

Ceramic Elephant Stools in the Flow of Export and Integration: Aesthetic Adaptation and Functional Transformation at Vietnamese Ceramic Centers (1975–2025)

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ABSTRACT: This article presents research results on the process of aesthetic adaptation and functional transformation of Vietnamese ceramic elephant stools in the context of export and international integration during the period 1975–2025. Based on the methods of art history, formal analysis, sociology of art, and field ethnography, the study surveyed and evaluated the influence of the international market on the decorative forms, glazes, and expressive techniques of ceramic elephant stools at three typical ceramic centers: Bat Trang, Lai Thieu, and Bien Hoa. Research results show that the export market has become an important driver promoting changes in sculptural language and decorative motifs, creating a multidimensional aesthetic adaptation process between national identity and international taste requirements. The contradiction between preserving identity and meeting market demands is a current reality, but it also creates positive compatibilities when many artisans have succeeded in combining traditional elements with contemporary requirements, enhancing the aesthetic value and competitiveness of the products. The study also points out significant differences in the degree and method of adaptation among the ceramic centers, reflecting the historical, technical, and cultural specificities of each locality.

KEYWORDS: ceramic elephant stools, ceramic export, cultural integration, aesthetic adaptation, functional transformation, Bat Trang, Lai Thieu, Bien Hoa, national identity, international taste.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Problem Statement

Vietnamese ceramic art, with a history of thousands of years, always moves in the dialectical relationship between tradition and creativity, between local identity and external influences. In this movement, the market element plays an important role, both as a driving force for development and as a factor affecting the transformation of the sculptural language and aesthetics of the product. In particular, after 1975, when the country entered the period of unification, construction, and subsequently Renovation (Doi Moi), the process of international integration has created profound impacts on traditional Vietnamese ceramic art, posing many theoretical and practical issues worth concerning.

The ceramic elephant stool is one of the ceramic product lines with high export potential, especially from the late 1980s onwards, when the Renovation policy opened up opportunities to access the international market for traditional ceramic production facilities. According to data from the Vietnam Ceramic Association and industry reports from the Ministry of Industry and Trade, Vietnamese artistic ceramic products, including ceramic elephant stools, have been exported to more than 40 countries and territories, with major markets including the United States, the European Union, Japan, Australia, and some Southeast Asian countries. This export process not only brings economic benefits but also creates a profound impact on the decorative forms, glazes, expressive techniques, and especially the utility function of the ceramic elephant stool product.

However, the impact of the international market on the art of decorating ceramic elephant stools is a complex issue, containing both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, the requirements of the international market promote artisans to innovate, create, improve quality, and diversify products. On the other hand, competitive pressure and the pursuit of foreign tastes can lead to a loss of identity, a standardization of styles, and a decline in traditional cultural values. The contradiction between national identity and international taste requirements is at the center of this issue, requiring serious research and analysis.

In this context, this article aims to assess the influence of the international market on decorative forms, glazes, and expressive techniques of ceramic elephant stools at typical ceramic centers, while analyzing the contradictory and compatible relationship between national identity and foreign taste requirements. Through surveying three major ceramic centers—Bat Trang (Hanoi), Lai

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Thieu (Binh Duong), and Bien Hoa (Dong Nai)—the research wishes to clarify the process of aesthetic adaptation and functional transformation of ceramic elephant stools in the flow of export and integration over the past half-century.

1.2 Research Status

Vietnamese ceramic art and the relationship between ceramic products and the market have been of interest to many researchers inside and outside the country. Regarding international research, John Stevenson and John Guy (1997) in "Vietnamese Ceramics: A Separate Tradition" analyzed the characteristics of Vietnamese ceramic art in comparative relation to Chinese and Southeast Asian ceramics, while also mentioning the role of trade and cultural exchange in the formation and development of Vietnamese ceramic styles. Rose Kerr and John Ayers (2002), in their study on Asian export ceramics, recorded the participation of Vietnamese ceramics in the international ceramic trade network from the 12th to the 15th century, providing an important historical foundation for understanding Vietnam's long-standing tradition of ceramic export.

Regarding domestic research, many works have mentioned traditional ceramic centers and the development of the ceramic craft in the context of Renovation. Le Thi Lien (2003), in her study on Bat Trang ceramics, analyzed the movement of the ceramic village from tradition to modernity, mentioning the impact of the export market on Bat Trang ceramic products. Tran Khanh Chuong (2006), in articles on contemporary Vietnamese artistic ceramics, recorded the strong development of decorative ceramic products in the context of integration, but did not go deep into analyzing ceramic elephant stools specifically. Vo Van Tuong (2000), in his study on Bien Hoa ceramics, mentioned the technical characteristics and artistic style of Bien Hoa ceramics, providing important materials on the development history of this ceramic center.

