

## **VISUAL AND INVISIBLE AESTHETIC VALUES IN THE MURALS OF AN ĐỊNH PALACE, VIETNAM**

### **ABSTRACT**

Mural paintings in An Định Palace include decorative floral arrangements, European motifs combined with Hue's traditional motifs, and especially the six landscape paintings of the mausoleums of the six former emperors of the Nguyễn Dynasty. They were drawn with oil paint applied directly on the walls of the interior space in Khải Tường pavilion. The works reflect the values of human life, aesthetic ideals, the East-West visual aesthetics, and the unique aesthetic and French cultural influences upon Emperor Khải Định. Through the murals, he expressed deep memories of his ancestors. Additionally, these six landscape paintings imply the topic of mausoleums - which indicates the world of death and its heavy atmosphere. It brings the hidden aesthetic codes, especially arising from the life and the physiology of Emperor Khải Định, which have been left unanswered.

#### **Keywords:**

Mural painting/fresco, An Định Palace, Khải Tường Pavilion, Khải Định Emperor, Restoration of mural painting/fresco, Huế Royal architecture, Huế royal art.

### **I. INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVE:**

#### **1.1. Introduction:**

Over 143 years of formation, development, and decline, the thirteen Nguyễn Dynasty Emperors had left many unique marks in art. The murals of Khải Tường pavilion at An Định palace (Huế city, Vietnam), although only a small part of the artistic achievements are works that show the human outlook on the world, people, spiritual nuances, aesthetic ideas, cultural influences, and interferences, and visual arts - a mirror reflecting the artistic characteristics of the Nguyễn Dynasty in the early years of the twentieth century - a turning point in the history of the Vietnamese art. At the same time, it also contains mysteries about life, demonstrating the unique and unusual aesthetic mindset of Emperor Khải Định.

#### **1.2. Objective:**

- To identify the artistic values through the creative arts and the expressive meaning, cultural beliefs, and ideas on the murals of An Định palace
- To find out the features of fine arts (visual and decorative ideas) of Emperor Khải Định in particular and the Nguyễn Dynasty in general.

### **II. MATERIALS AND METHODS:**

The project adopted an interdisciplinary approach, involving art studies with cultural, ethnographic, sociological, and historical studies to examine the mutual influences leading to the formation and the expressions of the art on the murals of An Định palace in Hue.

At the same time, based on psychoanalytic theories (Psychoanalysis), this project was conducted to find out the basic factors affecting the aesthetic thinking of Emperor Khải Định, and their expression in the art of his time. The present study also adopted methods such as:

The first method is the field method in which the researcher does research, makes a recording, and take photos of Gia Long Mausoleum, Thiệu Trị Mausoleum, Minh Mạng Mausoleum, Đồng Khánh Mausoleum, Khải Định Mausoleum, An Định Palace with a purpose of finding out the special features to shape and draw out the artistic values showing on the mural painting.

+ The second method is the method of synthesizing and analyzing documents. In this method, materials are collected from previous scientific studies, articles from books, newspapers, magazines, the internet, and materials in relation to the fine arts of the Nguyễn Dynasty, Vietnam from the early

20th century to distribute to the process of analyzing, probing and clarifying the points stated in the topic.

+ The next method is the art analysis method. The writer depends on the principles and visual elements of fine art such as layout, color, lines, rhythm, block array, space, distinctive features, and decorative forms of the works.

+ The last one is the method of synthesis, and comparison based on specific factors related to the politic, culture, society, and the features of the Nguyễn Dynasty's art form, as well as the original period of Vietnam's modern fine art in the early twentieth century, in order to analyze, synthesize, compare with the aim of discovery of artistic values, human outlook on ideology, aesthetic thinking, and beauty expressed in a piece of art.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. Results

An Định Palace was built in 1902 (formerly in Đệ Bát ward - Huế town, currently at number 97 Phan Đình Phùng street, Huế city) (Phan Thuận An, 2015). When the building was completed, it was named Phủ An Định, which was the private residence of Crown Prince Nguyễn Phúc Bửu Đạo (8th October 1885 - 6th November 1925) when he was 18 years old.

