



Original Research

An Định Palace: Hybrid Architecture, Identity, and Vietnamization in the Context of the Last Dynasty

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Abstract: This is a qualitative study to analyze the meaning and symbolism of the motifs of hybrid architecture and modernity at An Định Palace. The researcher analyzed data from documentary research and conducted interviews with experts, artists, and scholars to understand the process of identity creation and use of local cultural capital in the construction process. Ruling at a time when French colonialism had completely placed its yoke of domination on Vietnam, the royal family was thoroughly penetrated by Western culture, affecting all aspects of the political, cultural, and spiritual life of society. Aware that the country was in a weak position to be able to fight against the French colonialists, instead of continuing to rebel and make people's lives more and more miserable, the emperor chose to remain at Hue in central Vietnam and create opportunities for the people. An Định Palace was the first work built by Emperor Khải Định immediately after ascending the throne, along with many other works during his reign, marking a unique period in the history of Vietnamese architecture. Through the An Định Palace project, we can see the cultural identity and national pride of a reform-minded king in the context of the powerlessness of Vietnam's last feudal regime. This article argues that the Vietnamization of Western architecture in Hue was a lens through which the Vietnamese monarchy could continue to stamp their national ideology on an increasingly Westernized landscape.

Keywords: *An Định Palace, Hybrid Architecture, Khải Định, Modernity, Nguyen Dynasty*

Introduction

Hue City was the ancient capital of Vietnam, where the Nguyen Dynasty ruled for 143 years (1802–1945). It was home to thirteen generations of kings and is the site of considerable cultural heritage. The tangible heritage includes a defensive citadel system, magnificent palaces, temples, and a system of mausoleums of Nguyen Dynasty emperors. In addition, this place also has many French colonial-style buildings. The contrast between these architectural traditions reflects the two different worlds and political changes that shaped Vietnam in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Swart and Till 2015). One side is an ancient urban area, and the other is a modern city. The French Quarter on the southern bank of the Huong River is a result of targeted urban planning, where the French established overall urban design and management rules. The architecture of the buildings here was mainly modeled after French culture to establish the infrastructure for colonial society. Initially, the prominent art deco and neoclassical architectural styles of buildings like Hue Station (Figure 1) followed European prototypes. However, there are

traces of resistance in the architecture of Hue—a Vietnamization of European styles that helped forge a Vietnamese identity within the confines of French structure.



Figure 1: Hue Station, Built in 1902 and Still in Use Today

Source: *AlongWalker*¹

The Complex of Hue Monuments was recognized by UNESCO as a cultural heritage site in 1993 (Logan 2017). These are historical-cultural relics built by the Nguyen Dynasty during the period from the early nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century in the capital Hue and surrounding areas (Le and Kelboro 2019). The architecture of the Hue ancient capital relic complex is influenced by many different cultures, including the Hue citadel system built in the Vauban architectural style by French engineers at the request of the Emperor Gia Long at the beginning of the Nguyen Dynasty. Vauban Citadel was researched and developed by a French engineer, Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban, in the seventeenth century. Meanwhile, the palace system was built based on the Chinese model in terms of layout and function. However, the course has been aesthetically transformed to match local traditions.

The citadel area (*Kinh Thành*) is home to the most important architectural works of the Nguyen Dynasty. In the first half of the twentieth century, when researching Vietnamese art, Louis Benzacier divided the construction of Hue royal architecture into two phases: The first included architectural works of the nineteenth century, and the second included architectural works built during the *Khải Định* period. He called the architecture of this period the neoclassical period (Benzacier 1955). Although it is considered traditional Vietnamese architecture, the

¹ <https://vi.alongwalker.co/ga-hue-noi-giao-nhau-cua-hai-chuyen-tau-lich-su-s140662.html>.

buildings of the *Khải Định* period are heavily influenced by colonial architecture. Researchers also agree that 1916 to 1945 (corresponding to the rule of *Khải Định* from 1916 until 1925, and then *Bảo Đại* from 1926 until 1945) is a distinct period in studies of construction history and architecture (Loan and Lan 2017). The royal architecture of the Nguyen Dynasty during this period contributed to creating a new look for the architecture of the capital.

An Định Palace is located southeast of the Huong River, outside the Hue capital area. It was constructed in 1917 on the grounds of a former royal residence and originally bore the name Phụng Hòa Palace. This was the private palace of Emperor Khải Định from the time he was crown prince until he ascended the throne. The palace was created in the context of French colonialism, which brought Vietnam into a state of total domination, with Western culture intensely penetrating and influencing all aspects of political life, cultural values, and society. After Khải Định's enthronement, the palace was renovated to reflect French architectural trends, including decorative features like stained glass, ornate ironwork, and European-style balustrades, blending these with Vietnamese motifs in a hybrid style. This was the first project built by Khải Định immediately after ascending the throne. It marked a period of multi-dimensional interaction and had a particularly important meaning in the history of Vietnamese architecture in general and the history of Hue architecture in particular. During the subsequent reign of Emperor Bảo Đại, An Định Palace remained an important royal residence, hosting court gatherings and symbolizing the evolving cultural and political landscape of the early twentieth century. Therefore, identifying the architectural values, aesthetic perspectives, expressive meanings, ideas, beliefs, and culture within the hybrid architecture of An Định Palace is meaningful. It has profound significance for cultural and architectural researchers, and through it we can see the efforts to preserve traditional identity and cultural creativity in the spirit of national self-respect. Following the end of the Nguyen Dynasty in 1945, the palace went through periods of neglect and multiple uses; it was eventually recognized for its historical and architectural importance, leading to restoration efforts in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Research Objectives

