

Dong Ho Folk Painting and Protection of Handicraft in the Context of Modernization

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Abstract

Dong Ho woodblock printing is one of four types of folk paintings in Vietnam with unique contents and artistic values. Dong Ho painting is both genuine, idyllic, profound and philosophical, which has been handed down from generation to generation to become an identity of Vietnamese culture. Dong Ho folk painting has made significant contributions to the development of contemporary art, inspiring new artistic creations in Vietnamese music, poetry and literature. However, due to the drastic changes of economic, cultural and social conditions, the handicraft of making Dong Ho folk painting is facing a high risk of disappearance.

The article clarifies the reasons for the disappearance of this traditional handicraft in the context of modernization such as: social practices associated with Dong Ho folk painting are no longer available, the decline of good and knowledgeable craftsmen, the scarcity of materials for making Dong Ho painting, the competitiveness among contemporary art forms, changes in tastes and aesthetics of the public as well as the narrowing of consumer markets, etc.

On that basis, the article identifies a number of issues emerging to protect and promote the handicraft of making Dong Ho folk painting as a valuable cultural heritage of the country in the context of modernization.

Keywords: Dong Ho, folk painting, handicraft, protection, tradition, modernization.

Introduction

Dong Ho folk painting is one of the four types of folk paintings in Vietnam besides Hang Trong folk painting (Hanoi), Kim Hoang painting (former Ha Tay province) and Sinh Village painting (Hue city).

In terms of contents, Dong Ho painting is very diverse on its topic and theme, meeting the different demands of people's lives from spirituality, education of historical tradition to reflection of aspirations and dreams as well as praising the beauty of nature, country and ethical education. In terms of art, Dong Ho folk painting is classified into graphic art that expresses the artistic conception and aesthetic characteristics of folk art with a simple, rustic but unique style. Regarding manufacturing techniques, Dong Ho painting is entirely made by manual methods and only available natural materials are used, so it is environmentally friendly.

Sharpened by the time, Dong Ho folk painting has become a sparkling jewel of Vietnamese culture created by inspired imagination, unique artistic thinking and skillful hands of folk craftsmen. Dong Ho folk painting has contributed significantly to the development of contemporary art, encouraging new artistic creations in music, poetry and literature to form a unique identity of Vietnamese culture.

1. The handicraft of making Dong Ho folk painting: Development history and main categories

The handicraft of making Dong Ho folk painting originated in former Dong Ho village, now called Dong Khe village, Song Ho commune, Thuan Thanh district, Bac Ninh province which is a land of long history and cultural traditions in Vietnam.

According to many works by domestic and foreign researchers, Vietnamese folk painting appeared from the Ly - Tran dynasties (XI-XIII centuries) on the basis of the development of Buddhist sutras woodblock printing and folk worship paintings¹. However, evidence of the handicraft of making folk painting in Dong Ho village remains not much, dating back earliest to the 15th century². The Nguyen Dang family annals showed that they have been practicing painting craft here for 20 generations, i.e. approximately 500 years³. According to historical sources, bibliographies and records of the lineages, the handicraft of making folk painting in the locality did not really develop

until the 16th century. In the 17th century, Dong Ho folk paintings formed a clear style and became more and more popular in many regions⁴.

From the feudal period to 1945, the village's craft prospered very much. In the village, there were 17 clans with many families, all of them made paintings. The village had a big team of talented craftsmen whose reputation was soronous throughout the areas. Dong Ho village became a bustling place of producing, trading and providing paintings for the whole of the Northern, even for the Central and Southern Vietnam. However, while Dong Ho painting mainly serves the peasantry in villages, Hang Trong painting aims at the demands of urbanites in big cities.

During the period of resistance war against the French, Dong Ho painting craft was interrupted, many woodblocks and precious paintings were burned by fire of war. After 1954, when the peace in the North was achieved, the handicraft of making Dong Ho folk painting was revived and developed in the 1970-1990 period. A manufacturing cooperative with many groups and teams was established in the village to produce paintings and other products to serve the wide domestic market and export to socialist countries.

However, in the 1990s, when the system of socialist countries collapsed and the market economy appeared, the village's painting handicraft became increasingly difficult and began to deteriorate. The consumer market narrowed down and more families started to quit their craft and switch to other jobs. The younger generation were not interested in following the family's traditional craft. Therefore, Dong Ho folk paintings are facing a very high risk of oblivion.

