

The Formal Visual Language and Decorative Motifs on Vietnamese Ceramic Elephant Pedestals (1975–2025): Continuity and Transformation

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents research findings on the characteristics of plastic language and decorative motifs on ceramic elephant stools in Vietnam during the half-century period from 1975 to 2025. Employing formal analysis, comparative analysis, and art-historical methods, the study surveyed and analyzed the system of formal characteristics, including structural form, decorative composition, linear rhythm, system of floral patterns, glaze color treatment, and expression techniques. The research results indicate that the plastic language of Vietnamese ceramic elephant stools in the study period both profoundly reflects the continuity of traditional aesthetic values and demonstrates significant transformations influenced by market mechanisms, international integration, and the evolving creative mindset of artisans. The system of decorative motifs on ceramic elephant stools exhibits diversity and richness, ranging from traditional ancient patterns (flowers, leaves, clouds, waves, mythical creatures) to Chinese characters, auspicious symbols, and contemporary variations. The study also highlights that the process of continuity and transformation is not linear but complex, interwoven with preservation and creation, local identity and foreign influences.

KEYWORDS: ceramic elephant stool, plastic language, decorative motifs, Vietnamese ceramic art, traditional patterns, continuity and transformation.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Problem Statement

Vietnamese ceramic art is one of the visual arts fields with a history spanning thousands of years, closely linked to the material and spiritual life of the ethnic communities across the S-shaped land. Among traditional and contemporary ceramic products, the ceramic elephant stool is a distinctive type of creation, serving both functional purposes and embodying rich cultural-symbolic depth. A ceramic elephant stool is understood as a ceramic product modeled after the image of an elephant – an animal holding a special position in Vietnamese beliefs, culture, and fine arts – with a flat elephant saddle surface, serving to hold potted plants, to sit on, or as architectural decoration.

The period from 1975 to 2025 marks a half-century of profound changes and developments in Vietnamese society. From the context of national reunification, through the subsidy period, "Doi Moi" (Renovation), and international integration, ceramic art in general and ceramic elephant stool decoration in particular have been strongly influenced by changes in economic mechanisms, cultural exchange, and shifting aesthetic tastes of the community. According to Nguyen Quoc Thong (2005), the transformations in traditional Vietnamese visual arts after 1975 reflect a process of both inheritance and innovation, in which artisans continuously sought a balance between preserving national cultural identity and meeting new market demands.

However, to date, ceramic elephant stools have not been systematically and comprehensively studied from an art-theoretical perspective. Previous research primarily focused on ceramics in general or specific ceramic lines such as enameled ceramics, brown-glazed ceramics, blue-and-white ceramics, without adequate attention to ceramic elephant stools as an art object with its own distinct value. This research gap highlights the urgent need for an in-depth study capable of clarifying the characteristics of plastic language, decorative motifs, and the evolution and transformation of ceramic elephant stool decoration in the contemporary context.

1.2 Literature Review

Vietnamese ceramic art has attracted the attention of many researchers, both domestic and international. Among valuable references, one can mention the work by the Vietnam National Museum of History on the history of Vietnamese ceramics from the Stone Age to the feudal period, providing an important foundation for understanding the continuous development of pottery in Vietnam. Phan Cam Thuong (2009), in his research on traditional Vietnamese fine arts, discussed the role of the elephant image in folk art, where the elephant symbolizes strength, loyalty, and power, appearing commonly in sculpture, painting, and ceramics.

The Formal Visual Language and Decorative Motifs on Vietnamese Ceramic Elephant Pedestals (1975–2025): Continuity and Transformation

In terms of international research, John Stevenson and John Guy (1997), in their work "Vietnamese Ceramics: A Separate Tradition," analyzed the artistic characteristics of Vietnamese ceramics in comparison with Chinese ceramics and other Southeast Asian ceramic traditions, pointing out the independence and creativity of the Vietnamese ceramic tradition. Although this work does not directly address ceramic elephant stools, its observations on the plastic language, decorative motifs, and glaze techniques of Vietnamese ceramics provide an important theoretical basis for approaching the research subject.

Domestically, studies on traditional ceramics in craft villages such as Bat Trang, Phu Lang, and Bien Hoa have been conducted by many authors. Le Thi Lien (2003), in her study on Bat Trang ceramics, mentioned the diversity of ceramic product lines, including decorative stools; however, the analysis of ceramic elephant stools remained general and not in-depth. Tran Khanh Chuong (2006), in his writings on contemporary Vietnamese artistic ceramics, noted the development of decorative ceramic products in the market context but did not offer a separate monograph on ceramic elephant stools.

Thus, it can be seen that although Vietnamese ceramic art has been extensively researched, the ceramic elephant stool remains a significant gap in art-theoretical and art-historical studies. Specifically, the plastic language and decorative motifs on ceramic elephant stools in the post-1975 period have not been systematically surveyed, analyzed, and evaluated. This is the rationale and motivation for conducting this research.

1.3 Research Objectives and Tasks

This paper aims to clarify the characteristics of the plastic language and decorative motifs on Vietnamese ceramic elephant stools during the 1975–2025 period, focusing on the process of continuity and transformation. Specifically, the research undertakes the following tasks: First, to establish the theoretical basis of plastic language and decorative motifs in ceramic art, and to provide an overview of the history of the elephant image in traditional Vietnamese fine arts. Second, to analyze the characteristics of the plastic language on ceramic elephant stools, including structural form, composition, linear rhythm, and glaze surface treatment. Third, to survey and classify the system of decorative motifs, from traditional patterns to contemporary variations. Fourth, to identify the continuity and transformation in the art of ceramic elephant stool decoration through different developmental stages.