In 1906, Crown Prince Nguyễn Phúc Bửu Đạo was ordained as Phụng Hóa Công (Công is a leading title in the title system, bestowed upon descendants of the Royal Family and the founding father of the country), after which An Định Palace was named Phủ Phụng Hóa.

In 1916, the Prince ascended the throne, he took the name Khải Định (figure.1) and started living in the Forbidden Purple City in Huế. In 1917, the Emperor restored, rebuilt, and expanded Phụng Hóa Palace, which has a style influenced by French architectural art, combined with some indigenous decorative motifs.



Figure 1. Emperor Khải Định (An, V. H. 1994, p.103).

An Định Palace has many works but the most beautiful is the Khải Tường pavilion, which has an area of 745m<sup>2</sup>, including three floors with 22 rooms. It was built mainly with modern imported materials, such as lime mortar, cement, iron, and steel. This was mentioned by Henri Gourdon: "The use of iron and cement created a great change that made Emperor Khải Định very interested. Therefore, the palace of the Emperor, An Định Palace, and the palace of Van Nien on his mausoleum were all built of reinforced cement" (Gourdon, H. 2017. p.52).



Figure 2. Khải Tường pavilion at An Định palace. (Photo: Author).

Khải Tường pavilion was decorated with many beautiful murals painted by Royal painters according to the ideas of Emperor Khải Định. The most prominent murals at Khải Tường pavilion (figure 2) are the six landscape paintings showing the beauty of the mausoleums of the former Nguyen Emperors, painted with the Secco techniques - painted in color on dry mortar - "Painting in which any type of organic binding medium is used is defined as secco (meaning 'dry' in Italian)"- (Aoki, Shigeo, and Taniguchi, Yoko and Rickerby, Stephen and Mori, Michiyo and Kijima, Takayasu and Bomin, Su and Kirino, Fumiyoshi, 2021, p. 197). The painting has a vertical rectangular layout with a tall picture frame carved with decorative patterns of flowers and gilded leaves, creating the effect of an independent and luxurious painting, solemnly hung in the main hall (figure 3) - where the Emperors welcomed guests, enjoyed *boi* singing - a type of Vietnamese traditional performance art, and entertained French guests at parties during their reigns.

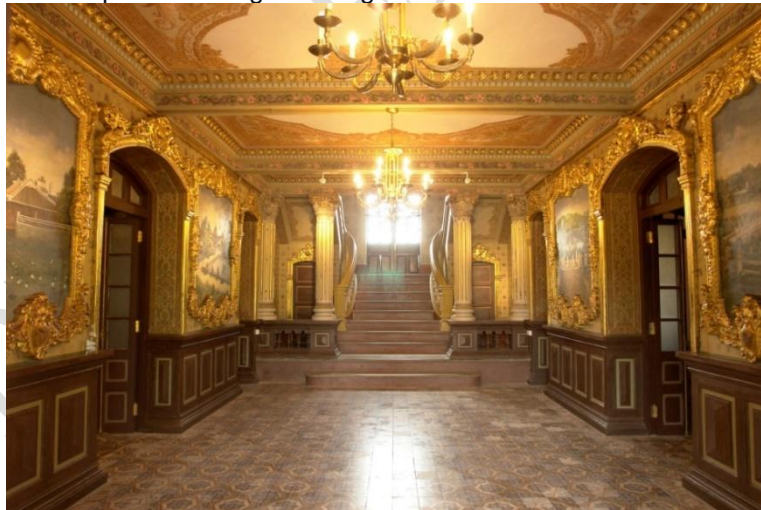


Figure 3. Hall - Khải Tường pavilion at An Định palace (Photo: Author).

The first work is the **Gia Long Mausoleum (1.8m x 1.4m) (figure 4)**. The painting shows the mausoleum of Emperor Gia Long - the founder of the Nguyễn Dynasty. The foreground is a spacious courtyard, opening up a green space of the Perfume River, hidden among the red phoenix trees with bunches of flowers swaying and fluttering in the winds. In the distance, the image of a large pillar located on Đại Thiên Thọ hill reminds people of a protective shield for the mausoleum. The serenity and peacefulness of the hills and mountains submerging themselves in a deep sleep symbolize the eternal rest of the Emperor.





Figure 4. The mural of Gia Long Mausoleum.  
(Photo: Author).



Real scenery of Gia Long Mausoleum.  
(Photo: Author).