This research has two purposes: (1) to study the hybrid architecture and modernity of An Định Palace and (2) to analyze the meaning and symbolism of the motifs at An Định Palace.

Literature Review

Cultural imperialism is a common phenomenon in societies affected by colonial subjugation. Throughout history there are countless examples of a dominant power invading a militarily inferior nation and subsequently imposing their own culture on the native population (Tomlinson 2001). In architecture, this is clearly visible throughout the former territories of the British and French empires, particularly, where European construction styles and

practices supplanted the traditional models (Isa et al. 2022). It was common practice for imperialists to erect grand public buildings in the style of the home nation to act as a marker of hegemony and power (Tian et al. 2024; Metcalf 1989). While local buildings may have retained the traditional architectural style, these large-scale grand constructions were beacons of dominance. Similar instances of hybrid architectural imposition followed by local adaptation can be seen in British India, where Indo-Saracenic architecture blended Mughal and European Gothic features, and in French North Africa, where traditional Islamic forms were fused with art deco motifs (Benghida et al. 2023; Parlewar 2022). At face value, the buildings constructed at Hue in Vietnam are no exception. They provide a tangible example of French presence through their Western architectural styles (Bailey 2022). However, upon closer inspection, there is a Vietnamese nature to the architecture that promotes Eastern construction philosophies in equal measure and is demonstrative of acculturation and hybridity more than cultural imperialism. It is evidence of the Vietnamese rulers preserving their national identity in the face of external oppression. This engagement between colonizer and colonized, where practices were imported and then negotiated by the colonized, showcases a dynamic interaction rather than a mere imposition (Beaudoin 2013).

According to Redfield et al. (1936), acculturation is a phenomenon that occurs when groups of people with different cultures come into long-term and direct contact, causing a change in the original cultural pattern of one or more people, both groups. When Vietnamese and French cultures came into contact with each other, there were changes to each original culture (Britto 2004; Nguyễn 2024). This was no more evident than in Hue, the dynastic capital of the Nguyen empire, where the temporal and spatial identities of the Vietnamese and French merged to create a climate of cultural hybridity (Brocheux 2016; Nguyen 2013). The interaction between Vietnamese and French cultures involved both conscious and unconscious negotiations, influenced by economic and social status, which shaped the extent to which elements from the colonial center were adapted or resisted (Beaudoin 2013; Smith 2007).

Cultural hybridity has been a prevalent academic debate in the field of history and architecture since at least the 1920s (Burke 2009). It is crudely defined as a space where the old and new meet and interpenetrate, producing what Tietze called a mixed style (*Mischstil*) (Burke 2016). Hybrid culture is the accommodation and conciliation of the other (Modood and Dobbernack 2013). Departing from traditional discourses that sharply delineate “East” and “West,” postcolonial theorists have highlighted the ambiguous yet productive spaces of identity arising from hybrid cultural formations (Scriver and Prakash 2007). These formations reflect the complex interactions between the spatial and conceptual frameworks of a globalized contemporary world shaped significantly by colonial histories. However, hybrid architecture is a product of cultural imperialism. The combination of foreign architectural features with indigenous architecture to create a new architecture imbued with identity, superior functionality, and aesthetic is a result of the imposition of the dominant culture through colonial policy (Harris and Myers 2007). It is accepting of modernity and antiquity as valid

artistic methods, depending on the local circumstances (Anderson 2013). Such examples are also evident in Indonesia under Dutch colonial rule, where local Javanese ornamentation merged with neoclassical European layouts, and in the Philippines under Spanish and later American influence, resulting in buildings that straddle multiple aesthetic traditions (Martinez 2024; Setiadi 2022). This understanding encourages a critical view of how colonial power was negotiated through architecture, where even monumental constructions can be seen as sites of resistance rather than mere reflections of colonial authority (Scriver and Prakash 2007).