In terms of genres, Dong Ho folk paintings are very diverse and plentiful, which is of various classifications. Basing on the systematic classification, French researcher Maurice Durand divided Dong Ho folk paintings into 8 categories⁵. Basing on the function, Do Duc artist divided paintings into 11 categories⁶. Two authors Nguyen Ba Van and Chu Quang Tru divided Dong Ho folk paintings into 8 categories⁷...

Combining all the classifications and basing on the reflection of topics and meanings of paintings, author Nguyen Thuan divided Dong Ho paintings into 6 main categories, which is somewhat more logical and comprehensive, including: 1) *Worship paintings*: to meet spiritual demands of people; 2) *Historical paintings*: to honor

Vietnamese traditions and historical figures; 3) *Paintings of blessings and wishes*: to pray for good luck, peace, happiness, prosperity...; 4) *The paintings of social activities*: to reflect the daily life of farmers; 5) *Landscape paintings*: to praise the beauty of nature, country, homeland; 6) *The paintings of popular stories*: to illustrate plots taken from Vietnamese literature⁸. Each category has different paintings called by their folklore names, which makes Dong Ho woodblock printing to be known under various names.

Dong Ho folk paintings have a long-lasting vitality and attractiveness to many generations of Vietnamese people and international visitors because the themes of the paintings vividly reflect agricultural society, idyllic life of farmers and traditional culture of Vietnamese villages in the past. Such paintings as flocks of pigs, chickens, rat's wedding, Confucian scholar in form of a toad, girl catching coconuts, jealousy and painting sets like virgin girl, four seasons, four kinds of flowers are much interested by the public, especially by foreign tourists and art researchers.

2. The values of contents and art of Dong Ho folk paintings

2.1. The content values

Each Dong Ho folk painting contains profound humanity meanings and reflects diverse aspects of human life.

- Educating historical traditions, honoring national heroes

Dong Ho woodblock printing can be said to be a lively picture chronicle reflecting the history of building and defending the country of Vietnam from the early days with Lady Trieu riding an elephant, Trung Sisters' uprising to the Middle Ages with King Dinh Tien Hoang, King Quang Trung, heroes Ngo Quyen, Tran Hung Dao..., and to the French colonial period and the resistance war against the American imperialists.

The heroic history of fighting against foreign enemies of Vietnam, especially images of heroines depicted in Dong Ho folk paintings has considerably contributed to educate national tradition for the next generations and showed the affection of Dong Ho folk artists reserved for them.

- Expressing human dreams and wishes

According to Vietnamese custom, on the occasion of Lunar New Year, Dong Ho paintings used to be hung for decorating houses to "see the old off and welcome the new" on the one hand, and to hope the New Year with good luck, wellbeing and prosperity on

the other hand. The contents of Dong Ho folk paintings mainly describe the legitimate aspirations and simple dreams of ordinary people, from the simplest to the most sacred things, such as praying for favorable rain and wind (for good harvests), happy family, numerous descendants, peaceful life, successful business.

- Honoring the beauty of nature, country and people

Praising the beauty of nature, country, and people is the painting set of the four seasons namely Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter corresponding to four kinds of flowers and trees namely Apricot, Orchid, Daisy, Bamboo and the paintings of birds such as songbirds, pheasant, crane, peacock to depict the contexts.

The painting set of Virgin Girl describes the beauty of young girls with their talents in playing musical instruments, playing chess, drawing, composing poems.

The paintings of four seasons express the harmony between people and nature. The four paintings of folk allegories and popular stories inspired by the plots in Vietnam literary such as *Tong Tran – Cuc Hoa*, *Luu Binh – Duong Le*, *Thach Sanh*, *Truyen Kieu*, etc praise human morality and ethics such as loyalty, justice, tolerance, altruism and the good wins over the evil.

- Educating the tradition of learning and respecting teachers

The studious and respectful tradition has become the culture of Vietnamese for a long time, which has been animatedly reflected in Dong Ho folk paintings. A series of famous paintings depict the topics of learning, taking exams, honoring successful people, respecting teachers in accordance to the morality “Study manners first and then learn to read and write”.

- Criticizing the bad habits of people, teaching human morality

Dong Ho folk paintings also contain great values in criticizing bad habits of human beings such as unfaithfulness, greed, aggressiveness, fornication, as well as condemnation of the injustices of feudal society in the past, thereby, they have contributed to moral education and perfecting human personality.