**The mural of Minh Mạng Mausoleum (size 1.8m x 1.4m) (figure 5)** is also known as Hiếu Mausoleum. In the foreground of the work are small trees; in the middle is the Trung Đạo bridge spanning over Tân Nguyệt lake embracing Bửu Thành - where the Emperor's mausoleum was located. The main highlight of this painting was Minh Lâu - an ancient building painted red situated on a hill called Tam Tài mountain. **From afar, Minh Lâu looks like a pink lotus that has not yet bloomed (Ứng, 1993, p. 118).** It is also known as - "a bright building" - is a square, two-story building with eight roofs that symbolize Eastern philosophy, showing the explanation of the universe and the human outlook of the ancients.

Further to the back is the vivid horizon at a late autumn sunset. The surrounding trees and leaves begin to turn red, and the blue sky is somehow tinted with the grayish color of winter. The dim sunlight at the end of the day faintly illuminates the roof. The nature and the architectural works in the picture promote harmony in highlighting the ancient beauty. All images in the painting show the perfect beauty of the grave, as a gentle message about life and death, about the infinity and the limit of life.



Figure 5. The mural of Minh Mạng Mausoleum. (Photo: Author).



Real scenery of Minh Mạng Mausoleum.  
(Photo: Author).



**Mural of Thiệu Trị Mausoleum (size 1.8m x 1.4m) (figure 6):**

Thiệu Trị Mausoleum, also known as Xương Mausoleum, is the burial place of Emperor Thiệu Trị. In this work, the focus is on Bi Đình (A platform on which a commemorated stele was placed), over a courtyard to Nghi Môn - a bronze gate, Ngung Thủy lake with white lotus flowers on the clear blue water, connecting the axis of the mausoleum with Bửu Thành, a construction surrounding the resting place of the Emperor. On the corner is a small luxuriant garden next to some leafless porcelain trees at the end of the season.



Figure 6. The mural of Thiệu Trị Mausoleum.  
(Photo: Author).



Real scenery of Thiệu Trị Mausoleum.  
(Photo: Author).

**Mural of Tự Đức Mausoleum (size 1.8m x 1.4m) (figure 7):**

Tự Đức Mausoleum, also known as Khiêm Mausoleum (figure 8), has a sophisticated architecture with a charming landscape, is one of the most beautiful mausoleums of the Nguyễn Dynasty. The painting covers a wide area from Tĩnh Khiêm island in the middle of Lưu Khiêm lake to Xung Khiêm Ta, Minh Khiêm theater, a part of Dụ Khiêm Tạ, Khiêm Cung door and Hòa Khiêm Palace. The clever layout arrangement of the artist leads the viewers' eyes from near to far, following a winding direction from right to left with the end at the Khiêm Cung door, which is believed to separate the worlds of life and death.



Figure 7. The mural of Tự Đức Mausoleum.  
(Photo: Author).



Real scenery of Tự Đức Mausoleum.  
(Photo: Author).

**Part of Đồng Khánh Mausoleum 1 (size: 1.8m x 1m) (figure 8).** Mausoleum of Đồng Khánh is also called Tu Mausoleum - the burial place of Emperor Đồng Khánh.

In the mural painting, the image of Đồng Khánh mausoleum involves the stele house and the Emperor's mausoleum. Unlike the mausoleums of Emperor Minh Mạng and Emperor Tự Đức, the work of Đồng Khánh's mausoleum is depicted with cold gray color, clearly showing the lime mortar material and the careful care in terms of textures, and patterns. In the distance are rows of green trees reaching out to the sides into a "V" shape in the clear blue sky and white clouds.



Figure 8. The mural of Đồng Khánh Mausoleum 1. (Photo: Author).



Real scenery of Đồng Khánh Mausoleum. (Photo: Author).

**A part of Đồng Khánh Mausoleum 2 (dimension: 1.8m x 1m) (figure 9):** The painting shows the landscape of a traditional Hue construction with an empty courtyard leading the viewer in three directions. The middle direction of the picture goes to the side of a red-tile group of houses, the right direction follows the stairs to the wall with a large closed gate, and on the left is the direction that wraps the work, surrounded by nature.



Figure 9. The mural of Đồng Khánh Mausoleum 2. (Photo: Author).