Modernism, as it relates to architecture, is a nineteenth-century phenomenon, similar to avant-garde movements in art and music. This movement reflects broader shifts in cultural and social paradigms that are central to the understanding of architectural evolution during this period. In this study, the term “modern” is used for cultural and social concepts. The definition of modernity is closely related to Vickers’s interpretation of Balinese modernity (Gantini 2020; Vickers 1996). Thus, modernity encompasses a broader spectrum that includes the expansion of capitalism and the Enlightenment in Europe, signifying a period of profound transformation and questioning of traditional norms. Modernity is, therefore, the desire to change, to create something new, including the work of separating oneself from what has been and drawing inspiration from the past or drawing on history and heritage (Vickers 1996). In addition, from the Vietnamese point of view, modernity means the acceptance of Western values under French occupation and close association with the colonial regime (Huynh 2005). These explanations of modernity are suitable for analyzing the Vietnamese social context during this period and explaining the birth of An Định Palace.

Methodology

This is qualitative research focused on hybrid architecture and the modernity of An Định Palace. Research data was collected from reference documents and field surveys in 2024. The research area was purposively selected as the Complex of Hue Monuments, specifically An Định Palace and its encompassing buildings (notably the Khải Tường building and Cuu Tu Dai Theater). Respondents were also purposively selected and included researchers, government regulators, Hue culture researchers, and local architects and artists. The researcher gathered data from in-depth interviews with these respondents, following strict ethical protocols of anonymity. All informants provided consent for their data to be used in this investigation. The 30-minute interviews were semi-structured and designed to gather information specifically concerned with the features of the palace’s architectural design and its Eastern/Western influences. The findings were supplemented with the lead researchers’ own observations at the research site and findings from the literature. Information related to Cuu Tu Dai Theater was collected from black and white photos taken by the French, which is the only remaining evidence of the structure since its destruction during the Viet Minh’s “scorched earth resistance” campaign in February 1947.

All data was validated using a triangulation method. The researchers compared similar data collected from different sources and through different methods, and in the instance of any anomalies collected further notes from the field. Once collected, the data was categorized according to the aims of the investigation to enable typological analysis and analytic induction. The results of this process are presented in the following sections as a descriptive analysis.

Hybrid Architecture and Modernity in An Đình Palace

An Định Palace is situated among foreign villas and far from the royal palace. After 1884, the French built this area into a European quarter south of the Huong River, with many offices such as the Governor's Palace, Morin Hotel, post office, hospital, bank, train station, and residential villas. This is considered a representative area of Western architecture, affirming the power of the French at the time. Eclectic style choices, from beaux arts nouveau to art deco, followed European preferences. The choice of location to build An Định Palace is an affirmation of the close connection with the French colonialists and their culture. However, in the construction of the palace buildings, the Nguyen Dynasty combined Western architectural preferences with traditional Vietnamese architectural planning principles and Eastern philosophy.

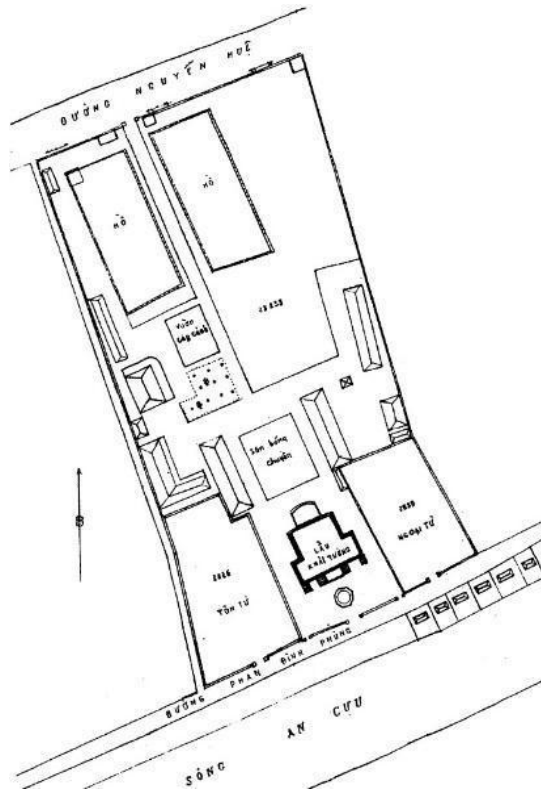


Figure 2: Location Map of An Định Palace Drawn in 1995

Source: An 2008

First, we can see that the An Định Palace project faces south, in front is the An Cuu River (Figure 2). This planning intention satisfies two important elements in Feng Shui.² These are methods of regulating wind and water elements to help guide good air and prevent bad air. South is considered the direction of the gods, the direction that brings prosperity, wealth, and health to the owner and is the direction that helps the building receive adequate light and help the wind circulate best. In the past, emperors often sat in the North and looked toward the South. This was considered as looking toward light and wisdom with the desire to rule the world more wisely. The An Cuu River plays an important role in helping to gather good energy for the project. Similar to other royal villas, An Định Palace was planned and built according to contemporary social criteria: near a town, near a river, and near a highway so that the owner of the project can travel and conveniently access the building.