However, when viewed as a whole, it can be seen that previous studies mainly focused on ceramics in general or specific product lines; there has not been any in-depth work on ceramic elephant stools in relation to the export market and integration process. In particular, the issue of aesthetic adaptation and functional transformation of ceramic elephant stools under the impact of the international market, as well as the contradiction between national identity and foreign taste requirements, remains a research gap that needs to be filled. This article aims to contribute to filling that gap.

1.3 Objectives and Research Methods

The article aims at three main objectives. First, to assess the influence of the international market on the decorative forms, glazes, and expressive techniques of ceramic elephant stools at Vietnamese ceramic centers during the period 1975–2025. Second, to analyze the contradictory and compatible relationship between national identity and international taste requirements in the process of producing and consuming export ceramic elephant stools. Third, to identify differences in the degree and method of adaptation among the three ceramic centers of Bat Trang, Lai Thieu, and Bien Hoa.

Research methods include: the art history method, used to reconstruct the development and transformation of ceramic elephant stools in a historical-social context; the formal analysis method, applied to dissect shape, decoration, and technical elements on the product; the sociology of art method, used to evaluate the impact of economic and market factors on the creative and consumption process; and the fieldwork method, implemented through actual surveys at craft villages, interviewing artisans, and collecting data. The spatial scope is limited to the three ceramic centers of Bat Trang, Lai Thieu, and Bien Hoa. The time scope is from 1975 to 2025.

2. THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL BASIS

2.1 Vietnamese Ceramic Export: Tradition and Contemporary

The tradition of exporting Vietnamese ceramics has a long history, starting from the 12th–13th centuries when Vietnamese ceramics actively participated in the maritime trade network of Southeast Asia and extended beyond the region. According to Stevenson and Guy (1997), Vietnamese ceramics of the Ly–Tran period were exported to many countries in the region, with main product lines being brown flower ceramics, celadon glaze, and blue and white ceramics. Underwater archaeology, especially at shipwreck sites in the Southeast Asian sea, has discovered large quantities of Vietnamese ceramics, proving the scale and stature of ceramic export trade in history. Kerr and Ayers (2002) also noted that Vietnamese ceramics were once a formidable competitor to Chinese ceramics in the Southeast Asian market, thanks to good quality, reasonable prices, and unique artistic style.

After 1975, in conditions of a unified country but a difficult economy, ceramic export activities were almost stagnant. According to data from the General Statistics Office of Vietnam and economic industry reports, it was not until after the Renovation policy in 1986, especially from the 1990s onwards, that ceramic export activities were restored and developed strongly. Vietnam participated increasingly deeply in the international ceramic market, not only with industrial ceramic products but also with handicraft ceramic products, including ceramic elephant stools.

According to a report by the Ministry of Industry and Trade of Vietnam, the export turnover of handicraft goods has grown significantly from the 1990s to the present. Particularly for the ceramics industry, export turnover reached about 200 million USD in 2005 and increased to over 600 million USD in 2015, with an average growth rate of about 10–15% per year during the period

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2000–2015. Although most of the ceramic export turnover comes from industrial ceramic products, handicraft ceramic products, including ceramic elephant stools, also contribute significantly, especially in terms of added value and cultural value. Data from the Vietnam Ceramic Association shows that handicraft ceramic products account for about 15–20% of total ceramic export turnover, with main markets being the United States, the European Union (especially France, Germany, the Netherlands), Japan, Australia, and Canada.

2.2 International Aesthetic Tastes for Decorative Ceramic Products

International aesthetic taste for decorative ceramic products is an important factor affecting the production and consumption process of export ceramic elephant stools. This taste is not uniform but clearly differentiated by geographical region, culture, and economy. Observations from international trade fairs on handicrafts such as Maison & Objet (Paris), Ambiente (Frankfurt), NY NOW (New York), and reports from trade promotion agencies allow for the identification of several major taste trends.

The US market, characterized as diverse, open, and favoring uniqueness, often prefers ceramic products with a "cross-cultural" nature, i.e., products combining traditional Eastern elements and modern Western styles. US customers tend to favor ceramic products with rich colors, eye-catching forms, and high decorative value. The European Union market, especially France, Germany, and the Netherlands, often prefers ceramic products with an elegant, refined style, combining craftsmanship and high aesthetics. European customers particularly value products with a cultural story, clear origin, and real artistic value. The Japanese market, with a tradition of refined aesthetics, often prefers ceramic products with a minimalist, natural style, with matte glaze colors and rustic forms. Japanese taste particularly values the "wabi-sabi" element—the beauty of imperfection and nature—which significantly influences requirements for imported ceramic products.

This differentiation of international tastes creates both opportunities and challenges for Vietnamese ceramic elephant stool production facilities. The opportunity lies in that the diversity of tastes allows artisans to exploit many styles and different product lines suitable for the creative capacity and technical strengths of each center. The challenge lies in that artisans must continuously adapt and adjust products to suit the requirements of each market, while maintaining identity and quality.