Nguyễn Đắc Xuân gave the following examples: The front face of the imperial mausoleum of Emperor Đồng Khánh has the same elements as the sixth picture. (Xuân, 2011, p. 754-755). He also



found a photograph named *Porte d'entrée du Tombeau de Đồng Khánh* (Door to Emperor Đồng Khánh's mausoleum) by Ph. Eberhardt with the details close to picture No. 6 (figure 10).

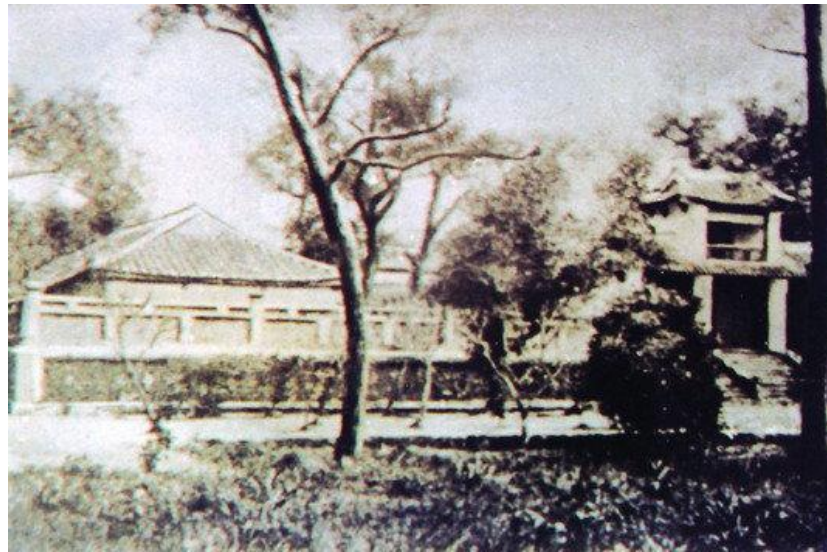


Figure 10. *Porte d'entrée du tombeau de Dong Khanh - Khánh* (Photo: Ph.Eberhardt), (Xuân, N.Đ, 2002, p. 755)

Currently, the caption of the work at Khải Tường Pavilion is *A corner of Đồng Khánh Mausoleum*; however, this name is controversial for scholars to study. As for Dr. Trần Đức Anh Sơn, it is possible that the tentative plan of Khải Định Mausoleum before this mausoleum was constructed in the Western architectural style in 1920 (Sơn, 2016, p.347). However, these opinions have not yet been established due to the absence of documentary evidence.

With the above historical data, the conclusion made by Nguyễn Đắc Xuân that the sixth painting shows the tomb of Emperor Đồng Khánh is quite accurate. This may help explain why Emperor Khải Định decided to draw two different paintings of Emperor Đồng Khánh (his father)'s mausoleum from two different perspectives instead of drawing his mausoleum after its construction, regardless of the fact that he was a person who always affirmed his status and personality via art.

### 3.2. Discussion

#### Emperor Khải Định - The hidden culture code in mural art

It can be said that the six mural paintings at Khải Tường Pavilion - An Định Palace are not only the earliest Western-style paintings in Vietnam, which Martin Kemlein asserted (Martin, 2010, p.29). There were also the first oil-painted landscape paintings among the modern works of Vietnamese fine art. Therefore, in addition to the skillful use of oil paint, in terms of visual arts, the author used natural language to very successfully express the architectural features of each mausoleum and convey genuine, sacred emotions, giving the feeling that when we look at the mausoleum, strange respect for the deceased will arise.

Besides, the artist successfully demonstrated the oil painting material. Still, it is possible that due to respecting the natural beauty of nature, as well as the royal requirements and standards, in terms of shape, six works are largely dependent on nature, lack creativity, and emotional distillation, and have not yet expressed the artist's style, personality, thoughts, and feelings. However, this is also understandable because the person who gave the idea of the landscape images of the emperors' mausoleums was not the painter themselves but Emperor Khải Định.

Emperor Khải Định was also very sensitive to art. He loved novelty and originality and was strongly influenced by French art and culture, so when deciding on the topic of mural paintings, it was likely that he subconsciously chose to show the image of the mausoleum of the former emperors as an act of paying tribute to the ancestors. However, when fully contemplating the works, we realize that the six paintings all show the mausoleum's theme- the world of death with a heavy atmosphere.