Layout of the Premises

The overall layout of An Định Palace is based on the previous French/Western street planning. The intention to develop space from a certain nucleus is the clearest and most important manifestation of axial symmetry. Traditional Eastern and Western spaces both comply with this principle. Like many colonial architectural works, An Định Palace has a strictly symmetrical layout of the floor plan and facade through the central axis; the floor plan is divided according to the law to achieve a symmetrical rhythm according to the rules. Convex–concave and solid–hollow, true to Western classical architectural spirit, expresses grandeur and power. The design idea connects a series of architectural items from the boat wharf, palace gate, Trung Lap communal house, front yard, flowerbeds, Khải Tuong building, Cuu Tu Dai Theater, horizontal house, animal cages, lake, palace garden, and back gate. However, the overall spatial layout in each unit of architecture at An Định Palace is dominated by clear Eastern concepts. This can be seen in the location of the Trung Lap Communal House, which is considered a screen to prevent bad air and unfavorable elements from entering the palace. This arrangement shows the religious beliefs of the Hue people in the past. According to author Vinh Cao (2023), the palace has some Feng Shui principles; the palace uses screens to limit the *Minh Duong* (bright space), creating a private space that is not too narrow when compared to the width of the palace.

Another case is the Khải Tuong building, An Định Palace's most important architectural work. Its construction site is rectangular, with an area of 745 square meters. The building has three floors with twenty-two large and small rooms of different sizes depending on location and function. The first floor is divided into seven rooms for receiving guests and entertaining. The second floor includes eight rooms used for dining and bed, and the third floor has seven rooms for worship and bed. The living space is divided on the ground floor, and the first floor is arranged in the form of a three-compartment house with two wings (*ruong*). This popular type

² Feng Shui is a traditional Chinese practice aimed at harmonizing individuals with their environment through the balanced flow of energy (qi). It focuses on spatial arrangement, orientation, and aesthetic principles.

of traditional civil architecture has developed in scale and architectural structure. The long front of the rooms is a buffer space from the yard to the main house, creating a multi-functional transition space that is very mobile and suitable for the weather of Hue, with the function of preventing cold wind in winter and heat radiation in summer. This was brought into the interior to facilitate the movement of owners and servants between separated areas. The area of the rooms is created to promote privacy for the owner when using it. The hallway arrangement on the first Khải Tuong floor makes it easy to travel between bedrooms. The arrangement of bedrooms like this is influenced by Asian culture, which always values mutual relationships and closeness and safety between family members, completely different from the European culture that values individuality and privacy in houses with a common space with paths to all functional rooms.

Architectural Form

The architectural form of An Định Palace is a harmony between the two schools of neoclassical and Asian architecture. The structural appearance of the buildings contains Eastern philosophies; all have a three-part vertical construction style that creates a clear structure, including the foundation, body, and roof. This is the manifestation of the theory of *Tam Tai* with Heaven–Earth–Humanity. Earth is the foundation that brings stability. *Nhan* is the middle body, although as this is the emperor's palace, the body is higher than normal folk constructions. At the top is *Thien*, the peaceful, all-encompassing roof and the most important element (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Architecture of Trung Lap Communal House and Khải Tuong Building with an Apparent Hybrid of Asian and European Styles

Form of Facade

Regarding the overall architectural lines, the structure is still based on the form, symmetrical proportions, and rich symbolism often found in European palaces, creating a feeling of massiveness and grandeur. The combination of traditional and Western features while still

carefully maintaining harmony with nature has created distinctive features in the appearance and layout of An Định Palace. The Western elements are reflected in the construction items, from the division of the premises to the ratio of the dimensions of the building and, in more detail, the windows in which the architects thoroughly applied the principle of proportion, the golden rule in architecture (Figure 4). The goal was to create aesthetics and balance for the details of the project. An easily recognizable hybrid feature is that the main door is a two-story structure built of lime bricks and richly decorated with the art of embossed porcelain and multi-colored glass. The door is built as “three gates”—a type of gate with three paths often found in pagodas or some mansions following traditional Vietnamese architecture but with only one path in the middle. The two sides are used to express parallel sentences and decorations. On both sides of the lower and upper floors are pairs of false pillars and two false roofs. The door’s sides are embossed with images of dragons, phoenixes, unicorns, tigers, celestial lakes (wine gourds), flowers, and leaves, symmetrically paired. The feature also includes architectural standards and palace gate decorations, with decorative round pillars in the Corinthian style where the column caps are decorated with the image of an upside-down lotus leaf assembled from porcelain. According to Benzacier (1955), this gate is far different from Western style because it is inspired by Vietnamese style. Similarly, the Khải Tường building has three floors in the style of a European palace. The front is also elaborately decorated with modern Roman-style motifs interwoven with Oriental royal motifs. Similarly, the Corinthian column cap here is also decorated with images of blooming lotus flowers and leaves in the same embossed style. In Cuu Tu Dai Theater, the four-sided structure of the interior architectural space is formed by large rows of columns designed into Romanesque-style rolling arches. The arches use decorative designs on the architectural surface. In particular, the column system follows the European Doric style but is divided into compartments and arranged with decorative designs inside with functions similar to traditional Hue royal wooden architecture. The idea of using architectural space to form decorative space for the building’s interior is a deliberate hybridization. Three typical works that still exist today show that the idea of breeding two lines of Eastern and Western art is quite successful.

