crafts in early 20th century

Before 1925, and the founding of Indochina Fine Arts University, lacquer was used for decorative purposes. Initially, the Indochina Fine Arts University including apartment for the production of lacquer crafts. In 1932, art student Tran Van Can and craftsman Dinh Van Thanh collaborated to discover the process of sanding lacquer and technique of mixing lacquer, turpentine, and color powder to paint with (*pumice lacquer*). Traditionally, lacquer painting was comprised with three different colors: Black, Red, and Yellow. This traditional color palette is accompanied by a couple of theories regarding the significance of these colors. The first theory of representation is that black, according to Chinese-derived Vietnamese thought, represents the universe. Stemming from a prehistoric caveman notion that blood equal life, red is said to represent humanity with happiness and prosperity. The clothing of monks is yellow, to represent their separation with human life and disconnection with human affairs, forces and emotions. Yellow may also represent the transcendence of humanity or death. The second Vietnamese theory regarding this traditional color scheme is that in unity these colors represent the human condition; black is the hair, red is the blood, and yellow is skin. Since the development of lacquer as a fine art, other materials have been used in combination with lacquer (silver and gold, eggshells, mother of pearl, etc.). Additional colors have been added to the palette, such as green and blue, though such colors are not produced from natural substances.

A necessary additional material in process of lacquer painting is the board which is painted upon. A lacquer board requires approximately one month to produce. Despite its plain appearance, a lacquer board contains many layers necessary to its quality. High quality lacquer boards consist of two equal sides, either of which may be used to paint upon. Five layers create one side of a lacquer board. The first surface layer of a lacquer board is an external coating of lacquer. This layer needs three to four coatings of lacquer, dried, and sanded between each to ensure smooth and flat surface as well as its stability. Types *gioi nhi* and *son thit* are used. The

second layer, moving towards the interior of the board, is a mix of soil lacquer and sawdust. This layer is carved into when eggshells are inlayed into painting. A loose-textures cloth is placed as the third layer in a lacquer board, to help maintain a consistent form and the longevity of the board. A thin layer of lacquer (lacquer type *nuoc thiec*) is used as an adhesive with the cloth, may be considered the fourth layer. At the center is a piece of high-quality plywood, the fifth and most substantial layer within a lacquer board.



Vietnam raw lacquer



Making and filtering transparent lacquer



Lacquer as a fine art developed during the period of French colonization, and developed within the Indochina Fine Arts University, established under French direction. The period of romanticism (1925-1945), with the first generation of lacquer painters produced western influenced compositions of landscapes and figures, avoiding the social issues of the time. Included in this first generation of artists were Nguyen Gia Tri, To Ngoc Van, and Tran Van Can, highly regarded for their lacquer compositions, among the first to establish the fundamental skills and rules in the art of lacquer painting. The second generation of artists captured the revolutionary activity of nation through realism. Among them were: Nguyen Quang Sang and Nguyen Tu Nghiem. During this period, 1946- 1954, French influence waned, and Russia becomes a prominent figure to draw upon. The function of art during this period was to reflect the revolution, artists were otherwise criticized. The 1960's can be considered as the peak of the development of painting and the growth of Vietnam's export of lacquer, though handicrafts remained prominent as well.



IN THE GARDEN – 1970

Artist Nguyen Gia Tri (1908 - 1993)



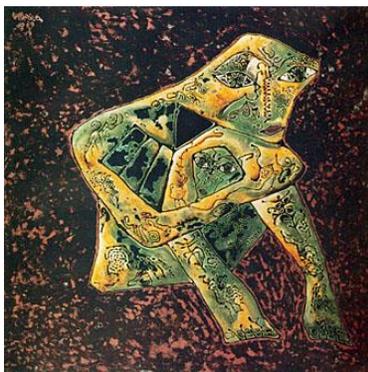
WIND OF SUMMER - 1940

Artist Pham Hau (1903 - 2007)

The first generation artists establish the rules and basic techniques of lacquer painting, as strictly abided by such conventions. The smooth and flat surface of a completed work was necessary condition for a successful production. Their compositions primarily contained decorative elements, while perspective remained immature with no clear distinction of space (ex: sky and earth were often time and colors, the border of gold around objects may be used to establish a distance between objects and background). The second generation of painters continued to rely on the basic skills and techniques of their forefathers, but also began innovating. One such example is how they begin disregarding the convention of a flat-surfaced board.



Artist Trinh Quoc Chien



Artist Vu Thang



Artist Nguyen Quoc Huy

Experimentation with volume, shape, and texture with some of the second generation artists, but continued and became more widespread among the third generation, exemplifies innovation and experimentation regarding volume and by combining Vietnamese and Japanese lacquer, through abstract-expressionism.

Despite the many conventions and established techniques in layer painting, contemporary artists greatly vary in method. It can be said that there is a fundamental process to lacquer painting (in mixing colors, building layers and sanding), though even this is being tested and stretched in definition by young artists, but there are many details in stylistic techniques that vary from one artist to the next. Lacquer painting is an art form that can incorporate many other materials such as: gold and silver powder and leaf, eggshells, mother of pearl, bronze powder, etc. It is in the use of such materials that there are no rules and varying techniques arise to create unique compositions. Through such various techniques the uniqueness of the medium is displayed; transparency in colors and texture can be conveyed through lacquer painting unlike any other media. Additionally, lacquer painting is still a very young fine art form and its mature state has not been reached nor been reached nor its capacity fully stretched; this is a contemporary development that artists today move towards with a variety of unique techniques.



Artist Diep Quy Hai

Being considered the leading fine arts institution throughout the nation, with a 90-year aged old history of foundation, Vietnam Fine Arts University is proud of many generations of talented students, who have been mainly contributing to form the face of Vietnam modern lacquer painting. For further development in near future, we really hope to get more and more cooperation with over sea arts institutions in general, and lacquer/urushi artists, organizations, and associations in particular to build up an international lacquer/urushi network together.



Vietnam Fine Arts University – Lacquer Painting Department 2019



Arts works by VNUFA students





Meeting with Chinese businessman, arts professors and students
at my lacquer studio, 2018.