In Vietnamese culture, the image of a mausoleum represents death and is rarely displayed in the houses of mandarins and people. Therefore, the Emperor appointed to place these mausoleum mural paintings in the most solemn place for welcoming guests and holding banquets of the Nguyễn Dynasty was particularly unusual.

Maybe, in addition to the intention of commemorating the ancestors through the display of the tomb images, showing the pride of the monumental scale and typical beauty of each mausoleum - as a form of introducing the unique features of architectural works of the Nguyễn Dynasty, these paintings are also the expression of Emperor Khải Định's aesthetic thinking arising from his special life and psychophysiology.

As human beings, everyone has their enduring obsession. The stronger the personality is, and the higher the status is, the greater the obsession may grow. Studying the life of Emperor Khải Định reveals perhaps his aesthetic thinking is dominated by the addictions stemming from a life that seemed to be enjoyable in luxury and power but was actually full of emotions, engulfed by the hidden memories of a puppet emperor under the French colonial government, who was helpless facing of the danger of the imperial court's decline, and the country's loss of independence to a foreign country, and the fact that his former emperors such as Emperor Hàm Nghi, Emperor Thành Thái were all kept in exile. The obsession also comes from the life of a person who was weak in terms of physical conditions and personality but fierce in terms of aesthetic mindset.

Additionally, the obsession with physical health and the successor to the court also somewhat weighed on his shoulders because Prince Nguyễn Phúc Vĩnh Thụy (later Emperor Bảo Đại) was his only son. Even at that time, there were rumors about his sexual orientation and royal lifestyle. The fact that he had a child, as a result, became a special and rare event that was widely circulated in the royal court and throughout the capital.

As noted by Võ Hương An, compared to the images of other emperors such as Emperor Thành Thái, Emperor Duy Tân, and Emperor Hàm Nghi, Emperor Khải Định was more flamboyant, which has contributed to people's belief in the rumor that he was impotent and infertile. Even "because of these rumors, when Emperor Khải Định expressed his intention to make Crown Prince Vĩnh Thụy the Crown Prince of the East Palace. The central envoy had to investigate thoroughly before approving it." (An, 1994, p. 280).

Nguyễn Đắc Xuân also noted in fact, according to Phan Văn Dật and Nguyễn Đắc Vọng, the fifth-ranked bodyguard, Cúc - Emperor Khải Định's servant - was pregnant with Hường D - Emperor Khải Định's friend. Hường D. gave up the fetus to Bửu Đạo (Emperor Khải Định's real name). The Emperor was very grateful to Hường D. In return, Bửu Đạo helped Hường D. a lot (in terms of career as well as money)" (Xuân, 2009, p. 558). Thus, while Emperor Khải Định was still ruling the country, rumors about his impotence and infertility, the fact that Bảo Đại was the son of Cúc (Emperor Bảo Đại's mother) and a member of the royal family emerged and was circulated everywhere. After his death, suspicions became widespread in many domestic and foreign newspapers.

Newton also observed that Emperor Khải Định rigorously and consistently presented subjectivity and sexuality outside of masculine norms for men in contemporary Vietnam (Newton, 2014, p. 255-268).

If this hypothesis were correct, Emperor Khải Định would have experienced more or less suffering because under the feudal system: Among the three unfilial things, not having a son to extend the family tree is the biggest unfilial sin. Thus, even though he was a notorious emperor who was weak and playful, perhaps Emperor Khải Định had a hard time accepting another person's son as his own and passing on the entire inheritance of his royal family. That invisibly becomes an obsession with an absolute sin.

There is no dynasty that lasts forever, but in a certain way, in the position of a person who put an end to a family line, he was also the one to weaken the inheritance that the Nguyễn Dynasty had worked so hard to build up. That was probably a difficult thing for Emperor Khải Định to accept silently in extreme loneliness.

All the above thoughts and concerns were compressed into obsessions about "the end," about death, about the underworld in his subconscious mind, which was the reason for forming a different aesthetic thought, sometimes colorful, peculiar, from which the theme of the tomb was revealed, becoming an idea for the artist to express into a work. The paintings are beautiful; the colors are fresh; the atmosphere is so emotional, but the hidden memories are still immense, with deep and subtle sadness.