- Reflecting the fine customs of traditional culture

Dong Ho folk paintings vividly reflect cultural activities, rituals and festivals of the inhabitants in the Northern Delta of Vietnam in the past. The peaceful countryside

scene associated with national customs, traditions, martial spirit recalls the beauty of traditional culture.

Dong Ho folk paintings are often accompanied by poems or verses to illustrate and explain the contents. That is a subtle combination between poetry and painting - "poetry in painting, painting in poetry". Dong Ho paintings seem to be very rustic, genuine and simple at first glance, but actually they contain erudite and profound implications of folk wisdom.

2.2. The artistic values of Dong Ho folk paintings and manufacturing techniques

Style of expression, Dong Ho painting characterizes the style of folk fine art, i.e. the art of depicting space in a conventional and symbolic manner. Dong Ho craftsmen do not express big and small figures with perspective (*far vs. close*), or contrast (*dark vs. light*) rules as in Western modern art, but it is characterized by highly conventional and symbolic manner. The layout of the main and secondary shades to express the big and small images depends on the requirements, the contents of the painting, the position and title of the characters.

In the painting's composition, the main characters are often placed in a higher position than the minor characters. Or for historical themes, the heroes and historical figures are always portrayed at the center and enlarged to a bigger stature than the other characters. The space in a painting may be understood as: the bottom refers to closeness while the top refers to far. Generally, folk craftsmen often paint in a broad - minded, but not in a realistic manner. "The genuine means true meaning, true nuance, but not the real shape"⁹. They are not imposed by anatomical clairvoyance, proportions, or shapes like modern art but pay more attention to *liveliness* rather than *similarity*, focusing on the inner soul of the image. They prefer the stylized method of expressive art to realistic description, i.e. "mainly depicting the nuance but not the appearance of the object"¹⁰.

Painting layout, for small pictures such as Dong Ho paintings, the composition must be very reasonable, coherent, just typical and quintessential scenes should be depicted. Depending on the inspirations, requirements, context and thematic contents, the craftsmen arranged the painting layout in a reasonable way. The layout of Dong Ho folk painting is very diverse, there are horizontal, vertical, single or multi-scene layouts, but

no matter what the layout is, it should be eye-catching in which the dominant image is highlighted in the correlation between the main and secondary segments. In short, it is a harmonious composition to have the painting's beauty as a whole.

Lines: The lines in Dong Ho painting tend to be simple, big and bold, but concise, strong, stylized and decorative rather than realistic. The lines are used to create color shades and painting ground, a harmonious combination between the two elements as lines and color shades, which forms a painting and makes it animated. In Dong Ho painting, the main lines creating the composition and depicting thematic contents are used to highlight the "spirit" of the painting. In accordance with the art of describing conventional space, the structure and the proportion of characters do not need to be as exact as it is in real life, so the lines should highlight marks and signs which makes the differences.

Materials of Dong Ho folk paintings are made from nature, which is both close to people and environmentally friendly. Printing paper is a unique feature of Dong Ho folk painting because it is made from "dó" paper coated with powdered seashell, also called "giấy điệp" (seashell paper). The advantage of this paper is light, thin, tough, easy to absorb color, anti-bacteria, anti-termite and very durable. Powdered seashell makes the paper bright, glittering and the colors fresher when printing other colors. The colors in Dong Ho paintings are also taken from natural materials. Black is made from the charcoal of bamboo leaves, chinaberry leaves or rice straw to have a glossy and dark color, according to craftsmen, it is much better than Chinese ink. Green is made from cajuput leaves. Yellow is made from sophora japonica flower or gardenia seed. Red is made from red gravel. White is made from the shells of sea scallop "điệp"¹¹. On the basis of these 5 basic colors, craftsmen have created a more varied palette by mixing and processing. These colors make Dong Ho painting to have a distinctive, unique and different nuance that distinguishes it from other folk paintings in Vietnam as well as those in the world.

Techniques of making Dong Ho paintings is also very unique, completely hand-printed, called woodblock printing. The process of painting making includes the following main stages: drawing painting patterns, carving woodblocks, printing and drying paintings. Drawing patterns is the most difficult stage, which requires the drawing

talents, the creativity of craftsmen in studying topics, verses and arranging the layout, colors of a painting. Carving woodblocks is the second difficult stage which requires the ingenuity and skill of the craftsmen. There are two types of woodblocks: line woodblock and color woodblock. For families making paintings, printing woodblocks become their treasures, which are passed down from generation to generation. Dong Ho painting is printed with the woodblock in prone position. In a multicolored painting, craftsmen usually print in the following order: red, green, yellow, then white, brown..., and finally, black to "cut off the lines" or to border the color shades. Drying painting is also not a simple stage, which requires experience of light processing to avoid damages caused by direct sunlight to the newly printed color.