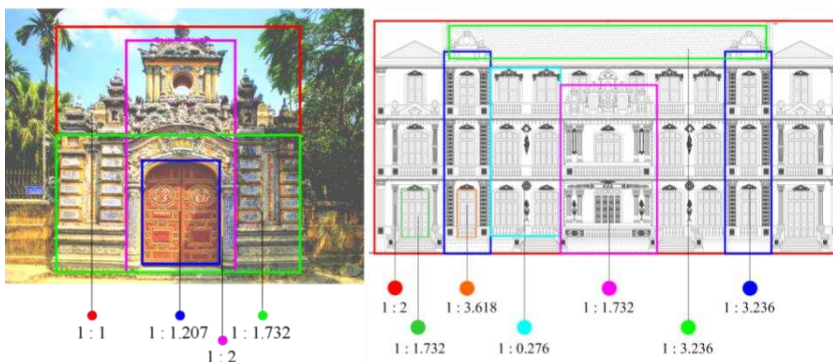


Figure 4: Golden Ratio in the Architecture of the Main Gate and Khải Tường Building Based on the Golden Rectangle

Structure and Construction Materials

An Định Palace uses contemporary techniques and structures. Typically, the Khải Tường building and Cuu Tu Dai Theater have main load-bearing structures made of brick walls, and at small-wide openings, brick arches are used with different styles. It was built mainly with modern imported materials such as lime mortar, cement, iron, and steel mixed with traditional materials (lime, paper, etc.). Henri Gourdon (2017) argues that the use of iron and cement created a great change that made Emperor Khải Định very interested. Therefore, the palace of the emperor and the palace of Van Nien on his mausoleum were all built of reinforced cement (Gourdon 2017). The floor structure uses steel beams to support the concrete floor. An exciting feature is the French–Vietnamese combination in the structure of the building. Although it has the appearance of a European castle, the wooden railings follow the architectural style of a beam house for the roof system. The roof is built in the style of *Trung thiem diep oc*, a typical roof style in Nguyen Dynasty palace architecture, and the roof is tiled according to the traditional *ruong* house technique. This hybridization creates an effective visual connection with the native landscape. In addition, this roofing method also meets the requirements for coping with Hue's tropical monsoon climate. Solutions adapted to the local climate evolved from large-scale awning systems to organizing side corridor spaces with windows. Windows and doors all use shuttered glass, built in the form of rolling domes or half domes. The walls are built thicker to avoid heat from the outside entering the interior space. However, climate adaptation solutions are not truly complete without a large roof system covering the building. Floor tiles adorn the rooms with colorful rosette and geometric patterns made in Vietnam using French technology.

The foundation of effective hybridization between the use of traditional Asian images and lines with the layout and shapes of Western architecture has created a new form, a difference through the combination. This creates harmony and naturalness between the elements. The earlier-mentioned shaping techniques show that the architecture has its own language; although it is based on the main foundation of Western architecture, the incorporation of indigenous components has made the architecture unique and strikingly different from the architecture in France.

Themes and Styles Used in Decorative Architecture

Decorative themes at An Định Palace are mostly Oriental in style, with profound humanistic connotations and specific symbolic meanings. The decorative themes used here have become cultural and aesthetic symbols imbued with philosophy such as the Eight Immortals, the Eight Fruits, the Four Times, the Phoenix Holding a Poem, the Dragon Flanking the Moon, and the Tai Chi Gourd. These are symbols of kingship, ideology of national governance, and Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist philosophical values. They also reflect the wishes and aspirations for longevity, wealth, peace, and the desire for all living things to exist (Nguyen 2006). At An Định

Palace, there are also many Western themes, such as bunches of grapes, vases, flowers, winged angels, and medals. These images are completely new compared to other themes and seem to sink completely into the traditional decorative space (Thong 2019).

The artisans at that time distributed the decorative images here into hidden, embossed, dark, and light patches, making them soft, flexible, and lively. Decorative themes in the fine arts of the Nguyen Dynasty's royal court expressed the spirit and content of Confucianism, but folk artists Vietnamized the decorative themes and styles in a skillful and creative way, thus creating transformations imbued with the essence of the nation's soul, making each image more vivid, intimate, and expressive, making the perception of the topic more diverse, rich, and lively (Binh 2021). The hybrid characteristics of the decoration theme at An Định Palace can be seen where the entire front of the Khải Tường building has been elaborately decorated with Roman architectural motifs mixed with ancient Oriental decorative themes. However, the artistic hybrid characteristics that appear most clearly in the interior of this castle are the mural works that express people's view of the world, spiritual nuances, and aesthetic ideology.