2.3 Concepts of National Identity and Aesthetic Adaptation

National identity in plastic arts is a concept referring to the totality of cultural, aesthetic, and technical characteristics that create the uniqueness and distinctiveness of an art school compared to others. In the context of Vietnamese ceramic art, national identity is expressed through a characteristic sculptural language (proportions, shapes, lines), a system of traditional decorative motifs (lotus, clouds, waves, dragons, phoenixes), traditional glazing and firing techniques, along with the symbolic meaning and cultural function of the product. According to Nguyen Quoc Thong (2005), national identity in Vietnamese plastic arts is not a static, immutable value, but a dynamic value, always moving and transforming in the process of contact and exchange with other cultures.

Aesthetic adaptation is a concept referring to the process in which artisans adjust and transform shape, decoration, and technical elements of the product to suit new requirements, in this case, the requirements of the international market. The adaptation process includes many levels, from small changes (adjusting color, size) to large changes (changing style, decorative motifs, product function). The degree of adaptation depends on many factors: specific market requirements, the artisan's technical and creative capacity, the level of influence of tradition, and socio-economic conditions.

According to Becker (1982), the process of aesthetic adaptation in applied art always takes place in the complex relationship between the artisan, the market, and tradition. The artisan is not a passive recipient of market requirements but an active person who selects, considers, and decides the appropriate level of adaptation based on preserving core values that they and the community cherish. This view is particularly significant when analyzing the aesthetic adaptation process of Vietnamese ceramic elephant stool artisans in the context of export and integration.

3. CURRENT STATUS OF CERAMIC ELEPHANT STOOL EXPORT AND IMPACT OF THE INTERNATIONAL MARKET

3.1 Process of Participation in the Export Market

The process of participating in the export market of Vietnamese ceramic elephant stools can be divided into three main stages, reflecting the movement of the economy and the transformation of the traditional ceramic industry.

The first stage, from 1975 to 1985, was the stage with almost no significant handicraft ceramic export activity. In the conditions of a subsidized economy, ceramic products mainly served the domestic market, with functions focusing on religious beliefs and basic daily use. According to records from traditional ceramic cooperatives in this period, ceramic elephant stool products were produced in limited quantities, mainly upon orders from temples, state agencies, and some families with good economic conditions. The export market almost did not exist due to a lack of incentive mechanisms, lack of market information, and lack of logistics conditions.

The second stage, from 1986 to 2000, was the stage of opening up and accessing the international market. The Renovation policy of 1986 created an important turning point, allowing private ceramic production facilities to operate, encouraging the export of

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handicraft goods, and creating conditions to access the international market. From the late 1980s, some ceramic production facilities in Bat Trang, Lai Thieu, and Bien Hoa began contacting foreign merchants and importers, mainly through trade fairs, international exhibitions, and personal relationships. According to records from elderly artisans in Bat Trang, the period 1990–1995 marked the beginning of ceramic elephant stool export activities, with the first orders from France, the Netherlands, and Japan. The initial export products were mainly ceramic elephant stools in a traditional style, with brown glazes, celadon glazes, and ancient motifs, welcomed by the international market thanks to high craftsmanship and unique cultural value.

The third stage, from 2001 to 2025, is the stage of strong development and professionalization of export activities. Vietnam's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2007 created additional momentum for export activities, with tariff reductions, market expansion, and enhanced trade exchange. During this period, ceramic elephant stool production facilities not only exported through intermediate merchants but also directly participated in the international supply chain, establishing relationships with importers, participating in international fairs, and building export brands. The development of e-commerce from the 2010s also created new consumption channels, allowing ceramic elephant stool products to reach international consumers directly through platforms like Amazon, Etsy, Alibaba, and specialized websites for handicraft goods.

3.2 Major Export Markets and Consumption Characteristics

Based on data from production facilities and trade promotion reports, it is possible to identify the major export markets for Vietnamese ceramic elephant stools and the consumption characteristics of each market.

The US market is the largest market, accounting for about 30–35% of the total export volume of ceramic elephant stools. Products consumed in the US market are mainly medium to large-sized ceramic elephant stools, serving interior and exterior decoration, with styles ranging from traditional to contemporary. US taste favors products with rich colors, eye-catching forms, and high applicability. According to feedback from US importers, customers often highly value products with "handmade", "unique", and "culturally rich" elements, while requiring products to meet safety standards (no lead, cadmium in glazes) and shipping standards (durability, impact resistance).

The European Union market accounts for about 25–30% of total exports, with major markets being France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK. Products consumed in the European market often have an elegant, refined style, combining traditional craftsmanship and modern aesthetics. European customers particularly value "sustainable", "eco-friendly", and "authentic" elements, setting high requirements for raw material origins, production processes, and the cultural story behind the product.

The Japanese market accounts for about 15–20% of total exports, characterized by a taste favoring minimalism, nature, and refinement. Ceramic elephant stool products consumed in the Japanese market are often small to medium-sized, with matte glaze colors (brown, gray, moss green), rustic forms, and simple decorative motifs. Japanese taste particularly values the "wabi-sabi" element—the beauty of imperfection, nature, and humility—directly influencing requirements for form and product style.

