



AESTHETIC PRINCIPLES AND ARTISTIC EXPRESSION IN CERAMIC MOSAIC ART OF THE NGUYEN DYNASTY

Nguyen Hoang Tan, M.A. (Applied Fine Arts)

Master Learning Hub Academy, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Corresponding author: hoangtan5m@gmail.com

Abstract: The art of ceramic mosaic inlay represents one of the pinnacle achievements of court fine arts during the Nguyen Dynasty, embodying the synthesis of exquisite craftsmanship and profound aesthetic philosophy. This paper analyzes the primary aesthetic principles and artistic expression methods in ceramic mosaic art through an examination of representative monuments in Hue. The study demonstrates that Nguyen Dynasty ceramic mosaic art applied the principle of color harmony based on Wu Xing (Five Elements) theory, symmetrical composition techniques reflecting Eastern cosmology, and a unique combination of symbolic and decorative elements. The research findings contribute to clarifying the distinctive aesthetic values of Vietnamese court art heritage and provide guidance for contemporary preservation and application.

The study also emphasizes the cultural significance and lessons derived from the preservation of traditional architectural decoration in Hue, while proposing potential development orientations for this artistic heritage in the future. Through historical analysis and aesthetic observation, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the harmonious relationship between traditional and modern artistic values, and highlights the importance of sustainable conservation strategies for court architectural heritage.

Index Terms - Ceramic mosaic inlay, Nguyen Dynasty art, aesthetic principles, Five Elements theory, Hue court architecture, decorative arts, traditional craftsmanship.

I. Introduction

Ceramic mosaic inlay (kham sanh su) emerged as a distinctive decorative art form during the Nguyen Dynasty (1802–1945), representing a sophisticated fusion of architectural ornamentation and symbolic expression. This technique, which involves cutting, polishing, and assembling fragments of broken ceramics into intricate patterns on architectural surfaces, demonstrates the exceptional skill of Vietnamese court artisans and their deep understanding of aesthetic principles.

Although the technique originated in China, Vietnamese artisans adapted and transformed it into a unique artistic language bearing strong national identity. Applied extensively across court architectural structures in Hue—including the Imperial City, palace buildings, temples, and royal tombs—ceramic mosaic decoration created colorful and symbolically rich artistic ensembles that continue to define the visual character of Vietnam's former imperial capital.



Figure 1: Dragon ceramic mosaic detail on palace roof demonstrating brilliant colors and exquisite craftsmanship

Despite the cultural and artistic significance of ceramic mosaic art, scholarly attention has primarily focused on technical and historical aspects, with limited systematic analysis of underlying aesthetic principles and methods of artistic expression. This research addresses this gap by examining the theoretical foundations, compositional techniques, and symbolic systems that governed the creation of Nguyen Dynasty ceramic mosaic works.

The study is guided by three primary research questions: (1) What aesthetic principles governed the creation of Nguyen Dynasty ceramic mosaics? (2) What are the principal methods of artistic expression employed in this art form? (3) What unique characteristics distinguish Nguyen Dynasty ceramic mosaic from similar traditions in neighboring countries?

Beyond its academic contribution, this research holds practical significance for conservation practice, heritage interpretation, and contemporary design applications. The findings offer guidance for restoration projects, inform strategies for sustainable heritage management, and provide a reference framework for integrating traditional decorative arts into modern architectural contexts.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study employs theoretical perspectives drawn from both Eastern and Western aesthetic traditions to analyze the principles underlying ceramic mosaic art:

Wu Xing (Five Elements) Theory: According to classical Chinese cosmological philosophy, the universe is constituted by five fundamental elements—Metal (jin), Wood (mu), Water (shui), Fire (huo), and Earth (tu)—which exist in cyclical relationships of generation and control. Each element corresponds to specific colors, directions, seasons, and natural phenomena. This cosmological framework profoundly influenced color selection and chromatic organization in traditional East Asian arts, including ceramic mosaic decoration.

Yin-Yang Principle: The complementary duality of yin and yang underlies traditional Eastern aesthetics, manifesting in the balance between opposing yet interdependent qualities: darkness and light, softness and hardness, curvilinear and rectilinear forms, warm and cool colors. In decorative arts, this principle guides compositional balance and visual harmony.