1.4 Research Methodology

The study employs a combination of methods suitable for the specific nature of the research subject in the field of art studies. Formal analysis is applied to deconstruct basic formal elements such as volume, proportion, composition, lines, colors (glaze), and surface texture. The art-historical method is used to contextualize the research subject within its historical-social setting, thereby deciphering its evolution and transformation. The comparative method is applied to clarify differences and similarities among production centers, between periods, and between tradition and contemporaneity. The fieldwork method is conducted through practical surveys at typical ceramic centers, interviews with artisans, and collection of visual documentation.

Scope of Research

Geographically, the study focuses on typical ceramic production centers where ceramic elephant stools are crafted, including Bat Trang, Kim Lan, and Phu Lang in the North, and Lai Thieu, Bien Hoa, and Cay Mai in the South. Temporally, the research is limited to the period from 1975 to 2025. Object-wise, the study focuses exclusively on ceramic elephant stools with a flat elephant saddle surface, consistent with their traditional function, and does not include variations such as elephant-shaped lamp bases, elephant-shaped vases, or other products featuring elephant imagery.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Plastic Language in Ceramic Art

Plastic language is a central concept in art theory, referring to the system of formal elements that artists use to convey ideas, emotions, and symbolic content in their works. In the context of ceramic art, plastic language includes structural components such as overall form, proportions between parts, decorative composition, linear system, masses, colors (glaze), and surface texture. According to Arnheim (1974), the formal language in art is not merely an external decorative means but constitutes the very content, the way an artist organizes and presents their aesthetic conception.

In traditional Vietnamese ceramic art, plastic language possesses distinct characteristics, influenced by natural conditions, production techniques, and the system of cultural values. Nguyen Quoc Thong (2005) pointed out that the plastic language of Vietnamese ceramics is characterized by harmony, closeness to nature, a preference for soft, fluid curves, and balance in composition. These characteristics are inherited and developed in ceramic elephant stools, creating a system of plastic language that is both traditional and adapted to new contexts.

2.2 Decorative Motifs in Ceramic Art

A decorative motif is a basic visual unit used in an artistic decorative system, capable of repetition, combination, and variation to create complex patterns. In the tradition of Vietnamese ceramic decoration, the system of motifs is incredibly rich, encompassing large groups: botanical motifs (flowers, leaves, branches, fruits), natural motifs (clouds, waves, mountains), animal motifs (dragons,

The Formal Visual Language and Decorative Motifs on Vietnamese Ceramic Elephant Pedestals (1975–2025): Continuity and Transformation

phoenixes, fish, elephants, horses), geometric motifs (circles, crosses, ovals), and symbolic motifs (Chinese characters, auspicious symbols). Each group of motifs not only possesses decorative value but also carries profound cultural and religious meanings, reflecting the worldview and human philosophy of the creative community.

According to Reigl (1992), decorative motifs in applied arts are always influenced by both internal factors (technical tradition, aesthetic style) and external factors (social impact, cultural exchange, market demands). This is especially true for Vietnamese ceramic elephant stools in the post-1975 period, where the system of decorative motifs has been subject to multi-directional influences from various forces.

2.3 The Elephant Image in Vietnamese Culture and Art

The elephant is one of the most important animal images in the system of Vietnamese cultural symbols. Historically, elephants have been associated with national defense wars (war elephants of the Ly, Tran, Le dynasties), with royal power (elephants as symbols of the monarch), and with folk beliefs (elephants in festivals, elephants in pagodas and temples). Phan Cam Thuong (2009) observed that the elephant image in Vietnamese fine arts embodies a combination of natural strength and sacredness, reality and symbolism, creating a rich source of creative inspiration for many types of visual arts.

In ceramic art, the elephant image has been used since very early times; elephant-shaped ceramic products can be found from the Champa period and Vietnamese feudal dynasties. The appearance of elephants on ceramic products not only carries decorative meaning but also reflects the belief in protective power, good fortune, and the sacredness that this image represents. According to Nguyen Van Huyen (1944), in the system of auspicious symbols in Vietnamese culture, elephants are often accompanied by elements such as jade (elephant carrying jade), precious vases (elephant carrying a vase), lotus flowers (elephant standing on a lotus), creating symbolic combinations that signify prayers for blessings, peace, and prosperity.

2.4 The Tradition of Ceramic Stools in Vietnamese Life

Ceramic stools are utensils with a long history in the material and spiritual life of the Vietnamese people. According to dictionary definitions, a stool is an object used to display potted plants or to sit on, having a standing block shape, usually without legs or with short legs. In the context of Vietnamese culture, ceramic stools coexist in two main spaces: religious spaces (pagodas, temples, places of worship) and civil spaces (houses, gardens, architectural structures). In religious spaces, ceramic stools often have a large size, a solemn character, and are elaborately decorated with motifs of deep symbolic meaning. In civil spaces, ceramic stools vary more in size, from small to large, with flexible decorative styles, suitable for the aesthetic tastes of each period. The diversity of forms on ceramic stools also reflects the richness of traditional ceramic artisans' creative thinking. Besides the elephant image, ceramic stools are also shaped after many other figures such as lions, turtles, dragons, phoenixes; however, ceramic elephant stools stand out most in terms of popularity, diversity in decoration, and distinctive aesthetic value.