The Australian and other markets account for about 15–20% of total exports, characterized by diverse tastes, combining European and Asian influences, favoring products with high applicability, reasonable prices, and vivid decorative styles.

3.3 Impact of the International Market on Ceramic Elephant Stool Production

The impact of the international market on the production of ceramic elephant stools at Vietnamese ceramic centers is multidimensional and profound, expressed in many aspects.

Regarding production scale, the requirements of the international market have promoted a significant increase in the quantity of products, especially from the 1990s onwards. Many production facilities in Bat Trang, Lai Thieu, and Bien Hoa have expanded their scale, invested in new kilns, recruited more workers, and organized production in assembly lines to meet export orders. According to records from artisan interviews, the quantity of ceramic elephant stools for export at some large facilities can reach thousands of products per year, accounting for a significant proportion of total output.

Regarding production organization, the international market has promoted specialization and division of labor in the production of ceramic elephant stools. Instead of one artisan handling the entire process from shaping to decorating and firing, export production is often divided into stages: one group of shaping workers, one group of decorating workers, one group of glazing workers, and one group of firing workers. This division helps improve productivity and product quality, but at the same time raises the issue of losing the "comprehensive" nature of the traditional artisan's craft.

Regarding marketing and consumption, the international market has changed the way production facilities approach customers for ceramic elephant stools. From producing and selling according to local needs, facilities have shifted to producing according to international orders, participating in international trade fairs, building catalogues, websites, and using social media to advertise products. This change not only affects the business method but also impacts the creative process, as artisans must balance personal ideas with market requirements.

4. AESTHETIC ADAPTATION AT THREE TYPICAL CERAMIC CENTERS

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4.1 Bat Trang: Elegance and Refinement in Adaptation

Bat Trang, a ceramic village with over 700 years of history located on the banks of the Red River (now belonging to Long Bien District and Gia Lam District, Hanoi), is the largest and most famous ceramic center in Northern Vietnam. The Bat Trang ceramic tradition is characterized by refinement in shaping, richness in glazes, and sophistication in decorative techniques. According to Le Thi Lien (2003), Bat Trang ceramics developed through many historical periods, from blue and white ceramics of the Le dynasty to crackle glaze ceramics of the Nguyen dynasty, creating a characteristic artistic style, both courtly and folk.

In the process of adapting to the export market, Bat Trang ceramic elephant stools clearly demonstrate the characteristic of "elegance and refinement," reflecting the aesthetic identity of this ceramic center. Regarding decorative forms, exported Bat Trang ceramic elephant stools often maintain balanced, harmonious proportions between parts, with a sculptural style that is both realistic and stylized. This characteristic suits the international taste favoring elegance while retaining the traditional identity of Bat Trang ceramics. Regarding decorative motifs, Bat Trang artisans have carried out a sophisticated stylization process, retaining traditional motifs such as lotus flowers, chrysanthemums, clouds, and waves but adjusting them to suit modern tastes, with finer lines, more open composition, and sparser decorative density compared to traditional products.

Regarding glazes, this is the aspect that most clearly reflects Bat Trang's adaptation to the international market. While traditional products mainly used brown glaze, celadon glaze, and crackle glaze, export products have significantly expanded the range of glazes, including white glaze, cream glaze, light blue glaze, moss green glaze, and especially the crackle glaze technique with many color variations. Crackle glaze, Bat Trang's most famous characteristic, has been developed into many different product lines suitable for each market: traditional brown crackle for the classic-loving market, green crackle for the lightness-loving market, and white crackle for the modern-loving market. This diversification of glazes reflects both the creativity of the artisans and the clear impact of international tastes on the production process.

Regarding expressive techniques, exported Bat Trang ceramic elephant stools are often executed with high techniques, especially in the stages of shaping, decorating, and glazing. The requirements of the international market for precision, uniformity, and surface quality have prompted Bat Trang artisans to improve their skills, applying some new techniques (such as gas kiln firing instead of traditional wood kilns, using molds for small details) while maintaining traditional techniques (such as hand painting, carving, crackle glazing). The combination of traditional and modern techniques creates ceramic elephant stool products with high quality, meeting international standards.

However, the adaptation process at Bat Trang also raises some concerning issues. According to feedback from some elderly artisans, chasing export orders sometimes leads to mass production, reducing craftsmanship and losing the "soul" of the traditional product. Some production facilities, for profit, have used molds instead of hand-shaping, decals instead of hand-painting, leading to standardization and the loss of uniqueness in each product. This is a clear expression of the contradiction between national identity and international taste requirements, which needs to be identified and addressed carefully.