Another special feature, apart from the six paintings showing the theme of the mausoleum - with a feeling of the afterlife world, the system of floral decorative patterns on the ceiling and walls in the whole Khải Tường Pavilion brings a vivid beauty, filled with positive energy. The images of colorful flowers and leaves and beautiful butterflies contrast the quiet look of the mausoleum. This both complements and evokes the contrast of the decorative content, or the contrast in the Emperor's mind - a person that both harbored the obsession of the impending end of the dynasty and sparked the hopes of a sensitive soul. Above all, Emperor Khải Định was also noted as a person who was quite interested in the culture and civilization of the nation and the country (Gadkar-Wilcox, 2018, p. 46). He expressed the desire to overcome those adversities and strive to do something useful for the country and the people within his limited capacity (Nguyen, 2017, p. 41).



#### 4. CONCLUSION

It can be said that, in addition to the unique, monumental, sophisticated architecture influenced by the Western art of Khải Định Mausoleum, An Định Palace is also quite a lavish and magnificent architecture with a system of murals. The paintings were new compared to contemporary Vietnamese traditional art. These works consume a lot of the royal budget and have been praised and criticized by many public opinions.

But in some way, it fits the argument of a powerful Emperor - if you like it, you must do it; if you do it, it must be different, beautiful for future generations to admire. It is the way of playing and the art of thinking influenced by the inner life with many meanders that have left us amazing works, the first mural painting works, typical, bearing the unique artistic value of the Vietnamese painting arts, and at the same time affirming that he is the Emperor with the most outstanding personality and artistic mindset among the Nguyễn Dynasty Emperors.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- This work is (partly) supported by the research project No.22 - DHFPT/2021/22 granted by FPT University
- We thank the Hue Museum of Royal Antiquities for allowing me to research and photograph the murals on the walls of An Định Palace, and for allowing us to publish these photos in this article.

#### ETHICAL APPROVAL

The author declares that the report is made by the author himself and that all references and illustrations have been fully cited.

#### REFERENCES

1. An, V.H (1994). Emperor Khải Định images and events (1916-1922), Hồ Chí Minh: Culture - Art.
2. An, PT (2005), "An Định Palace- an architectural work of art", *Song Huong Online Magazine*, (192) (February). Accessed 10 March 2022. Available: <http://tapchisonghuong.com.vn/tap-chi/c139/n1417/Cung-An-Dinh-mot-cong-trinh-kien-truc-nghe-thuat.html>.
3. Aoki, S., Taniguchi, Y., Rickerby, S., Mori, M., Kijima, T., Bomin, S., & Kirino, F. (Eds.). (2021). *Conservation and Painting Techniques of Wall Paintings on the Ancient Silk Road*. Springer.
4. Gadkar-Wilcox, W. (2018). Universality, Modernity and Cultural Borrowing Among Vietnamese Intellectuals, 1877–1919. *The Journal of Transcultural Studies*, 9(1-2), 33-52.
5. Gourdon, H. (2017). Art of An Nam. (Translated by Trương Quốc Toàn). Hồ Chí Minh: World.
6. Kemlein, M. (2010). Hue's Hidden Peal. Berlin: Ruksaldruck GmbH.
7. Newton, N. (2014). Homosexuality and transgenderism in Vietnam. *Routledge handbook of sexuality studies in East Asia*, 255-268.
8. Nguyen, N. (2017). A Local History of Vietnamese Sinology in Early-Twentieth Century Annam—The Case of the Bulletin Du Học Báo 遊學報. *Producing China in Southeast Asia: Knowledge, Identity, and Migrant Chineseness*, 39.
9. Sơn, T.Đ.A. (2016), Huế Style, Hồ Chí Minh: Culture - Art.
10. Xuân, N.Đ. (2011). Studying the ancient Nguyễn and Huế Dynasties. Huế: Thuận Hóa.
11. Xuân, N.Đ. (2009), 700 years of Thuận Hóa Phú Xuân Huế, Hồ Chí Minh: Youth.
12. Ứng, M.K. (1993), Mausoleum of Emperor Minh Mang, Huế: Vietnam History Association Thừa Thiên Huế Historians Association.