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## VIETNAMESE BLUE AND WHITE WARE. DECORATIVE MOTIFS AND SYMBOLS

## ABSTRACT

Vietnamese blue and white ware has recently become an object of scientific scholarly interest. In the beginning, this kind of pottery was overshadowed by Chinese products, but later on it experienced a boom in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. In this paper, I analyse the development of ceramics on the territory of modern Vietnam, including its shape, decorative motifs and ornament symbolism while focusing on the unique national character of this category of products.

Despite strong Chinese influences which are clearly visible in the technological borrowings and symbolism of depictions, Vietnamese pottery shows a skilful mixture of tradition and foreign inspirations. Unlike their Chinese counterparts, Vietnamese painting styles clearly give the Vietnamese pottery of this period a unique, individual form. The blue and white vessels are no longer copies or imitations but local products of high artistic value.

**Keywords:** Vietnam, blue and white ceramics, Southeast Asian ceramics, symbols, decorative motifs, Bat Trang, Ly dynasty, Tran dynasty

## Introduction

Studies on Vietnamese ceramics constitute a relatively young strand of research. Eclipsed by the popularity of Chinese ware, Vietnamese ceramics became a subject in western scholarship in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The successive discoveries of shipwrecks in Southeast Asian seas revealed unusual finds of blue and white ceramics dated to the heyday of Vietnamese workshops of the 15<sup>th</sup> century AD. These products are enrapturing in both their technological and artistic aspects. Despite the strong Chinese impact on Vietnamese culture between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century AD, blue and white ware kept its local individuality that manifested itself in numerous dish shapes and decorative motifs. In his book from 1956, John A. Pope states that Vietnamese blue and white pottery cannot be compared with Chinese products because they are completely different.<sup>1</sup> It is clear that Vietnamese workshops drew on Chinese experiences and produced vessels deceptively resembling the Chinese blue and white. However, they also drew from local traditions, forming what can be clearly seen as a distinct group of Vietnamese

ceramics. The beginnings of the Vietnamese ceramic industry can be traced to the Neolithic period. The oldest known pottery came from the Da But culture (ca. 4000–2700 BC). At that time, a simple mixture of clay and sand with organic inclusions was used. The vessels had simple shapes with basic decoration. Over time, the production technology underwent improvements such as more careful clay purification and a higher temperature of firing in closed kilns.<sup>2</sup> In the Iron Age, the production technique reached a very high level. The Dong Son culture, the most representative for this period, produced a lot of new pot shapes with a wide range of functions. A good example of the new types of production forms are zoomorphic vessels. The same period also saw the advent of what is probably the oldest glazed pottery in Vietnam.<sup>3</sup>

Under Chinese occupation (1<sup>st</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> century AD), Vietnamese production improved due to the technological influence of Chinese workshops. This is especially visible in raw material processing and the introduction of pure, almost white clay.<sup>4</sup> The new philosophical systems and religions that arrived from China, such as Confucianism and Taoism also influenced Vietnamese

<sup>1</sup> After Nguyen Long 1999, 111.

<sup>2</sup> May 2000, 18.

<sup>3</sup> May 2000, 32.

<sup>4</sup> Rooney 2013, 23.

culture, including pottery and its decoration. This process inspired local potters who began to create new forms of vessels. Foreign elements were mixed with the native tradition.<sup>5</sup>

Vietnam regained its independence during the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD. The political change in the region coincided with very high quality of pottery production. That period may be considered the golden age of the local ceramic production.<sup>6</sup> Vietnamese ware reflects the great creativity of artisans. The potters started experimenting with different shapes of vessels, adding new elements that were characteristic of the local tradition and the social needs during the Ly and Tran dynasties.<sup>7</sup>