4.2 Lai Thieu: Strength and Boldness in Adaptation

Lai Thieu, a town belonging to Thuan An City, Binh Duong Province, is the largest ceramic center in Southern Vietnam, with a history of development spanning over 300 years. Lai Thieu ceramics is characterized by a bold sculptural style, rich glaze colors, and diverse decorative techniques, reflecting the Southern aesthetic characteristic. According to research from the Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Binh Duong Province, the Lai Thieu ceramic craft originated from Chinese immigrants in the 17th century, bringing traditional ceramic techniques and styles of China, which were then fused with local elements to create a unique style.

In the process of adapting to the export market, Lai Thieu ceramic elephant stools clearly demonstrate the characteristic of "strength and boldness." Regarding decorative forms, exported Lai Thieu ceramic elephant stools often have large sizes, full body proportions, creating a feeling of sturdiness and massiveness. The sculptural style tends to be more realistic compared to Bat Trang, with details such as the trunk, tusks, ears, and eyes expressed clearly and vividly. This characteristic suits the tastes of some international markets, especially the US and Australia, where customers favor products with strong, impressive forms and "rich Eastern flavor."

Regarding decorative motifs, exported Lai Thieu ceramic elephant stools demonstrate a rich combination between traditional elements and new elements. Lai Thieu artisans often use rich floral motifs (roses, chrysanthemums, apricot blossoms, betel leaves), combined with mythical creature motifs (dragons, phoenixes, fish) and Han script elements, creating a brilliant, multi-colored decorative complex. This is a traditional characteristic of Lai Thieu ceramics, but in the context of export, this characteristic is maximized, fitting the international taste favoring richness, brilliance, and "rich Eastern flavor." According to observations from international trade fairs, Lai Thieu ceramic elephant stools are often displayed with a presentation style emphasizing the "exotic" aspect, attracting the attention of Western customers due to cultural difference.

Regarding glazes, Lai Thieu has a special strength with rich colored glaze lines, including blue glaze, green glaze, pink (red) glaze, yellow glaze, and especially the technique of painting multi-colored glazes on the same product. In the context of export, Lai Thieu artisans have developed many new glaze lines suitable for international tastes, including copper glaze (for classic style), gemstone

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glaze (for luxurious style), and matte glaze (for modern style). The diversity of glazes is one of the important competitive advantages of Lai Thieu ceramic elephant stools in the international market.

Regarding function, exported Lai Thieu ceramic elephant stools have undergone significant transformation compared to traditional products. While traditional products mainly served the function of holding ornamental pots and for sitting, export products have expanded functions to many other purposes: making flower pots (combining the elephant stool with an attached flower pot), making decorative vases (modifying the structure to fit the vase function), making decorative lights (combining with a lighting system), and making art display stands (with small sizes, suitable for modern display spaces). This functional transformation reflects the direct impact of international tastes on the design and production process, while also showing the flexible adaptability of Lai Thieu artisans.

4.3 Bien Hoa: Lyrical and Local Adaptation

Bien Hoa, a city in Dong Nai Province, is a ceramic center with a long tradition in the South, with a style clearly distinct from Bat Trang and Lai Thieu. Bien Hoa ceramics is known for its characteristic blue glaze line, bold sculptural style, and highly local decorative techniques. According to Vo Van Tuong (2000), Bien Hoa ceramics is influenced by many sources: techniques from Chinese ceramics via immigration, style from Champa ceramics via cultural contact, and identity from the cultural life of the South. This fusion creates a Bien Hoa ceramic style that is "lyrical and local," with a sculptural language close to nature and life.

In the process of adapting to the export market, Bien Hoa ceramic elephant stools clearly demonstrate the "lyrical and local" characteristic. Regarding decorative forms, exported Bien Hoa ceramic elephant stools often have a natural, soft sculptural style, with flowing curves and harmonious proportions. Bien Hoa artisans tend to emphasize the natural beauty of the elephant image, with less stylization compared to Bat Trang, creating products with a high degree of "closeness" and "authenticity." This characteristic suits the international taste favoring "natural" and "authentic" products.

Regarding decorative motifs, exported Bien Hoa ceramic elephant stools mainly use floral motifs (especially lotus flowers and lotus leaves), combined with wave and cloud motifs, creating a highly natural decorative complex. Compared to Bat Trang and Lai Thieu, the decorative motifs on Bien Hoa ceramic elephant stools are somewhat simpler, focusing on main lines and large blocks, reflecting the influence of the Southern aesthetic which favors boldness and freedom. However, this simplicity does not mean poverty; it is a refinement in selection, knowing how to emphasize main elements and reduce auxiliary details.

Regarding glazes, Bien Hoa has a special strength with the traditional blue glaze line, with color shades from light blue to dark blue, creating a deep, lyrical beauty. In the context of export, Bien Hoa artisans have developed the blue glaze line into many variations suitable for international tastes, including white-blue (for elegant style), gray-blue (for classic style), and blue combined with brown glaze (for warm style). Additionally, Bien Hoa artisans have experimented with some new glaze lines such as gemstone glaze, ash glaze, and crackle glaze, but blue glaze remains the dominant and most characteristic line.