3. PLASTIC LANGUAGE OF VIETNAMESE CERAMIC ELEPHANT STOOLS IN THE PERIOD 1975–2025

3.1 Structural Form and Proportion

The structural form is the fundamental element determining the overall appearance of the ceramic elephant stool. Essentially, Vietnamese ceramic elephant stools have a structural form consisting of two main parts: the elephant body and the elephant saddle. The elephant body is a ceramic block that mimics the overall shape of an elephant, including the head, body, four legs, and tail, treated with various degrees of stylization, from realistic to semi-abstract. The elephant saddle is the flat surface on top, where potted plants or people rest, serving both functional and aesthetic roles, marking the end point of the overall structure. The proportions between the parts of ceramic elephant stools clearly demonstrate the aesthetic characteristics of each production center and developmental stage. In northern ceramic centers such as Bat Trang and Kim Lan, ceramic elephant stools typically have harmonious, balanced proportions between the head and body, with the elephant head accounting for about one-quarter to one-third of the total height. This characteristic reflects the influence of traditional Northern aesthetic styles, which favor gracefulness, lightness, and balance. In contrast, in southern centers like Bien Hoa and Lai Thieu, ceramic elephant stools often have a larger body proportion, creating a robust, imposing feel, suitable for the Southern aesthetic style which prefers strength and boldness.

The proportional differences between periods are also noteworthy. In the 1975–1985 period, ceramic elephant stools maintained traditional proportions, with balance and harmony between parts. From the 1986–2000 period, especially after "Doi Moi," proportions began to change, with a tendency to increase overall size to suit new architectural spaces and export market demands. By the 2001–2025 period, proportions on ceramic elephant stools became more diverse than ever, ranging from small desktop stools to large garden stools, reflecting a clear differentiation in function and usage preferences.

3.2 Decorative Composition

Decorative composition on ceramic elephant stools is the most explicit aspect reflecting the visual organization and aesthetic conception of the artisan. The composition on ceramic elephant stools is influenced by the three-dimensional structural form, creating unique characteristics compared to compositions on round ceramic products (vases, pots) or flat ones (plates, bowls).

The Formal Visual Language and Decorative Motifs on Vietnamese Ceramic Elephant Pedestals (1975–2025): Continuity and Transformation

Regarding organizational principles, the decorative composition on ceramic elephant stools often follows the principle of vertical axial symmetry, with the axis of symmetry running along the elephant's spine, from head to tail. This principle of symmetry ensures visual balance for viewers from all angles, while also reflecting traditional aesthetic concepts of harmony and order. However, in many cases, especially in works from the post-2000 period, artisans have broken strict symmetrical rules, creating deliberately asymmetrical compositions that convey a more lively, natural, and modern feel.

In terms of layered structure, the composition on ceramic elephant stools is often organized into three main areas: the elephant's head, body, and legs. Each area has distinct decorative characteristics, with varying degrees of complexity and pattern density. The elephant's head area is usually the most elaborately decorated, with intricate details like eyes, ears, tusks, and trunk, combined with motifs such as lotus flowers, clouds, and precious gems. The elephant's body is the largest surface, often decorated with extended pattern bands, creating continuous rhythm and smooth transitions between areas. The elephant's legs are usually decorated more simply, with small floral or geometric motifs, providing a stable base for the overall structure. Regarding the relationship between decoration and form, an important characteristic of ceramic elephant stool composition is the organic integration of decorative patterns with the elephant's body structure. Unlike round ceramic products, where decorative patterns are evenly spread over a curved surface, patterns on ceramic elephant stools must adapt to the continuous changes of the surface, from convex areas on the body to concave areas on the belly, from the flat surface of the saddle to small details on the head and legs. This requires artisans to possess flexible compositional skills, knowing how to adjust the proportion, direction, and density of patterns to suit each surface area.

3.3 Linear Rhythm

Linear rhythm is the element that creates movement, vitality, and emotion in a ceramic artwork. On Vietnamese ceramic elephant stools, linear rhythm is expressed through two main systems: structural lines (lines forming the shape) and decorative lines (pattern lines).

The structural linear system on ceramic elephant stools is primarily based on curves, reflecting the natural shape of an elephant. The curved line of the back creates the main rhythm, flowing from head to tail, imparting a sense of softness and fluidity. The curve of the elephant's trunk, especially when raised or coiled, creates a dynamic focal point, breaking the static nature of the overall form and bringing vitality to the piece. The curve of the elephant's tusks, with their characteristic curvature, serves both as a decorative accent and expresses strength and natural beauty.

The decorative linear system on ceramic elephant stools is richer, including lines of floral motifs (curved branches, soft petals), lines of cloud motifs (spiral curves, coiled shapes), lines of wave motifs (undulating, continuous curves), and lines of mythical creature motifs (lines depicting the shapes and movements of various animals). The combination of these linear systems creates a complex rhythm, possessing both the stability of structural lines and the dynamism of decorative lines.

The differences in linear rhythm between production centers are also noteworthy. In Bat Trang, the linear rhythm is often graceful and delicate, with gentle curves, reflecting the influence of imperial court and Confucian aesthetic styles. In Phu Lang, the linear rhythm is somewhat stronger and bolder, with broad curves, creating a robust feel. In Bien Hoa and Lai Thieu, the linear rhythm demonstrates a blend of tradition and modernity, with lines that are both soft and decisive, reflecting Southern aesthetic characteristics.