### Vietnamese Blue and White Ware

The first examples of Vietnamese blue and white ware are dated to the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century AD.<sup>8</sup> According to James R. Brow, the earliest vessel was dated to 1450 AD and came from a workshop in the Hai Duong province in northern Vietnam<sup>9</sup> (Fig. 1). Most information about this kind of pottery comes from underwater explorations of shipwrecks found along the coasts of Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, both Vietnamese and Chinese vessels were exported to the same markets. Kerry Long Nguyen suggested that this could be proof of the high quality of Vietnamese production and its unique character.<sup>11</sup>

Blue and white pottery became especially popular during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. It was painted under glaze and fired in high temperatures. The blue pigment was produced using cobalt, imported probably from the Middle East.<sup>12</sup> Vietnamese craftsmen never acquired the skill of porcelain production despite rich sources of kaolin near the city of Hanoi.<sup>13</sup> They produced only occlusive stoneware vessels in palettes of colours ranging from light beige to almost white, with thin vessel walls.<sup>14</sup> Under glaze, the cobalt pigment showed different shades of blue which gave the products their unique character.<sup>15</sup> Vessels of diverse shapes were manufactured, such as plates, large and small bowls, cups, pots, vases, kendi, jugs, and bottles of various sizes and purposes (Fig. 2), from purely decorative forms to simple vessels intended for daily use (table and storage ware). Interestingly, the

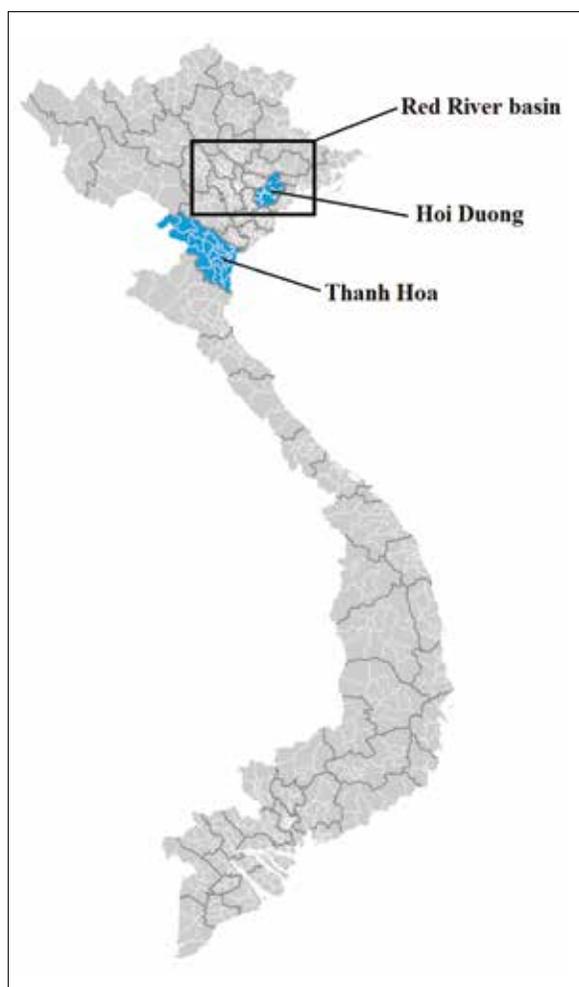


Fig. 1. Thanh Hoa and Hoi Duong provinces (drawing by K. Czapska).

workshops also produced zoomorphic and even rare anthropomorphic vessels<sup>16</sup> (Fig. 3).

### Types of Decoration

The decoration of Vietnamese blue and white pottery is characterised by an unusual richness of motifs. A new decorative direction is clearly visible, inspired by Chinese patterns but filtered through indigenous culture and religion. Motifs related to philosophical systems (Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism) were very pop-

<sup>5</sup> Stevenson, Guy 1997, 149.

<sup>6</sup> Wasilewska-Dobkowska 2001, 49.

<sup>7</sup> Rooney 2013, 23.

<sup>8</sup> Brown 1997, 16.

<sup>9</sup> Brow, Anh 2004, 90.