Symmetry and Harmony Theory: Classical aesthetic theory, both Eastern and Western, identifies beauty with proportion, symmetry, and harmonic relationships among constituent parts. In East Asian court architecture, symmetry extends beyond formal

arrangement to embody cosmological order and social hierarchy, reflecting the emperor's role as mediator between heaven and earth.

Symbolic Theory: Court art operates as a symbolic language in which motifs, colors, and patterns convey cultural, political, and spiritual meanings. Understanding this symbolic vocabulary is essential for interpreting artistic intention and cultural messages embedded in decorative programs.

2.2 Research Methodology

The study employs a multi-method approach integrating field observation, formal analysis, and comparative investigation:

- Field survey and documentation at major court monuments in Hue, including the Imperial City, Minh Mang Tomb, Tu Duc Tomb, and Khai Dinh Tomb
- Formal analysis of color systems, compositional structures, decorative motifs, and technical execution
- Symbolic interpretation of iconographic programs and cultural meanings
- Comparative analysis with ceramic mosaic traditions in China, Japan, and Thailand to identify distinctive characteristics

III. AESTHETIC PRINCIPLES IN NGUYEN DYNASTY CERAMIC MOSAIC

3.1 Color Harmony Based on Wu Xing Theory

One of the most distinctive features of Nguyen Dynasty ceramic mosaic is the use of brilliant, polychromatic palettes organized according to systematic principles rather than intuitive color selection. The governing framework derives from Wu Xing theory, which establishes both a chromatic system and rules for color combination.



Figure 2: Dragon ceramic mosaic demonstrating color combinations according to Five Elements principles

3.1.1 The Five-Color System

Ceramic mosaic decoration employs five primary colors corresponding to the five elements:

Element	Color	Direction	Symbolic Associations
Wood (Mu)	Green, cyan	East	Spring, growth, Azure Dragon
Fire (Huo)	Red, orange-red	South	Summer, culmination, Vermilion Bird
Earth (Tu)	Yellow, golden	Center	Imperial authority, cosmic center
Metal (Jin)	White, silver	West	Autumn, harvest, White Tiger
Water (Shui)	Black, dark blue	North	Winter, latency, Black Tortoise

The integration of these five colors creates not only visual richness but also conveys cosmological completeness, representing the totality of natural elements and cosmic order. The central position of yellow—associated with Earth and imperial authority—reflects the emperor's mediating role within this cosmic system.

3.1.2 Generative and Controlling Cycles in Color Composition

Beyond employing the five-color palette, artisans demonstrated sophisticated understanding of the relational dynamics between colors as prescribed by Wu Xing theory. The system defines two fundamental cycles:

Generative Cycle (Xiang Sheng): Wood generates Fire, Fire generates Earth, Earth generates Metal, Metal generates Water, Water generates Wood. In color terms: green supports red, red supports yellow, yellow supports white, white supports black, black supports green.

Controlling Cycle (Xiang Ke): Wood controls Earth, Earth controls Water, Water controls Fire, Fire controls Metal, Metal controls Wood. In chromatic application: green dominates yellow, yellow dominates black, black dominates red, red dominates white, white dominates green.

In practice, artisans strategically placed generative colors in adjacency to create visual harmony, while avoiding direct juxtaposition of strongly controlling colors. When controlling relationships were necessary for compositional reasons, transitional colors or spatial separation mitigated potential visual tension. This systematic approach produced chromatic compositions that achieved both aesthetic balance and symbolic resonance.

3.2 Symmetry and Balance Principles

Symmetry constitutes a fundamental organizing principle in Nguyen Dynasty court architecture and decoration, reflecting cosmological concepts of order, hierarchy, and cosmic-earthly correspondence. Ceramic mosaic decoration consistently employs symmetrical composition as both formal device and symbolic expression.

3.2.1 Bilateral Symmetry

The majority of ceramic mosaic compositions—whether on roof ridges, wall surfaces, or architectural panels—are organized along a central vertical axis. Elements on either side of this axis are arranged in mirror symmetry or regular repetition. A paradigmatic example is the twin-dragon (song long) motif, in which paired dragons are positioned symmetrically facing a central element such as a flaming pearl or solar disc.