A notable point in the adaptation process at Bien Hoa is the combination between local and international elements. Bien Hoa artisans tend to preserve local elements (Southern floral motifs, natural sculptural style, traditional blue glaze) while adjusting to fit international market requirements (adjusting size, enhancing decoration, expanding glazes). This combination creates ceramic elephant stool products that possess both local identity and internationality, fitting the taste of a segment of international customers who favor products with a "cultural story" and "locality."

5. CONTRADICTIONS AND COMPATIBILITIES BETWEEN NATIONAL IDENTITY AND INTERNATIONAL TASTE REQUIREMENTS

5.1 Contradictions

The process of aesthetic adaptation of Vietnamese ceramic elephant stools to the international market is not always smooth but contains many contradictions, reflecting the tension between national identity and foreign taste requirements.

The first contradiction is between traditional craftsmanship and mass production requirements. Traditional ceramic elephant stools are created by the hands of artisans, with each product being unique, bearing the personal mark and "soul" of the worker. However, the requirements of the international market for large quantities, competitive prices, and uniform quality have promoted the trend of mass production, using molds, decals, and industrial processes. This leads to the loss of craftsmanship, uniqueness, and artistic value of the product. According to feedback from many artisans in Bat Trang, the differentiation between "market goods" (cheap products, mass-produced) and "art goods" (handmade products, high aesthetic value) is increasingly clear, reflecting the contradiction between commercial value and artistic value.

The second contradiction is between traditional decorative motifs and innovation requirements. The system of traditional decorative motifs on ceramic elephant stools (lotus, chrysanthemum, clouds, waves, dragons, phoenixes) carries deep symbolic meaning, reflecting the worldview and philosophy of the Vietnamese community. However, international tastes do not always understand and correctly evaluate the symbolic meaning of these motifs. Many international customers view traditional motifs as "too complex," "too fussy," or "hard to understand," leading to requirements for innovation, simplification, or replacement of traditional motifs with

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new ones. This requirement places artisans in a dilemma: wanting to preserve traditional motifs while wanting to meet market requirements.

The third contradiction is between traditional glazes and international tastes. Traditional glazes on ceramic elephant stools (brown glaze, celadon glaze, blue glaze) carry Vietnamese cultural and aesthetic characteristics, but do not always suit international tastes. Some markets favor bright, fresh colors (requiring diverse colored glazes), while traditional products have earthy, classic color shades. Some markets favor minimalist, neutral colors (requiring white, gray, black glazes), while traditional products have warm, rich color shades. The difference in color taste forces artisans to adjust, sometimes having to abandon traditional glazes to pursue new glazes, leading to a loss of color identity.

The fourth contradiction is between traditional functions and new functions. Traditional ceramic elephant stools have clear functions: displaying ornamental pots or for sitting. However, international tastes demand products must have more diverse functions, serving many different usage purposes. Functional transformation, if uncontrolled, can lead to the loss of the essence and original cultural meaning of the ceramic elephant stool. When the ceramic elephant stool becomes "anything," the traditional symbolic function (strength, protection, sacredness) may fade, replaced by purely commercial functions.

The fifth contradiction, and perhaps the deepest, is between cultural value and commercial value. The traditional ceramic elephant stool is a cultural product, containing knowledge, skills, beliefs, and aesthetics of the community. When introduced to the international market, this cultural product becomes a commodity, subject to the laws of supply-demand, competition, and profit. The contradiction between "value" (cultural, aesthetic value) and "price" (commercial value, profit) is a difficult problem, requiring careful consideration from artisans, enterprises, and management agencies.

5.2 Compatibilities

Alongside the contradictions, the process of aesthetic adaptation of Vietnamese ceramic elephant stools to the international market also demonstrates many positive compatibilities, showing the ability to harmoniously combine national identity and international taste requirements.

The first compatibility is between the "handmade" element and the international taste favoring handmade products. In the context of globalization, when industrial products become ubiquitous and uniform, handmade products are increasingly highly valued in the international market for their uniqueness, individuality, and cultural value. Vietnamese ceramic elephant stools, with a long tradition of craftsmanship, have a clear competitive advantage over industrial products from China and other countries. Many international importers highly value Vietnamese ceramic elephant stools precisely for their craftsmanship, meticulous decoration, and the "cultural story" behind each product. This shows that traditional craftsmanship identity is not a barrier but an advantage in the integration process.

The second compatibility is between the "local" element and the "global" trend favoring products with locality. In recent decades, international consumption trends have shifted clearly to favoring products with local origins, cultural stories, and "authentic" nature. This creates a great opportunity for Vietnamese ceramic elephant stools, as this product bears strong locality with a rich history, culture, and traditional techniques. Many production facilities have known how to exploit the local element as a marketing advantage, building a brand story around the village history, traditional techniques, and local culture, creating a differentiation and added value for the product.