The Khải Tường building is decorated with six hand-painted murals. These paintings are located in the main lobby, the central area of the ground floor of the Khải Tường building. This position in the formal space of the traditional Vietnamese home layout is where the ancestral altar is located, so this is considered a memorial space, a modern type of ancestor worship (Phuong 2022). These frescoes are painted with oil paint directly on the walls and have wooden frames bordered in Baroque style, but interestingly they are carved with Vietnamese themes such as stylized apricot flowers and lotus leaves. The paintings are drawn according to the Western perspective that Vietnamese artists of the early twentieth century absorbed, but also partly combined with the lively perspective of the East. According to Martin Kemirein (2010), the six paintings in Khải Tường Pavilion are the earliest Western-style paintings in Vietnam and the first oil landscape paintings among modern works of Vietnamese fine art.



Figure 5: Three of Six Paintings Hand-Drawn Directly Onto the Wall in a European Perspective, Depicting the Tombs of the Nguyen Dynasty Emperors with Baroque-Style Frames

Another example of artistic hybridization at An Định Palace is the Cuu Tu Dai Royal Theater (Figure 6). Like Khải Tường Pavilion, Cuu Tu Dai was built of reinforced concrete, with a construction area measuring 1,150 square meters, accommodating more than five hundred spectators. According to witnesses still living in the area next to the palace, the design and decoration of the facade of the Cuu Tu Dai was inspired by the Opera House in Hanoi but was designed in a modern style during the Khải Định period. Its interior decoration was similar to Thien Định Palace in Khải Định mausoleum. This means that the walls were embossed with pieces of porcelain and glass, representing traditional Eastern and Vietnamese decorative themes. The unique feature of this project was that Hue's ceramic mosaics had reached the pinnacle of creativity, workmanship, and processing skills to master the expressiveness of the material. In addition, many carved details on door frames and hand-painted decorative motifs on frescoes were inspired by the East but were expressed in the style of wallpaper or furniture of the West. It was a smooth combination of East and West decorative elements, creating unique hybrid images with unique symbolic and artistic values that exude the spirit of an emperor's palace. It can be said that although the decoration theme at An Định Palace is from Vietnamese culture, it was influenced by the Rococo (French) style of decoration.



Figure 6: Interior of Cuu Tu Dai Theater—The Pinnacle of Porcelain Mosaic Art of the Nguyen Dynasty, Destroyed During the Viet Minh's Scorched Earth Resistance Campaign

Source: *Vietnam Times*³

Modernity in An Định Palace

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Vietnam was exploited by Western civilization and colonialists on the path of colonial exploitation. This was an important turning point in the monarchical ideology that had existed in Vietnam for more than ten

³ <https://vietnamtimes.org.vn/for-104-years-hues-anh-Định-palace-continues-to-impress-36681.html>.

centuries, changing the unique position of the Nguyen Dynasty. This impact took place in two directions: the colonial government imposed requirements, and the Hue court changed its own policies to adapt to the requirements of the new context. The establishment of the French protectorate throughout Indochina opened a period of cultural absorption and integration into Vietnamese society, marking an important turning point in the cultural life of the Vietnamese people. The legitimacy of the dynasty, the power of the emperor, and the perception of cultural identity were also strongly influenced by new ideas. Since Khải Định ascended the throne to become the twelfth emperor of the Nguyen Dynasty, he sought to adapt to survive, integrate, and create a new form of royal culture. This was an innovation ahead of its time. The architectural works renovated at that time also had their own style, which can be collectively called the Khải Định period style. Royal decoration began to take on Western decorations with new designs and motifs compared to the traditional decoration of the Hue royal court. During this period, Western architectural techniques and styles gained an official position in Hue architecture and French engineering experience gradually replaced traditional construction methods. However, not all segments of Vietnamese society embraced these Western influences. Interviews revealed that certain conservative mandarins and nationalist scholars viewed such changes as a threat to cultural sovereignty, arguing that adopting French-inspired architectural forms eroded the nation's identity and reflected undue capitulation to colonial power. Likewise, among the local populace, reactions varied: while some welcomed the prestige and modern conveniences of Western styles, others lamented the perceived decline of traditional craftsmanship in favor of foreign aesthetics.

The construction of An Định Palace is a typical case, followed by a number of projects in the royal palace area, such as Kien Trung Palace, Hien Nhon Gate, Chuong Duc Gate, and finally, his tomb. These buildings were built according to European traditions using modern technology and new materials. However, the general layout of the plan, done according to the Feng Shui tradition, is themed with decorative sculptures and ornaments that show Confucian influence⁴. This is a unique phenomenon in Hue architecture of that period. Emperor Khải Định's heir, Emperor Bảo Đại, brought European glory to Hue's architectural complex because he was trained and raised from French education. This reflects the changes that took place in society, royal life, and urbanization in Vietnam in the first half of the twentieth century.