Obviously, Dong Ho folk painting contains a lot of historical, cultural, artistic values, and it is the reason why it has a strong vitality over time and a long-lasting life up to now.

3. The risk of disappearance of Dong Ho painting handicraft in contemporary life

Traditional handicraft in which knowledge, skills and arts preserved, is an important part of the nation's cultural heritage. Currently, among the four types of folk paintings in Vietnam, one household of Hang Trong painting is working in the field, Kim Hoang and Sinh Village painting have been lost, Dong Ho folk painting is at high risk of oblivion. The risk of disappearance of this folk painting is due to the following reasons:

Firstly, it is the change of customs and practices associated with Dong Ho folk paintings. The residents no longer buy worship paintings to hang in worshiping spaces or buy paintings for decorative houses on the new year and mid-autumn festivals. In addition, Dong Ho paintings are now framed, inserted into glass, well preserved, so it needs not for buying new paintings every year. As a result, the amount of consumed paintings narrowed down.

Next, in modern society, people's tastes and aesthetics have changed. They are no longer interested in folk arts, they are keen on newer, more modern and trendy art forms instead. The competition of contemporary art products with all kinds of materials, themes and styles of domestic and foreign authors has significantly influenced the demand for enjoying Dong Ho paintings.

In the context of modernization and market economy, many new occupations appear to create stable jobs with higher incomes, which have attracted artisans' families in the village to change their jobs. Previously, Dong Ho village used to make votive products as a secondary job. Thanks to the government's policy of religious freedom during the Doi Moi period, rituals and religious practices were restored. The making votive products has the opportunity to develop and increasingly overwhelms the craft of making woodblock paintings. In the past, Dong Ho village had 17 clans with 308 households, all of which were engaged in the craft of making folk painting¹², now Dong Khe village has 509 households, 95% of which make votive products all year-round¹³. Many households get richer thanks to making votive products, so the younger generation does not want to continue the painting craft.

At the same time, materials for making woodblock printing today are increasingly expensive and scarce. Scallops must be weathered for a long time in coastal brackish waters, becoming heavily exploited and exhausted. It is more difficult to find “Dó” paper and natural colors so they become more expensive, which leads to high costs of products. At present, some craftsmen have to mix additional materials into “dó” paper, seashell paper and use industrial colors, which therefore, affects the painting quality.

Lastly, there is a small number of craftsmen due to their old age and some craftsmen have passed away while the young generation does not want to pursue the craft. Currently, in the Dong Khe village only 3 households continue to do painting work with a total of nearly 20 people. The number of craftsmen who are able to perform difficult stages such as drawing painting patterns, carving woodblocks, making colors is very small. The rest can do only simple work such as printing, grinding scallops, cooking scallop batter, drying paintings... Therefore, the shortage of craftsmen is at high risk that leads to the decline of the craft.

4. Some issues posed for the protection of Dong Ho painting handicraft in the context of modernization

4.1. Mechanisms and policies to support the craft

In order to save and revive Dong Ho folk painting handicraft, it is important to promptly have appropriate mechanisms and policies to encourage households that are working in this field.

Bac Ninh province should have both legal and financial policies to support those who are doing the craft such as: facilitating low-cost land lease to expand factories and maintain production, lending capital with preferential interest rates, tax exemption or reduction, supporting craft development through projects, programs, etc.

The State should have policies to honor Dong Ho folk painting craftsmen. The Ministry of Industry & Trade and the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism should honor and confer the titles of "Golden Hand", "People's Artist", "Excellent Artist" to craftsmen who are working in the field of folk fine art. The noble titles will make them proud and win the community's confidence. Besides being conferred the titles, they should be granted with financial supports so that they can be able to pursue and maintain the traditional handicraft. The concerned agencies should facilitate craftsmen to participate in professional associations, fine art exhibitions both domestically and internationally. Social organizations need to take advantages of international projects, funds, non-governmental sponsorships to assist Dong Ho folk painting handicraft.