This bilateral arrangement transcends purely formal considerations, embodying the yin-yang principle of complementary opposition and mutual completion. The symmetrical halves represent opposing yet harmonious forces—yin and yang, earth and heaven, past and future—unified within a stable compositional structure that mirrors cosmic equilibrium.

3.2.2 Dynamic Balance

Beyond static bilateral symmetry, artisans employed principles of dynamic balance in which asymmetrical elements are counterweighted to achieve visual equilibrium. For example, an ascending dragon on one side might be balanced by a descending dragon on the opposite side, or by static elements such as cloud formations or rock masses that provide compositional counterweight.



Figure 3: Decorative detail illustrating balance between compositional elements

Similarly, chromatic balance was achieved through strategic color distribution. Warm color dominance in one compositional zone would be counterbalanced by cool color emphasis in the corresponding zone. This approach produced compositions that maintain overall visual stability while avoiding rigid repetition, reflecting the philosophical concept of 'stillness within movement, movement within stillness' central to Eastern aesthetic thought.

3.3 Integration of Symbolic and Decorative Functions

Ceramic mosaic art in the Nguyen Dynasty consistently integrates aesthetic appeal with symbolic meaning. Unlike purely ornamental decoration, each motif, pattern, and color carries specific cultural, political, or spiritual significance, functioning simultaneously as visual embellishment and encoded communication.

3.3.1 Auspicious Symbolic Vocabulary

The symbolic repertoire employed in ceramic mosaic decoration is extensive and culturally specific:

- Dragon (Long): Supreme imperial authority, cosmic power, rainfall, agricultural prosperity
- Phoenix (Phuong): Empress, nobility, marital harmony, dynastic legitimacy
- Qilin (Ky Lan): Benevolence, wisdom, righteous governance, peace
- Tortoise (Quy): Longevity, stability, endurance, cosmic pillar
- Lotus (Sen): Buddhist purity, transcendence, spiritual enlightenment
- Peony (Mau Don): Wealth, honor, spring, feminine beauty
- Pine-Bamboo-Plum (Tung Truc Mai): Scholarly virtues, moral constancy, resilience
- Bat (Doi): Happiness, good fortune (phonetic symbol in Chinese)
- Clouds and Waves (Van Thuy): Heaven-earth mediation, cosmic circulation, dynamism
- Sun and Moon (Nhat Nguyet): Yin-yang duality, celestial order, eternal cycle

This symbolic vocabulary functioned as a visual language through which court ideology, Confucian values, Buddhist concepts, and cosmological understanding were communicated to viewers possessing appropriate cultural literacy.

3.3.2 Integration of Figural and Geometric Ornamentation

Ceramic mosaic compositions characteristically combine naturalistic or symbolic figural motifs with abstract geometric patterns, creating hierarchically organized decorative programs:

- Primary motifs (dragons, phoenixes, lotus flowers) occupy central or focal positions
- Secondary motifs (clouds, waves, foliage) fill intermediate spaces and create visual continuity
- Geometric borders (meanders, diamond patterns, lotus petal friezes) define compositional boundaries
- Background fields (monochrome or simple repeating patterns) provide visual ground

This hierarchical integration creates compositions with clear figure-ground relationships, distinct focal points, and unified visual coherence despite considerable decorative complexity.

IV. METHODS OF ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

4.1 Curvilinear Expression through Rigid Materials

One of the most remarkable technical and artistic achievements in Nguyen Dynasty ceramic mosaic is the creation of fluid, organic curves using inherently rigid ceramic fragments. This accomplishment required sophisticated understanding of both material properties and visual perception:

- Fragmenting ceramic pieces to very small dimensions (typically 1-2 cm) to enable smooth curve approximation
- Careful edge finishing to achieve tight joints and minimize visual disruption
- Aligning fragment orientations along curve trajectories (dragon bodies, phoenix tails, wave patterns)
- Varying fragment size according to curve radius: smaller pieces for tight curves, larger pieces for gentle arcs

The result is dragon forms that appear sinuous and graceful, plant motifs that suggest organic growth, and wave patterns that convey fluid motion—all constructed from thousands of small, hard ceramic fragments.