3.4 Surface Treatment and Glaze Color

Surface treatment and glaze color are the final but no less important aspects of the plastic language of ceramic elephant stools. The glaze surface not only protects the product but also creates distinctive aesthetic effects, contributing to the artistic style and aesthetic value of the artwork.

In the 1975–1985 period, ceramic elephant stools primarily used traditional glazes, especially brown and celadon glazes in northern centers, blue glazes in Bien Hoa, and colored glazes in Lai Thieu. Brown glaze, with its range from reddish-brown to dark brown, created an antique, solemn beauty, suitable for religious spaces and traditional architecture. Celadon glaze, with its light to dark green hues, conveyed a sense of gracefulness and lightness, often used on ceramic elephant stools for civil spaces.

In the 1986–2000 period, the diversity of glaze colors increased significantly, reflecting the influence of new glaze techniques and market demands. Glazes such as blue, brown, and green, combined with underglaze painting techniques (multicolored patterns on a glazed background), created a rich variety of aesthetic effects. Notably, the crackle glaze technique – a distinctive technique of Bat Trang ceramics – was applied to ceramic elephant stools, creating a unique aesthetic effect with a glazed surface featuring natural cracks, conveying an antique and elegant beauty.

In the 2001–2025 period, in addition to continuing to develop traditional glazes, artisans experimented with many new glazes, including ash glaze, jade glaze, crystalline glaze, and copper glaze. The diversity of ceramic glazes not only expanded aesthetic expressive possibilities but also reflected the process of research, creation, and technical exchange among domestic and international ceramic centers. The trend of using monochromatic glazes (single colors with depth and transparency) on ceramic elephant stools also became popular during this period, aligning with modern aesthetic tastes that favor minimalism and sophistication.

The Formal Visual Language and Decorative Motifs on Vietnamese Ceramic Elephant Pedestals (1975–2025): Continuity and Transformation

4. SYSTEM OF DECORATIVE MOTIFS ON VIETNAMESE CERAMIC ELEPHANT STOOLS

4.1 Floral Motifs

Floral motifs are the most common and richest group of motifs on Vietnamese ceramic elephant stools. The system of floral motifs includes many different types of flowers and leaves, each carrying its own symbolic meaning and used in specific decorative contexts.

The lotus flower is the most widely used floral motif on ceramic elephant stools, especially in products for religious spaces. In Vietnamese culture, the lotus symbolizes purity, enlightenment, and peace, associated with Buddhism and the spiritual life of the community. On ceramic elephant stools, the lotus is often depicted in various states: blooming lotus (symbol of enlightenment, achievement), lotus bud (symbol of potential, growth), lotus combined with lotus leaves (symbol of shelter, protection). The techniques for rendering lotus flowers on ceramic elephant stools are also diverse, from incised carving (creating raised patterns on the surface) to underglaze painting (creating colored patterns on a glazed background), from realistic (detailed, meticulous) to stylized (simplified, abstracted).

The chrysanthemum is the second most common motif, especially in products for civil use. In Vietnamese and East Asian culture, the chrysanthemum symbolizes longevity, resilience, and nobility. On ceramic elephant stools, chrysanthemums are often depicted as continuous vines (intertwining, flowing), single large chrysanthemums in the center, or chrysanthemums combined with leaves and tendrils. The style of rendering chrysanthemums on ceramic elephant stools differs between centers: in Bat Trang, chrysanthemums are often meticulously painted with many layers of petals; in Bien Hoa, chrysanthemums are often stylized, with bolder and more expansive lines.

Besides lotus and chrysanthemum, the system of floral motifs on ceramic elephant stools also includes apricot blossoms (symbolizing resilience, vitality in winter), roses (symbolizing beauty, love, and luxury), peach blossoms (symbolizing spring, fertility), Bodhi leaves (symbolizing wisdom, enlightenment in Buddhism), stylized leaves (a characteristic stylized leaf motif in traditional Vietnamese ceramics), and other climbing plants and decorative branches. This diversity reflects the rich artistic vocabulary and endless creativity of traditional ceramic artisans.

Notably, there has been a process of transformation in the way floral motifs are depicted across different periods. In the 1975–1985 period, floral motifs primarily inherited traditional styles, with realistic, detailed rendering and strict adherence to ancient decorative rules. In the 1986–2000 period, floral motifs began to undergo significant stylization, with simplification of details, emphasis on main lines, and creation of strong contrasts between patterns and background. In the 2001–2025 period, floral motifs show the greatest diversity, from traditional to modern styles, from realistic to abstract, reflecting the differentiation in aesthetic tastes and creative styles.

4.2 Cloud and Wave Motifs

Cloud and wave motifs are an ancient group of motifs in traditional Vietnamese decorative art, frequently appearing on ceramics, woodwork, metalware, and architecture. On ceramic elephant stools, cloud and wave motifs play an important role in creating rhythmic movement, continuity, and a sense of space in the decorative composition.

Cloud motifs (cloud scrolls, swirling clouds, spiral clouds) on ceramic elephant stools are often used in various positions: around the elephant's head (creating a halo, aura), along the elephant's body (forming a decorative background), at the elephant's feet (creating a floating, ethereal feeling), and on the elephant saddle (forming a decorative border). The symbolic meaning of cloud motifs is associated with the concept of the heavens, nobility, sacredness, and good fortune. In the context of ceramic elephant stools, the combination of the elephant image and cloud motifs creates a symbolic ensemble of "elephant walking on clouds" or "elephant carrying clouds," implying transcendence, sacredness, and power.

