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### Vietnamese Lacquer Painting: A Cross-Cultural Analysis

The development of lacquer as a medium for the artist is one of the most significant achievements in the art world of 20th century Vietnam.<sup>1</sup>

– Kerry Nguyen Long

Originating in neolithic China, the medium of lacquer migrated easily across modern political borders to influence the traditional utilitarian and decorative wares in Burma, Japan, and Vietnam due to military conquest and the spread of religion. The artistic and preservative qualities of the medium have long appealed to local artists, who adapted Chinese and other foreign influences into their own cultural practices. Over the course of the several thousand years since its naissance, the application of lacquer has manifested itself into many forms, with each geographic area displaying unique pieces. Although a multitude of sources played a key role in the cultural proliferation of lacquer, nowhere is its genealogy more distinctly evident than in the contemporary artistic practice of Vietnam.

#### The Lacquer Art Process

Lacquer was first introduced to Vietnam by the Chinese during their military dominance of the region from 111 BCE to 939 CE, further modified to fit European standards by French colonists from 1858 to 1945, and is presently restricted by the country's communist government. This influx of foreign influence on Vietnam's visual art practice parallels Vietnamese attitudes toward their own cultural history. With a marked lack of resistance, the Vietnamese have a

<sup>1</sup> Kerry Nguyen Long, "Lacquer Artists of Vietnam," *Arts of Asia*, January–February 2002, 53.

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historical pattern of assimilating new ideas and shaping them to fit their needs. As communication becomes easier and ideas are rapidly shared, present-day Vietnamese lacquer artists are employing traditional practices while incorporating a new Western style, displaying their colonial history and adapting their aesthetic as a model for contemporary Asian art.

The medium of lacquer has been simplified in the modern age, refined through time-tested experiments with environmental controls to become the practice used today. The sap used to make the original lacquer wares comes from a resin-producing tree indigenous to central and southern China and to Japan called *Rhus verniciflua*; sap from *Malanhorrea usitata* is used in Burma and *Rhus succedanea* in Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> Each tree yields about six or seven ounces of sap from mid-June to late October.<sup>3</sup> After the sap is harvested, it is placed in sealed containers to prevent contact with moisture. In Vietnam, the sap is placed in waterproof baskets, where it settles into strata that are separated for different work based on its quality.<sup>4</sup> The primary component of lacquer is urushiol, an oil found to produce allergic reactions upon contact or inhalation. A combination of oxidation and polymerization of urushiol in the tree's sap when exposed to moisture allows the lacquer to harden, rather than dry through evaporation alone. Following a dehydration process for purification, iron powder is mixed with the sap to create the black lacquer that is used as the primary layer for all lacquered wares. Early Chinese pieces were created using this iron-based lacquer foundation and colors were later produced by adding

<sup>2</sup> Bang Sy Truc, "An Introduction to the Lacquer Art of Vietnam," Thavibu Gallery, March 12, 2005, <http://www.thavibu.com/articles/ATC24.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Maehata Shunsai, "This Is Urushi," presentation at the Asian Art Association Curatorial Circle, Denver Art Museum, Denver, March 9, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Huu Ngoc, "Panorama of Vietnamese Popular Art," *Cultures* 6, no. 2 (1979): 113–33.

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different minerals. Today, the sap is still harvested using traditional methods, but is often processed using factory techniques.

Lacquer is a difficult practice that has been passed down by trained artists since its inception in China. The practice takes time and experienced craftsmanship to master. As artists refined its use, the technique to create a successful piece spread across eastern and southeastern Asia. The artist starts with a solid structure, usually wood, clay, porcelain, or metal. After preparing the inner structure, the pre-prepared lacquer is applied with a layer of cloth to strengthen the core. Many coats of lacquer are subsequently applied and left to harden separately in a dark, humid environment. Lacquer solidifies rather than drying like traditional oil paints, and must be achieved at a temperature between ten and twenty degrees Celsius and between 70 and 90 percent humidity, making southern Asian climates ideal for its use. In Japan, the drying process can take eight hours in a modern drying device or several days when only exposed to air.<sup>5</sup> A smaller object, such as a tea container, can have as few as ten to fifteen layers of lacquer, while a more protected object can have several hundred. Each layer is polished or burnished with charcoal between coats to create a smooth, polished surface ranging from matte to glossy in appearance.

Decoration of the piece is done after the initial base of lacquer is complete. Artists inlay precious materials, such as gold or silver powder, foil, mother-of-pearl and in Vietnam, eggshell. These decorative elements are sealed with additional layers of lacquer and then polished. A finished lacquer object or painting can take weeks and sometimes years to complete. Surface

<sup>5</sup> Shunsai, “This Is Urushi.”

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decoration is greatly divergent across cultures, stemming from the lavish lacquered wares found in tombs in China in the fourth century BCE (see fig. 1).

[PLACE FIGURE 1 HERE]

Figure 1. Chinese lacquered coffin, dated to the fourth century BCE. Hubei Provincial Museum, Hubei, China. Image courtesy of the Hubei Provincial Museum.

Chinese lacquer developed into an art form in two distinct categories: surface decoration and carving. Surface decoration involves painting or inlaying materials, such as gold, silver foil, or mother-of-pearl. Some pieces were previously carved wooden objects that were later covered with lacquer coatings, whereas others were carved following the lacquering process. The earliest pieces found are painted and were probably the type of artifact that the Chinese exported to the modern areas of Korea and Japan. These types of works were expensive to produce, and thus the lacquer tree became an important economic asset by the Warring States period (475–221 BCE).<sup>6</sup> During this time, lacquer was mainly used for practical purposes, such as in the preservation of caskets and utilitarian objects, and was only made an artistic expression in the south.

### The Historical Origins of Lacquer

Although the origins of lacquered objects are very hard to trace, references to lacquer have been found in Chinese literary sources dating to the reign of emperor Shun (late third millennium BCE). Physical artifacts have been found in late Shang dynasty sites (1300–1028

<sup>6</sup> James C.Y. Watt and Barbara Brennan Ford, *East Asian Lacquer: The Florence and Herbert Irving Collection* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1991), 15.

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BCE),<sup>7</sup> but it can be assumed that these pieces were mainly used for their preservative and strengthening qualities, as decoration was not seen until later. According to George Kuwayama, “[by] the Warring States period (475–221 BCE) the medium of lacquer had become a major art form.”<sup>8</sup> Lacquer production in China became a prosperous industry by the Han dynasty (202–220 BCE), leading to private workshops in addition to the imperial artist centers in Henan and Sichuan.

It is important to note that the objects found from this period are mostly of aristocratic patronage because of the expense and necessity for trained artisans, although lacquer was gaining more widespread usage by this time. An example of the lacquer pieces from the imperial workshops was found in the tombs of the Marquis of Dai at Mawangdui in Changsha, Hunan Province (179–157 BCE). Also of note is the claim of authorship, as most objects were inscribed with the names of their craftsmen as well as the administrators of the workshop.<sup>9</sup> After this period, lacquer began to lose favor in the court, although it would remain an important Chinese art. It was during this time that the Chinese focused their vision outside of the court and toward their many foreign military conquests, diffusing Chinese customs throughout eastern and southeastern Asia.

<sup>7</sup> George Kuwayama, *Far Eastern Lacquer* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1982), 15.

<sup>8</sup> Kuwayama, *Far Eastern Lacquer*, 15.

<sup>9</sup> Watt and Ford, *East Asian Lacquer*, 18.

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