Meaning and Symbolism of Typical Decorative Images

Interviews and discussions with key research respondents revealed that the relationship between decorative motifs in royal architecture and traditional cultural philosophies and concepts in the early twentieth century in Vietnam and Hue, in particular, was influenced by

⁴ Confucian thought emphasizes moral values, hierarchical relationships, and social harmony; in Vietnamese architectural ornamentation, this often manifests through symbolic motifs referencing filial piety, loyalty, and other virtues, as well as symmetrical layouts and balanced, ordered patterns.

international processes, modernization, and East–West cultural exchange. The Nguyen court, headed by Emperor Khải Định, chose to try to maintain the nominal existence of the symbolic monarchy combined with the ideology of modernization. Direct contact with the West and the French before becoming emperor greatly influenced the sense of Emperor Khải Định. Each era has its own art to reflect its spirit. Therefore, studying the meaning of motifs in the architecture of works at An Định Palace is also a way to understand the spirit of the development period (Table 1).

Table 1: Semiotic Analysis of the Decorative Motifs at An Định Palace

<i>Form of Decorative Motif</i>		<i>Meaning</i>	<i>Location</i>
<i>Topic</i>	<i>Motif</i>		
Universe—Nature	Pearl, fire cloud	The creation of all things, the eternal cycle of heaven and earth, a sign of good omen, longevity, happiness, peace	Main Gate
Legendary Animals	Dragon	The symbol of the emperor	Main Gate Trung Lap Pavilion Cuu Tu Dai Theater
	Unicorn	Peaceful, sustainable dynasty with wise emperor	
	Turtle	Yin and yang harmony, sustainability, longevity.	
	Phoenix	Desire for a peaceful life and a peaceful reign	
	Two dragons flanking the moon	The harmony of heaven and earth, yin and yang, symbol of heaven and kingship	
	Unicorn playing with a sphere	Luck, peace	
	Turtle carrying Bagua	A prosperous and happy life	
	Tiger Talisman	Strength, longevity of dynasty, eternity	
	Fish	Wealth and fulfillment	
	Crane	Longevity, good omen	
	Bat	Happiness and longevity	
Tree, Fruit	Four seasons (apricot, orchid, chrysanthemum, pine tree)	Wishing for a noble, elegant life, integration between people, nature, and the universe	Trung Lap Pavilion
	Peach	To be long-lived	
	Pomegranate, Soursop	Crowded, full of children	
	Pear	Success and advancement	
	Gourd fruit	Lucky, full	
	Buddha's hand	Good luck, nice	
	Pumpkin	Prosperous and prosperous	
	Lotus flower, lotus leaf, lotus stem	Morality: pure, untainted by dirt and dust; steadfastness, prosperity, many children	
	Bodhi leaf	Enlightenment	
	Acanthus leaves	Grandeur	
	Artemisia leaf	Happiness, peace, prosperity	
	Jasmine	Luck, fortune, health, and happiness	
	Lemon flower	Elegance, intimacy	
	Orchid	Symbol of compatibility and harmony	
	Cornflower	Well-being	

	Rose	Perfection	
	Peony	Wealth, joy, and happiness	
	Bunch of grapes, grape leaves	Not common in Vietnam, but images of grape vines and leaves were popular decorations in Hue. Characteristics of grape leaves, vines, and tangerine fruit clusters evoke a sense of crowdedness	
Object	Eight treasures: Pipa or Tranh; Hand fan, Book; Flower Basket; Brush; Rhino Horns; Gourd	Wishing for a fulfilling and happy life	Trung Lap Pavilion Cuu Tu Dai Theater
	Stupa	Enlightenment and peace	
	Bottle gourd	Symbol of a magical, prosperous, and living universe	
	Vase of rose	Perfection	
	Ange	Protect	
	Order of The Dragon of Annam “Emperor Khải Định”	Royal symbol	
	Khanh	Reward items, good luck, great blessings	
Characters	The Eight Immortals	Longevity and immortality	Trung Lap Pavilion
Positive-Meaning Chinese Words	Van	Royal wishes: “Endless life”	Main Gate Trung Lap Pavilion Cuu Tu Dai Theater
	Tho		
	Vo		
	Cuong		
	Chinese characters	Couplet, epitaph	
	Auspicious knot	long happy life	
Geometric Pattern: Hoi Van	Mesh patterns come in many shapes, such as diamonds with straight edges or slightly curved edges, hexagons, triangles, and rectangles	Purely decorative patterns	Main Gate Trung Lap Pavilion Khải Tuong Building Cuu Tu Dai Theater
	Rosette pattern		
	The pattern of two diamonds linked together		
	Motifs Hoi Van		