The third compatibility is between traditional techniques and international quality requirements. The international market sets high requirements for product quality, including form precision, glaze uniformity, mechanical durability, and chemical composition safety. To meet these requirements, artisans must improve skills, innovate techniques, and strictly control quality. This process of quality improvement, although impacted by the international market, benefits the development of the traditional ceramic craft, as it helps preserve and enhance traditional technical values, while creating a foundation for sustainable development.

The fourth compatibility is between traditional decorative motifs and the "ethnic" trend in the international market. Many international markets, especially Europe and North America, have a trend of favoring products with an "ethnic" or "tribal" style, with traditional decorative motifs, natural colors, and a handmade style. Vietnamese ceramic elephant stools, with a rich system of motifs (lotus, clouds, waves, dragons) and characteristic glazes, fit this trend, creating a competitive advantage in the international market without needing to change the traditional identity too much.

5.3 Experience from the Three Ceramic Centers

Comparing the adaptation process at the three ceramic centers of Bat Trang, Lai Thieu, and Bien Hoa shows that each center has its own adaptation method, reflecting the historical, technical, and cultural specifics of each locality.

At Bat Trang, the dominant adaptation method is "upgrading identity," i.e., preserving characteristic elements (crackle glaze, elegant style, refined motifs) and improving quality and sophistication to meet international market requirements. This is a relatively sustainable adaptation method, as it both preserves identity and enhances product value, but requires artisans to have high skills and large investments.

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At Lai Thieu, the dominant adaptation method is "diversifying identity," i.e., preserving characteristic elements (rich glazes, bold style, brilliant motifs) while expanding the creative scope, combining many new elements suitable for different markets. This is a flexible adaptation method, allowing production facilities to meet diverse market needs, but posing a risk of identity loss if diversification exceeds limits.

At Bien Hoa, the dominant adaptation method is "simplifying identity," i.e., preserving core elements (blue glaze, natural style, nature motifs) and simplifying auxiliary elements, creating products with clear identity but fitting the international taste favoring minimalism and refinement. This is a cautious adaptation method, with little risk of identity loss, but may limit the ability to expand the market if too conservative.

These three adaptation methods, each with its own pros and cons, reflect the diversity in approaches to the issue of identity and integration among Vietnamese ceramic centers. No method is perfect or absolutely correct; each method fits the specific conditions of each center and each market.

6. FUNCTIONAL TRANSFORMATION OF CERAMIC ELEPHANT STOOLS IN THE CONTEXT OF INTEGRATION

6.1 From Traditional Function to Multifunctional Use

The traditional function of Vietnamese ceramic elephant stools, as mentioned, focuses on two main functions: displaying ornamental pots and for sitting. In religious spaces, ceramic elephant stools are used as bases for flower pots, incense burners, or Buddha statues, carrying both functional and symbolic meaning. In domestic spaces, ceramic elephant stools are used as seats or decorative items, serving daily life activities.

However, in the context of international integration, the function of ceramic elephant stools has undergone significant transformation, reflecting the impact of international tastes and the creativity of artisans. First, the function of "art decor" becomes increasingly important, as many international customers use ceramic elephant stools as displayed art works, not necessarily serving a specific usage function. In this function, aesthetic value and cultural meaning are paramount, requiring the product to have high artistic quality and the ability to tell a cultural story. Second, the function of "planter" is expanded, with many variants of ceramic elephant stools designed with integrated flower pots on top, fitting international trends in garden and interior decoration. Third, the function of "decorative lamp" appears on some products, as artisans combine ceramic elephant stools with a lighting system, creating a product that is both decorative and illuminating. Fourth, the function of "stand" is expanded, with ceramic elephant stools used as stands for many different items, from vases to small statues to books and decorative items.

This functional transformation reflects the process of "globalization" of traditional ceramic products, when products bearing Vietnamese cultural identity are redefined and reapplied in a new cultural context. This process brings both opportunities for market expansion and challenges regarding maintaining original identity and cultural meaning.

6.2 Influence of International Tastes on Function

International tastes have a direct influence on the functional transformation of ceramic elephant stools through various mechanisms. The first mechanism is "market feedback," when importers and international customers provide requirements and feedback on the product, from which artisans adjust the function accordingly. For example, many US importers have requested production facilities in Lai Thieu and Bien Hoa to create ceramic elephant stools with smaller sizes, fitting urban apartment spaces, leading to the emergence of the "mini elephant stool" product line. The second mechanism is "trend influence," when international consumption trends (such as "indoor gardening," "boho decor") affect the usage of ceramic elephant stools, thereby directing functional transformation. The third mechanism is "artisan creativity," when artisans, based on understanding of international tastes, proactively create and propose new functions for the product.