4.2 Light Effects and Color Dynamics

4.2.1 Glazed Surface Luminosity

The glossy glazed surfaces of ceramic fragments create distinctive optical effects that enhance visual impact:

- Under direct sunlight, compositions achieve brilliant luminosity with chromatic intensity varying according to viewing angle
- Under diffuse light or artificial illumination, surfaces produce subtle shimmer and atmospheric depth
- Specular reflection creates perceived three-dimensionality despite actual surface flatness
- Light reflection amplifies color saturation and creates dynamic visual character responsive to environmental conditions

4.2.2 Color Contrast and Gradation Techniques

Artisans employed sophisticated chromatic strategies to enhance figure-ground separation and create spatial depth:

- Strong contrast: Bright red dragons on deep blue grounds, golden phoenixes on black backgrounds to maximize figure prominence
- Subtle gradation: Transitioning through related hues to model volumetric forms such as dragon coils or cloud masses
- Tonal progression: Arranging fragments from light to dark values to suggest atmospheric or spatial recession
- Accent color: Deploying vivid hues (bright yellow, intense red) at focal points such as dragon eyes or flaming pearls

4.3 Decorative Pattern Systems

4.3.1 Ornamental Pattern Vocabulary

Ceramic mosaic decoration employs a standardized repertoire of ornamental patterns with specific functions and meanings:

- Cloud patterns (Van): Stylized cloud forms (lingzhi clouds, spiral clouds, scroll clouds) symbolizing celestial realm and good fortune
- Wave patterns (Thuy): Undulating linear motifs symbolizing water, cosmic flux, and continuity
- Lotus petal patterns: Radiating petal forms used as border ornament, symbolizing Buddhist purity
- Scale patterns: Overlapping tile-like forms creating texture and suggesting dragon skin
- Swastika patterns (Wan): Buddhist symbol representing infinite blessing and cosmic order
- Geometric grids: Regular lattice patterns providing visual ground or border definition

4.3.2 Calligraphic Integration

A distinctive feature of some ceramic mosaic works is the integration of Chinese calligraphy, combining two artistic traditions within a single medium:

- Characters rendered in contrasting colors (typically yellow or red) against dark backgrounds (blue-black or brown)
- Stroke directionality preserved by aligning ceramic fragments along brush movement paths
- Characters frequently surrounded by ornamental frames featuring dragon-phoenix or cloud motifs

Court artisans frequently combined ceramic mosaic with complementary materials to achieve enhanced visual and symbolic effects:

- Ceramic + colored glass: Creating transparency effects and special light transmission
- Ceramic + precious stones: Providing valuable accents, particularly for dragon eyes and flaming pearls
- Ceramic + gold or silver leaf: Enhancing luxury and symbolic status for important structures
- Ceramic + relief carving: Combining planar mosaic surface with three-dimensional carved elements

V. DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

5.1 Comparison with Chinese Ceramic Mosaic Traditions

Although Vietnamese ceramic mosaic technique derived historically from Chinese prototypes, Nguyen Dynasty artisans developed distinctive stylistic characteristics:

Characteristic	Chinese Tradition	Nguyen Dynasty
Color Palette	Emphasis on imperial yellow and bright red; warm color dominance	Balanced warm-cool palette; extensive use of blue, green, and white
Linear Quality	Angular, vigorous, sometimes heavy line quality	Flowing, sinuous, more graceful line quality
Dragon Imagery	Fierce, imposing expression; emphasis on power	Benevolent expression; round eyes suggesting wisdom
Technical Scale	Larger ceramic fragments; bolder execution	Smaller fragments; more intricate detail
Overall Character	Solemn, monumental, formal restraint	Elegant, refined, expressive freedom

5.2 Vietnamese Cultural Synthesis

Nguyen Dynasty ceramic mosaic exemplifies cultural synthesis, integrating Chinese-derived elements with indigenous Vietnamese aesthetic sensibilities:

Chinese-derived elements: Wu Xing cosmology, yin-yang principles, standardized auspicious symbols (dragon, phoenix, qilin), Chinese calligraphy, rigorous bilateral symmetry.