The techniques for rendering cloud motifs on ceramic elephant stools also differ between centers and periods. In Bat Trang, cloud motifs are often executed using incised or raised carving techniques, with delicate, fluid lines and subtle color transitions. In Phu Lang, cloud motifs often have bolder, stronger lines, with clear relief carving techniques. In Bien Hoa, cloud motifs are often painted with glaze, featuring free, bold lines and a rich combination of colors.

Wave motifs (swirling waves, rippling waves, continuous waves) are also common on ceramic elephant stools, especially on the lower body and legs. In Vietnamese culture, waves symbolize life, fertility, natural strength, and eternity. On ceramic elephant stools, wave motifs are often organized into continuous bands of patterns, running horizontally around the elephant's body, creating a steady rhythm and smooth transitions between decorative areas. The techniques for rendering wave motifs are also rich, from incised, raised carving to glaze painting, from detailed to stylized.

A notable point is the transformation in the use of cloud and wave motifs across different periods. In the 1975–1985 period, these two motifs largely maintained traditional styles, closely combined with other motifs in ancient pattern systems. In the 1986–2000 period, cloud and wave motifs began to be more strongly stylized, with a tendency to detach from traditional contexts to become independent decorative elements, purely aesthetic in nature. In the 2001–2025 period, the combination of cloud and wave motifs

The Formal Visual Language and Decorative Motifs on Vietnamese Ceramic Elephant Pedestals (1975–2025): Continuity and Transformation

with modern elements (geometric, abstract) created new variations, preserving traditional symbolic meanings while aligning with contemporary aesthetic tastes.

4.3 Mythical Animal Motifs

Mythical animal motifs on ceramic elephant stools include highly symbolic animal figures in traditional Vietnamese and East Asian culture. The system of mythical animal motifs on ceramic elephant stools is rich, including dragons, phoenixes, fish, horses, bats, turtles, and many other creatures.

The dragon is the most important mythical motif, often appearing on ceramic elephant stools in products for religious spaces or high-end items. In Vietnamese culture, the dragon symbolizes power, strength, and prosperity, associated with royalty and belief systems. On ceramic elephant stools, the dragon is often depicted wrapped around the elephant's body, on the saddle, or at the elephant's head, creating a "dragon-elephant" ensemble with a dual symbolic meaning of power and strength. The technique for rendering dragons on ceramic elephant stools is very elaborate, requiring meticulous detail in each scale, claw, horn, and whisker, and precision in composition.

The phoenix (phuong hoang) is a mythical motif often accompanying the dragon, symbolizing nobility, virtue, and beauty. On ceramic elephant stools, the phoenix is usually depicted in a position symmetrical to the dragon, creating the traditional "long-phuong" (dragon-phoenix) pair. In addition, the phoenix is also used independently, especially on ceramic elephant stools for civil decorative purposes.

Fish are a common mythical motif on ceramic elephant stools, especially in products associated with the "carp transforming into a dragon" symbol – signifying effort, overcoming difficulties, and success. Fish motifs on ceramic elephant stools are often stylized, with soft lines and harmonious combination with wave motifs.

Bats are mythical motifs carrying auspicious meaning, as the word "doi" (bat) in Vietnamese is a homophone for "phúc" (blessings, good fortune) in Chinese. On ceramic elephant stools, bats often appear on the saddle or around the elephant's head, signifying prayers for blessings and peace. Horse motifs (ma dao thanh cong - literally "horses returning triumphantly," symbolizing success) also appear on some ceramic elephant stools, often combined with cloud and wave motifs, creating a symbolic ensemble of achievement and favorable outcomes.

The transformation in mythical animal motifs across different periods clearly reflects the process of continuity and change in aesthetic thinking. In the 1975–1985 period, mythical animal motifs primarily inherited ancient forms, with a highly traditional rendering style. In the 1986–2000 period, mythical animal motifs began to undergo stylization, with a tendency to simplify details and emphasize main lines. Notably, the combination of traditional mythical motifs with modern sculptural styles created new forms, both familiar and novel, reflecting the interweaving of tradition and contemporaneity. In the 2001–2025 period, mythical animal motifs became the most diverse and rich, with many creative variations, suitable for the diverse tastes of domestic and international markets.

4.4 Chinese Characters and Auspicious Symbols

Chinese characters and auspicious symbols constitute a special group of motifs on ceramic elephant stools, reflecting the profound influence of Sino-Confucian culture in traditional Vietnamese decorative systems. Chinese characters on ceramic elephant stools often appear as single characters (Phuc - Fortune, Loc - Prosperity, Tho - Longevity, Tam - Heart/Mind, Duc - Virtue) or phrases (Dai Cat - Great Fortune, Nhu Y - As Desired, Truong Tho - Longevity, Binh An - Peace), rendered using incised, raised carving, or glaze painting techniques.

The character "Phuc" (fortune, happiness) is the most commonly used Chinese character on ceramic elephant stools, often appearing in the center of the elephant saddle or the elephant's chest, combined with other floral and mythical animal motifs. The character "Loc" (wealth, prosperity) often accompanies "Phuc," forming the traditional "Phuc-Loc" pair. The character "Tho" (longevity, long life) is often depicted within a circle or square, combined with motifs of bats, peaches, and deer (loc), creating the "Phuc-Loc-Tho" ensemble – the most common trio of auspicious symbols in traditional Vietnamese and East Asian decorative arts.