Understanding the original meanings of each decorative motif at An Định Palace is essential, particularly in relation to the specific spaces they adorn. The gourd motif, part of the set of eight jewels and located atop the main gate, symbolizes the welcome of heavenly and earthly auras, termed the Taiji gourd, representing prayers for longevity, luck, and blessings. When positioned in Taoist temple compartments, this motif transforms into the wine gourd of Taoist deities and, within the temple, becomes the gourd jar holding the nectar of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. Such motifs, predominantly traditional with a blend of Western influences, dominate the palace’s decor. Notably, the four sacred beasts—dragon, unicorn, turtle, and phoenix—feature prominently. For instance, the dragon motif on the main gate’s roof architecture, shows two

dragons flanking a symbol of longevity, distinct from the typical solitary dragon playing with pearls or enveloped in clouds (Figure 7). This particular arrangement, where dragons flank the moon rather than the sun, aligns with the yin-yang principles of the I Ching, symbolizing a balanced, enduring, and prosperous life, in harmony with An Định's name, which connotes peace and stability for the emperor and his family. Similarly, the phoenix motif, embodying feminine beauty and virtue, and the unicorn, a symbol of peace and saintly birth, reinforce the emperor's aspirations for a serene and wise rule. The roof of the *Trung Lap* communal house is adorned with twelve dragons, positioned to suggest movement in all directions, embodying the expansive reach and protective nature of the emperor's power (Figure 8). Meanwhile, the Eight Immortals motif, though common in Chinese decor, appears sparingly in Vietnam, suggesting immortality atop the neutral pavilion roof.



Figure 7: Porcelain Mosaic Decorative Details with the Presence of Four Sacred Animals, with Focus on the Image of Two Dragons Flanking the Longevity Symbol



Figure 8: Octagonal Communal House with Twelve Dragons on the Roof

The third floor of the Khải Tường building, which served as the residence for Queen Mother Tu Cung, vividly showcases royal culture through its decorative frescoes and motifs exclusive to the royal family. Notably, the inscription *Van Tho Vo Cuong* (live a hundred years) alongside imagery of the eight treasures articulates a desire for a prosperous and fulfilling life. Similarly, the interior of Cuu Tu Dai Theater is adorned with motifs of four plants (apricot blossom, cymbidium, yellow daisy, and bamboo), symbolizing the four seasons and their corresponding months. This is a common theme in Hue royal architecture that symbolizes the cyclical nature of time and conveys wishes for prosperity and well-being. Moreover, the motif of the eight treasures recurs, echoing the spiritual aspirations of Vietnam's feudal dynasties. Western elements, including grape bunches, assorted floral and leaf designs, vases, and winged angels, are woven into the facade and interior frescoes of the Khải Tường building, blending with traditional Eastern symbols like dragons, phoenixes, and herbal patterns. This hybrid iconography reflects the cultural amalgamation characteristic of the period and embodies Emperor Khải Định's aspirations for a harmonious and contented life amid the challenges of his era.

Conclusion

From this exploration of the hybrid architecture at An Định Palace, it is clear that the unique architectural ideology of Emperor Khải Định left profound, permanent influences on the Hue landscape. This is mirrored with his influence on similar building structures and designs in other architectural works in Vietnam. The designs and layout reflect the artistic, cultural, and archaeological identity of a nation striving to assert its relevance amid colonial oppression. With the political context during his reign and the country's situation, Emperor Khải Định was aware of the weak position in all aspects of the court. Therefore, he innovated a new Vietnamese identity with the acceptance of Western cultural and artistic elements. The hybridity in architecture at An Định Palace is a display of the quintessence of indigenous traditions. It is a lesson in preserving the core spiritual values of a culture by embracing an outside influence. In contrast to the views of Lukito and Miranda (2018) on contested space in Indonesia, An Định Palace serves as a clear example of how hybrid architecture protected local identity, rather than enabling the indigenous population to adopt Western culture. The Vietnamization of Western architecture in Hue was thus a lens through which the Vietnamese monarchy could continue to stamp their national ideology on an increasingly Westernized landscape. Moreover, the carefully selected decorative motifs throughout An Định Palace exemplify how Emperor Khải Định fused indigenous beliefs with Western artistic expressions, embedding deeper cultural meanings and symbolism through these hybrid designs.

Limitations and Recommendations

This investigation is clearly limited by its nature as a specific case study of one site in Vietnam, making the results difficult to generalize from. Consequently, the researchers recommend

further studies into the grand structures of the colonial world to identify the nature of identity protection and hybridity within their design. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that the research methodology and interpretive lens employed here are influenced by the author's own cultural background and theoretical assumptions, which may shape the analyses and conclusions drawn. Nevertheless, this investigation can be used as one marker to demonstrate how the Vietnamese imperial monarchy was more active in the preservation of the national identity than has previously been presumed. This can contribute to similar subaltern studies to provide perspectives and voices of the disempowered under colonial domination. Potential actionable steps for heritage practitioners include documentation and community collaboration to ensure that both tangible and intangible aspects of hybrid structures are preserved. Practitioners should also promote educational outreach to highlight cross-cultural narratives and encourage interdisciplinary collaboration to inform policies that recognize the unique value of these hybrid architectural works.

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Informed Consent

The authors have obtained informed consent from all participants.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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