4.2. Expanding consumer markets, diversifying products

Another vital issue is to expand the product consumption market. To maintain the craft, it is prerequisite to have its stable output. Besides the efforts of households involved, the State's support in finding and expanding consumer markets plays an important role. The Department of Industry and Trade of Bac Ninh province, Vietnam Chamber of Commerce abroad should coordinate to promote, re-conquer traditional markets and seek new markets for Dong Ho folk paintings.

In addition, Dong Ho painting must be diversified by the producing households. Currently, besides traditional products such as multicolored prints, black and white paintings, the craftsmen have tried to improve designs and categories to create new products such as: large hand-painted pictures, woodblock prints, calendars, posters, scrapbooks, notebooks, postcards, invitation cards, etc. However, the innovation of models needs continuing, which requires collaborations with professional designers and research institutes in composing new models and products. It is a paradox that in craft villages, experienced craftsmen often work with old designs as they are unlikely to create

new ones, and conversely, professional artists who are able to create new models, are unskilled and inexperienced. Thus, it is essential to have a combination between these two human forces as a new wind of innovation and creativity to overcome the stagnation in traditional craft villages.

4.3. Improving the vitality of the craft village through tourism development

It is possible to improve product consumption and promote Dong Ho folk painting handicraft through community tourism development. Bac Ninh province is famous for its long-standing, valuable historical and cultural relics, which facilitates cultural tourism, festival tourism combined with handicraft village tourism. Currently, some neighboring villages have been very successful in developing community based tourism. Dong Ho craftsmen have started organizing tourism exploitation, however it remains unprofessional and spontaneous, so the effectiveness is not considerable. Therefore, it is necessary to promote the affiliate tourism routes, in which visitors are given opportunities to experience making paintings, meeting craftsmen, buying painting products as well as exploring traditional Vietnamese rural villages.

4.4. The promotion, propagation and education of the heritage

In order to introduce and promote Dong Ho folk paintings to a large number of people and tourists, it is necessary to step up the propaganda and raise awareness about products of this craft. Relevant agencies need to have lively and effective programs on radio, television, publications, Internet... to introduce the beauty, originality, values and meanings of Dong Ho folk painting to stimulate interest of the public. Especially, it is essential to emphasize on the risk of the craft's extinction so that the heritage will be paid more attention by all the people, public opinion, authorities and professional agencies. Craftsmen must be provided with opportunities to participate in fairs, exhibitions, central and local museums, cultural events at home and abroad to introduce and perform the painting work.

The training on Dong Ho folk painting in fine art universities, cultural and art colleges should be enhanced by the State together with the promotion of art education at schools through the heritage education programs. Schools should organize extracurricular activities and field trips to take students to the painting village to make

painting by themselves to be equipped with skills and knowledge about Dong Ho folk painting heritage.

4.5. Building a team of craftsmen for the future

Currently, the craftsmen in the field of making painting is mainly transmitted in a hereditary way, which leads to the fact that they are technically skillful and experienced, but they are not equipped enough in terms of knowledge, marketing skills or product consumption.

In today's market economy and modernization context, in addition to family's know-how and personal professional experience, new generation of craftsmen need to be further trained business administration, information technology and foreign languages to promote the marketing product better and export to foreign markets... These are new qualifications that Vietnamese craftsmen need in order to meet the requirements of the new age.

Conclusion

Dong Ho folk painting contains a lot of historical, cultural and artistic values, which have now become a precious cultural heritage of Vietnam. In the context of modernization, this type of painting continues to contribute to the development of contemporary fine art, providing topics, motifs, forms of expressions and inspirations for writers, painters and artists to have new creativity in the field of art.

Although facing a high risk of disappearance, Dong Ho folk painting has become an indelible brand and the name "Dong Ho painting village" forever enters the history of Vietnamese culture. The protection and promotion of Dong Ho painting handicraft are now extremely urgent. Therefore, Vietnamese government has conducted a nomination file of the handicraft of making Dong Ho Woodblock Printing to UNESCO for its inscription as an intangible cultural heritage in need of urgent safeguarding. If it is recognized by UNESCO, this will be a very important step to save and revive the element. It will work as the highest legal basis and a warning to the State, Bac Ninh province authorities and the local community to pay more attention to protect this heritage.

In the immediate future, to promptly prevent the decline of the craft, appropriate and synchronous solutions should be taken to support the handicraft village, which requires the determination of the local government, the participation of cultural managers, the support of researchers and experts as well as the consent of the whole society./.

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Notes

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