Auspicious symbols on ceramic elephant stools are no less rich, including: precious vase (symbol of preservation, safety), jade (symbol of preciousness, nobility), mirror (symbol of insight, discernment), gold ingot (symbol of wealth, prosperity), peach (symbol of longevity, immortality), musical instrument (symbol of culture, scholarship), flag (symbol of victory, glory), and many other symbols. The combination of Chinese characters, auspicious symbols, and the elephant image creates a rich symbolic system, embodying multiple layers of cultural meaning.

Notably, there has been a transformation in the use of Chinese characters and auspicious symbols across different periods. In the 1975–1985 period, due to historical context, the use of Chinese characters and auspicious symbols was somewhat limited, concentrating primarily on products for religious spaces. In the 1986–2000 period, alongside the recovery and development of economic and cultural life, Chinese characters and auspicious symbols became more prevalent, reflecting the community's desire for blessings and peace in the context of "Doi Moi." In the 2001–2025 period, Chinese characters and auspicious symbols are used more diversely, from traditional to modern styles, suitable for various users and aesthetic tastes.

The Formal Visual Language and Decorative Motifs on Vietnamese Ceramic Elephant Pedestals (1975–2025): Continuity and Transformation

4.5 Contemporary Variations

In addition to the traditional motif system, Vietnamese ceramic elephant stools in the 2001–2025 period also feature numerous contemporary variations, reflecting the process of creation and innovation in ceramic decorative art. These contemporary variations include: stylized geometric motifs (circles, squares, triangles organized into patterns), abstract motifs (lines and color blocks without specific figurative meaning but aiming for pure aesthetic effect), hybrid motifs combining tradition and modernity (stylized lotus, clouds combined with geometric shapes, dragons combined with abstract lines), and motifs inspired by international art movements (Art Deco, Art Nouveau, minimalism).

The emergence of contemporary variations on ceramic elephant stools reflects multiple factors. Firstly, this is the result of cultural exchange and international aesthetic influence, as Vietnamese ceramic artisans come into contact with various artistic schools and styles. Secondly, it is a response to changing market aesthetic tastes, especially in the export market, where customers tend to favor more contemporary and international products. Thirdly, it is an expression of self-innovation in the creative thinking of artisans, as they constantly seek differentiation and creativity to enhance the aesthetic value and competitiveness of their products.

However, the emergence of contemporary variations also raises pertinent issues regarding the balance between creation and preservation, between traditional identity and foreign influence. Some argue that chasing contemporary trends might erode the distinctive identity of traditional Vietnamese ceramic decorative art, while others believe that the process of transformation and innovation is essential and necessary for ceramic art to survive and develop in the new context. This issue needs careful consideration, based on a clear identification of core values to be preserved and elements to be innovated.

5. CONTINUITY AND TRANSFORMATION ACROSS PERIODS

5.1 Period 1975–1985: Continuity of Tradition in a New Context

The 1975–1985 period was the first phase after national reunification, marking profound changes in the political, economic, and social context. In ceramic production, this period was characterized by a strong continuity of tradition, maintaining ancient techniques, styles, and decorative motifs. However, the new context also had significant impacts on the content and form of ceramic products.

For ceramic elephant stools, the 1975–1985 period saw the relatively intact preservation of traditional plastic language characteristics. Structural forms still adhered to ancient proportional rules, with balance between parts and a highly realistic sculptural style. Decorative compositions continued to be based on principles of symmetry and layering, with traditional patterns dominating. The plastic language in this period was highly stable, reflecting a deep inheritance from previous generations of artisans. Regarding decorative motifs, the 1975–1985 period primarily used traditional ancient motifs: lotus, chrysanthemum, clouds, waves, dragons, phoenixes, and auspicious symbols. Floral motifs were rendered in a realistic, detailed, and meticulous style. Mythical animal motifs maintained ancient forms, with a solemn and highly symbolic sculptural style. Chinese characters and auspicious symbols were commonly used, especially on products for religious spaces.

However, this period also witnessed some notable transformations, mainly due to the impact of the new social context. Firstly, some "feudal" or "bourgeois" decorative motifs were restricted or eliminated, reflecting the influence of cultural policies during the subsidy period. Secondly, shortages of raw materials and techniques under difficult economic conditions affected the quality and diversity of ceramic products. Thirdly, the consumer market was primarily domestic, with demand focused on products for basic religious and civil use, limiting creativity in form and decorative motifs.

In terms of glaze color, the 1975–1985 period primarily used traditional glazes, especially brown and green glazes in northern centers, and blue glazes in Bien Hoa. The limited availability of glaze raw materials during the subsidy period also affected the diversity of colors and the aesthetic effects of the products.

5.2 Period 1986–2000: Transformation Under the Impact of "Doi Moi" and Integration

The 1986–2000 period, beginning with the "Doi Moi" (Renovation) policy (socio-economic renovation), marked a significant turning point in the development of Vietnamese ceramic art in general and ceramic elephant stools in particular. The open-door policy, development of a market economy, and international integration created new conditions, offering both opportunities and challenges for ceramic decorative art.