Vietnamese elements: Indigenous dragon iconography (elongated body, large head, benevolent expression), lighter chromatic palette, more fluid linear expression, integration of local flora and fauna, less rigid compositional approach.

This synthesis produced a distinctive artistic language that honors East Asian cultural heritage while expressing Vietnamese national identity. This dual character constitutes the particular value of Hue court decorative arts within the broader context of regional artistic traditions.

VI. SIGNIFICANCE AND CONTEMPORARY APPLICATIONS

6.1 Artistic and Technical Significance

Nguyen Dynasty ceramic mosaic represents the culmination of Vietnamese traditional decorative craftsmanship:

- **Technical mastery:** Precise cutting, finishing, and assembly of thousands of ceramic fragments requiring exceptional skill
- **Aesthetic sophistication:** Harmonious integration of color, form, symbolism, and architectural context
- **Creative transformation:** Conversion of broken material into luminous artistic works, embodying the philosophical concept of 'transformation of waste into treasure'

6.2 Cultural and Historical Value

Ceramic mosaic art provides material evidence of Vietnamese-Chinese cultural exchange and Vietnamese creative adaptation. The symbolic programs encoded in these works reflect Nguyen Dynasty political ideology, Confucian values, Buddhist cosmology, and indigenous spiritual traditions. As such, ceramic mosaic constitutes valuable primary source material for research in history, architecture, decorative arts, and religious studies concerning late feudal Vietnam.



Figure 4: Overall court architectural space demonstrating integrated ceramic mosaic decoration

6.3 Contemporary Application Potential

Traditional ceramic mosaic techniques offer diverse contemporary applications:

- **Heritage conservation:** Restoration of damaged historical works using traditional materials and methods
- **Contemporary architecture:** Integration of ceramic mosaic elements in modern buildings with appropriate stylistic adaptation
- **Applied arts:** Development of handicraft products, fashion accessories, souvenirs, and interior decoration items
- **Cultural education:** Heritage interpretation programs and traditional craft village development

VII. CONCLUSION

7.1 Summary of Findings

This study has clarified the aesthetic principles and methods of artistic expression in Nguyen Dynasty ceramic mosaic art, a distinctive and valuable component of Vietnamese cultural heritage. The principal findings include:

First, ceramic mosaic decoration is governed by systematic aesthetic principles: chromatic harmony based on Wu Xing theory, symmetry and balance reflecting Eastern cosmological concepts, integration of symbolic and decorative functions, and harmonious coordination with architectural context.

Second, artistic expression employs sophisticated methods: techniques for creating fluid curves with rigid materials, distinctive light and color effects, chromatic organization following generation-control relationships, and strategic integration of diverse materials.

Third, Vietnamese ceramic mosaic possesses distinctive characteristics: synthesis of Chinese influence and Vietnamese identity, more fluid and graceful stylistic expression, balanced chromatic palette, and imagery reflecting humanistic values.

7.2 Theoretical and Practical Contributions

This research contributes both theoretical understanding and practical application guidance. Theoretically, it clarifies the aesthetic system underlying Vietnamese court decorative arts, enriching scholarship on traditional visual culture. Practically, findings can inform conservation practice, guide restoration projects, support contemporary design applications, and enhance cultural heritage education programs.

7.3 Future Research Directions

Future research could extend investigation in several directions: examination of other inlay techniques (wood inlay, mother-of-pearl inlay), detailed technical analysis of manufacturing processes, deeper cross-cultural comparison with decorative traditions in East and Southeast Asia, and documentation of craft knowledge transmission across generations of artisans. Such research would further enhance understanding of this important artistic heritage and support its sustainable preservation and contemporary relevance.

Moreover, interdisciplinary collaboration among art historians, conservation scientists, traditional craftspeople, and contemporary designers could generate innovative approaches to heritage preservation that respect historical authenticity while enabling meaningful contemporary engagement. Such collaboration represents the most promising path toward ensuring that ceramic mosaic art remains a vital component of Vietnamese cultural identity.

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