6.3 Consequences of Functional Transformation

The functional transformation of ceramic elephant stools in the context of integration brings both positive and negative consequences. Regarding positive consequences, the diversification of functions helps expand the market, increase revenue, and enhance the competitive position of Vietnamese ceramic elephant stools in the international market. Functional transformation also promotes the process of creativity and innovation in design and production, creating new and attractive products. At the same time, functional transformation helps maintain and develop the traditional ceramic craft, as when products have many functions and markets, production demand increases, creating jobs and income for artisans and the community.

Regarding negative consequences, excessive functional transformation can lead to the loss of the essence and original cultural meaning of the ceramic elephant stool. When the ceramic elephant stool becomes "anything," the traditional symbolic function (strength, protection, sacredness) may fade, replaced by purely commercial functions. Functional transformation can also lead to product homogenization, when Vietnamese ceramic elephant stools become similar to decorative ceramic products from other countries, losing characteristics and identity. Additionally, the pressure to diversify functions can cause overload for artisans, forcing

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them to disperse creative energy into many directions, instead of focusing on improving the quality and artistic depth of the main product.

7. DISCUSSION AND PROPOSALS

7.1 Sustainable Direction for Export Ceramic Elephant Stools

From the research results, several conclusions can be drawn regarding the sustainable direction for Vietnamese ceramic elephant stools in the context of export and integration. First, national identity is not a barrier but an important competitive advantage in the international market. In the context of globalization, when industrial products become uniform, handmade products bearing cultural identity are increasingly valued. Artisans and production facilities need to clearly perceive this, not chase the trend of homogenization but proactively promote identity as a factor creating differentiation and added value.

Second, the process of aesthetic adaptation needs to be implemented on the basis of "keeping roots, innovating branches," i.e., preserving core elements (traditional techniques, characteristic motifs, symbolic meaning) and innovating external elements (colors, sizes, functions, presentation style). The balance between preservation and creativity is the key to sustainable development, when the product both retains identity and meets market requirements.

Third, each ceramic center needs to determine its strengths and development direction, avoiding copying and internal competition. Bat Trang with the strength of crackle glaze and elegant style, Lai Thieu with the strength of rich glazes and bold style, Bien Hoa with the strength of blue glaze and natural style, each center needs to focus on promoting its own strength to create differentiation and avoid unhealthy competition.

Fourth, it is necessary to raise awareness about intellectual property protection and product branding. Currently, many Vietnamese ceramic elephant stool products are copied and produced in other countries at cheaper prices, causing damage to artisans and domestic production facilities. Registering for protection of industrial designs, trademarks, and building a national brand for Vietnamese handicraft ceramics is necessary to protect rights and enhance competitive position.

Fifth, investment in market research and product development is needed. Many ceramic elephant stool production facilities currently still produce based on experience and orders, lacking a strategic product development and systematic market research. Building a professional design team, updating international taste trends, and developing new products based on a traditional foundation is necessary to enhance competitive value and expand the market.

7.2 Proposed Solutions

Based on the analysis, the article proposes several specific solutions. On the part of production facilities, it is necessary to build a product development strategy balancing identity preservation and market satisfaction, invest in improving artisan skills, apply quality management systems, and build export brands. On the part of management agencies, there should be reasonable support policies for traditional ceramic production facilities, including financial support, technical support, trade promotion support, and intellectual property protection support. On the part of the artisan community, it is necessary to strengthen exchange, cooperation, and experience sharing among ceramic centers, while promoting the role of craft associations in protecting rights and enhancing the position of traditional handicraft ceramic products.

8. CONCLUSION

The article has assessed the influence of the international market on decorative forms, glazes, and expressive techniques of ceramic elephant stools at three typical ceramic centers: Bat Trang, Lai Thieu, and Bien Hoa during the period 1975–2025, while analyzing the contradictory and compatible relationship between national identity and international taste requirements. Research results show that the export market has become an important driver promoting changes in sculptural language, decorative motifs, glazes, and especially the function of ceramic elephant stools. The process of aesthetic adaptation takes place multidimensionally, with both contradictions and compatibilities, both challenges and opportunities.

The contradiction between national identity and international taste requirements is a current reality, manifested in many aspects: craftsmanship vs. mass production, traditional motifs vs. innovation, traditional glazes vs. new tastes, traditional functions vs. multifunctionality, cultural value vs. commercial value. However, alongside contradictions, there are also many positive compatibilities, when craftsmanship identity, locality, traditional techniques, and national motifs become competitive advantages in the international market.

The three ceramic centers of Bat Trang, Lai Thieu, and Bien Hoa have their own adaptation methods, reflecting historical, technical, and cultural specifics: Bat Trang with the "upgrading identity" method, Lai Thieu with the "diversifying identity" method, and Bien Hoa with the "simplifying identity" method. Each method has its own pros and cons, needing to be considered in the specific context. The sustainable direction for export ceramic elephant stools lies in the balance between preserving identity and meeting the market, between keeping tradition and creative innovation, between cultural value and commercial value. National identity is not a barrier

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but an important competitive advantage, needing to be promoted on the basis of improving quality, diversifying products, and building export brands.

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