Regarding plastic language, the 1986–2000 period saw significant transformations. Structural forms began to show greater flexibility, with experimentation in new proportions, sometimes breaking traditional rules of balance to create dynamism and modernity. Decorative compositions also changed, with a trend towards reducing the complexity of traditional patterns and increasing new decorative elements, aligning with international market tastes. Linear rhythm became more expansive, combining traditional and modern lines.

Regarding the system of decorative motifs, this period witnessed the most distinct transformations. Firstly, motif stylization became the dominant trend, with simplification of details, emphasis on main lines, and creation of strong contrasts. Secondly, the emergence of new motifs, inspired by international art, reflected the process of cultural exchange and external aesthetic influences. Thirdly, the

The Formal Visual Language and Decorative Motifs on Vietnamese Ceramic Elephant Pedestals (1975–2025): Continuity and Transformation

combination of traditional and contemporary motifs became common, creating pattern ensembles that were both familiar and novel. Fourthly, Chinese characters and auspicious symbols were widely used again, reflecting the demand for blessings and peace in the context of the market economy.

Regarding glaze color, the 1986–2000 period recorded significant diversification, with the application of new glaze techniques, richer color combinations, and higher aesthetic effects. Crackle glaze technique in Bat Trang, multicolored glaze technique in Bien Hoa, and copper glaze technique in Lai Thieu created a rich variety of aesthetic choices for ceramic elephant stool products.

Notably, the development of the export market during this period profoundly impacted the decorative art of ceramic elephant stools. According to data from the Ministry of Industry and Trade and traditional craft reports, from the late 1990s, Vietnamese fine art ceramics, including ceramic elephant stools, were exported to major markets such as the US, EU, Japan, and Australia. The demands of the international market for designs, colors, and decorative styles directly influenced the creative process of artisans, compelling them to adjust their plastic language and decorative motifs accordingly.

5.3 Period 2001–2025: Diversification and Specialization

The 2001–2025 period is the richest and most complex phase in the development of Vietnamese ceramic elephant stool decorative art. The strong economic development, the explosion of information and cultural exchange, the clear differentiation of aesthetic tastes, and the specialization in production have created a diverse tapestry of plastic language and decorative motifs.

Regarding plastic language, the 2001–2025 period most clearly demonstrates the trend towards diversification and specialization. Structural forms became the most varied, from elephant stools with traditional realistic styles to highly stylized ones, from compact small elephant stools to large, imposing ones. Proportions between parts also became more flexible, reflecting the artisans' creative freedom in seeking new forms. Decorative compositions clearly showed a differentiation between two trends: the traditional trend (symmetrical, layered compositions, ancient patterns) and the modern trend (asymmetrical, free compositions, new patterns).

Regarding the motif system, the 2001–2025 period exhibited unprecedented richness. Traditional motifs continued to be widely used, especially on products for religious spaces and for customers who preferred classical styles. However, motif stylization and transformation also occurred strongly, with many new variations combining traditional and contemporary elements. Notably, the trend of using abstract and geometric motifs on ceramic elephant stools became more popular, especially on products for the export market and young customers with modern aesthetic tastes.

Regarding glaze color, the 2001–2025 period recorded significant innovation, with the application of many new glaze techniques, creative color combinations, and high aesthetic effects. The trend of using monochromatic glazes, transparent glazes, and crystalline glazes on ceramic elephant stools reflected the influence of minimalism and contemporary design aesthetic styles. At the same time, traditional glaze lines were maintained and developed, creating a balance between preservation and innovation.

An important characteristic of the 2001–2025 period is the clear differentiation between markets and user groups. The domestic market for religious spaces still favored traditionally styled ceramic elephant stools, with ancient motifs and traditional glazes. The domestic market for modern civil spaces tended to prefer contemporary styled ceramic elephant stools, with stylized motifs and new glazes. The international market had more diverse demands, ranging from antique-style products to modern-style products, depending on the tastes of each region. This differentiation created a strong impetus for the creative process and innovation in ceramic elephant stool decorative art.

Furthermore, the 2001–2025 period also witnessed the development of ceramic craft villages and the emergence of artist-designers, who possessed both knowledge of ceramic tradition and the ability to absorb and apply international design trends. The appearance of this group of artisans led to the creation of ceramic elephant stools with high aesthetic value, simultaneously preserving traditional identity and having contemporary and international appeal.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Relationship Between Continuity and Transformation

The research results show that the relationship between continuity and transformation in the decorative art of ceramic elephant stools in the 1975–2025 period is not linear, where continuity leads to transformation, but rather a complex, interwoven, and interacting relationship. Continuity does not mean intact preservation but rather a process of selection, inheritance, and restructuring of traditional elements within a new context. Transformation does not mean breaking with tradition but rather a process of creation and innovation based on core values.

According to Gombrich (1984), art always operates in a dialectical relationship between "schema" (traditional patterns) and "correction" (modification, adjustment). Artisans never create from scratch but always start from a traditional repertoire, then adjust, modify, and supplement to suit new conditions and needs. This holds true for Vietnamese ceramic elephant stool art, where the process of continuity and transformation occurs continuously, from one generation of artisans to the next, from one period to another. A notable point is that the speed and degree of transformation vary among different aspects of plastic language and decorative motifs. Structural form and proportion have the slowest transformation rate, as they are strongly influenced by production techniques

The Formal Visual Language and Decorative Motifs on Vietnamese Ceramic Elephant Pedestals (1975–2025): Continuity and Transformation

and functional utility. Decorative composition has a medium transformation rate, as it is both influenced by tradition and allows for creative flexibility. Decorative motifs have the fastest transformation rate, as they can easily absorb and adapt to new aesthetic influences. Glaze color transformation rate depends on technical conditions and raw materials; some periods see rapid transformation (with new techniques), while others are stable (when techniques are maintained).

6.2 Impact of Market Economy and International Integration

One of the important findings of the research is the profound impact of the market economy and international integration on the decorative art of ceramic elephant stools. Since "Doi Moi" (1986), particularly since Vietnam joined the WTO (2007), the export market has become a crucial driver of transformation in plastic language and decorative motifs. The demands of the international market for designs, quality, style, and price have compelled artisans to adjust their products, creating a clear differentiation between products for the domestic market and those for the export market.

However, the impact of the market economy and international integration is not solely negative (loss of identity) but also positive (fostering creativity, improving quality, expanding markets). Many artisans have learned to combine traditional elements with market demands, creating products that possess both national identity and international appeal, meeting both aesthetic and commercial needs. This is one of the important achievements of ceramic elephant stool decorative art during the research period.

6.3 Role of Artisans and Aesthetic Mindset

Artisans play a central role in the process of continuity and transformation of ceramic elephant stool decorative art. They are the ones who directly create, transform, and transmit plastic language and decorative motifs from one generation to the next. The aesthetic mindset of artisans, formed through apprenticeship, exposure to tradition, and influence from the social context, directly determines the artistic characteristics of the product.

Through interviews and field surveys at ceramic centers, three main groups of aesthetic mindsets among ceramic elephant stool artisans in the 1975–2025 period can be identified. The first group comprises conservative artisans, primarily focused on maintaining and inheriting tradition, with little creativity and innovation. The second group consists of reformist artisans, who both preserve tradition and actively innovate, creating highly blended products. The third group includes creative artisans, primarily focused on innovation and adopting new influences, creating highly contemporary products. These three aesthetic mindsets coexist, interact, and complement each other, contributing to the diversity and richness of ceramic elephant stool decorative art.

Issue of Preservation and Development

The research also raises important issues regarding the preservation and development of ceramic elephant stool decorative art. In the context of globalization and modernization, the risk of traditional values fading away is real, as older generations of artisans gradually retire and new generations are not adequately trained in traditional techniques and styles. At the same time, competitive pressure from imported ceramic products, especially from China, also poses a significant challenge to the existence and development of traditional Vietnamese ceramic elephant stools.

However, the study also points to positive signs in the process of preservation and development. The attention of cultural management agencies, the support of international organizations, the development of cultural tourism, and public interest in traditional handicrafts have created favorable conditions for preserving and promoting the artistic value of ceramic elephant stools.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper analyzed the characteristics of plastic language and decorative motifs on Vietnamese ceramic elephant stools during the 1975–2025 period, focusing on the process of continuity and transformation. From the research results, the following main conclusions can be drawn.

Regarding plastic language, Vietnamese ceramic elephant stools in the 1975–2025 period exhibit a rich and distinctive system of plastic language, including structural form, decorative composition, linear rhythm, and glaze surface treatment. This plastic language both inherits traditional aesthetic values and undergoes significant transformations influenced by social, economic, and cultural contexts. The harmony between function and aesthetics, between form and symbolic meaning, is a prominent characteristic of the plastic language of Vietnamese ceramic elephant stools.

Regarding the system of decorative motifs, Vietnamese ceramic elephant stools demonstrate diversity and richness, encompassing main motif groups: flora (lotus, chrysanthemum, apricot blossom, stylized leaves), clouds and waves, mythical animals (dragon, phoenix, fish, bat), Chinese characters and auspicious symbols (Phuc, Loc, Tho, precious vase, jade), along with contemporary variations. Each motif group carries its own symbolic meaning, reflecting the worldview and human philosophy of the creative community.

Regarding the process of continuity and transformation, the study identifies three distinct developmental periods. The 1975–1985 period was a phase of traditional continuity, with the relatively intact preservation of ancient plastic language and decorative motifs. The 1986–2000 period was a phase of strong transformation under the impact of "Doi Moi" and integration, with motif stylization,

The Formal Visual Language and Decorative Motifs on Vietnamese Ceramic Elephant Pedestals (1975–2025): Continuity and Transformation

glaze color diversification, and the influence of the export market. The 2001–2025 period was a phase of diversification and specialization, with a clear differentiation among aesthetic trends and usage preferences.

The relationship between continuity and transformation is not linear but complex and interwoven, where continuity is a process of selection and restructuring, and transformation is a process of creation based on tradition. The impact of the market economy and international integration both creates challenges and opportunities for the development of ceramic elephant stool decorative art. The role of artisans and their aesthetic mindset is a decisive factor in the process of continuity and transformation. Based on these conclusions, the paper proposes several recommendations. Firstly, there is a need to promote research and systematic documentation of ceramic elephant stools, including collection, photography, measurement, and detailed recording of techniques, styles, and symbolic meanings of the products. Secondly, it is necessary to strengthen training and knowledge transfer to new generations of artisans, ensuring the continuous inheritance of traditional knowledge and techniques. Thirdly, appropriate support policies should be provided for traditional ceramic elephant stool production facilities, helping them both preserve their identity and meet market demands. Fourthly, it is crucial to promote and introduce the artistic value of Vietnamese ceramic elephant stools to domestic and international audiences, contributing to enhancing the position of Vietnamese ceramic art on the international stage.

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