<sup>10</sup> Osman 2003, 10–11; May 2000, 145.

<sup>11</sup> Nguyen Long 1999, 114.

<sup>12</sup> Guy 1989, 51.

<sup>13</sup> Guy 2000, XVI.

<sup>14</sup> Rooney 2013, 23.

<sup>15</sup> Wasilewska 2009, 28.

<sup>16</sup> May 2000, 168.

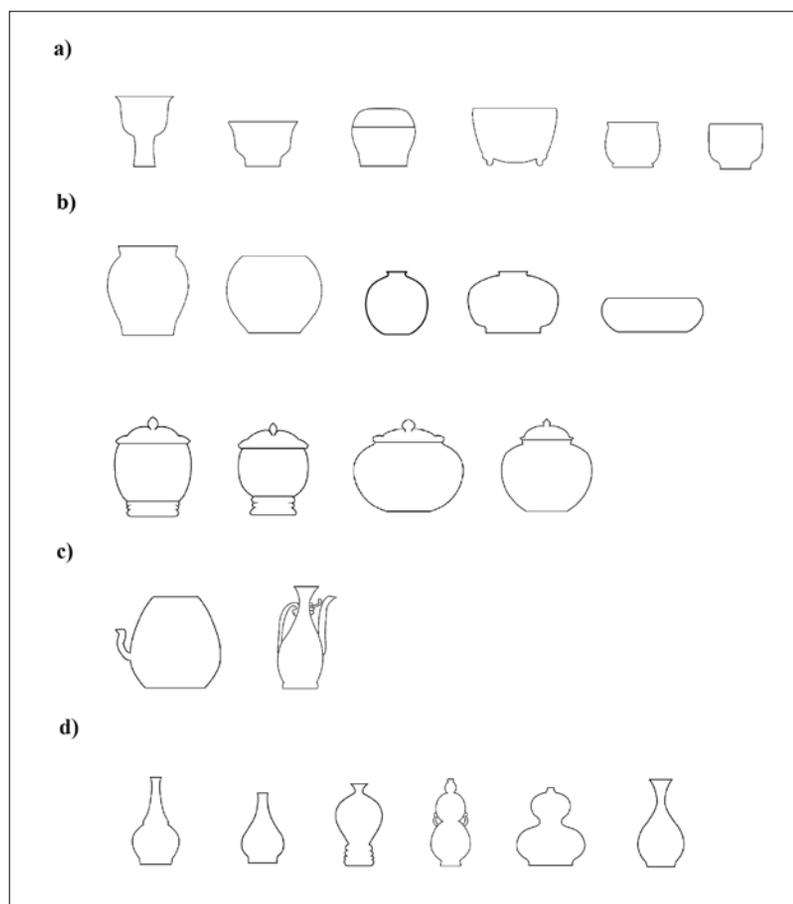


Fig. 2. Shapes of Vietnamese blue and white pottery (schematic examples without scale): a) bowls and cups; b) jars; c) pouring vessels; d) bottles. Drawing by K. Czapka, based on Ysaguirre, Silverman, Paffrath 2000.

ular. It should be pointed out that the decorative motifs on pottery have mostly symbolic meaning. The most interesting attributes of Far Eastern traditions are depictions of many different floristic and animal patterns or landscape elements. When interacting with this pottery, one not only admires the art of the craftsman, but also reads the message and identifies the motifs characteristic for a given workshop.<sup>17</sup>

The decorative motifs of blue and white ware can be divided into floral, faunal, and scenery. Local workshops drew inspiration from surrounding nature. Amongst the floristic depictions, the most popular are many kinds of flowers, such as peony, chrysanthemum and lotus, as well as stylised lotus leaves<sup>18</sup> (Fig. 4). These flowers are characterised by delicate quality, lightness and ease. The lotus is one of the most popular plants in both Vietnam and China. Its symbolism can probably be associated with

Buddhism. The pure lotus flower emerging from water, scented and simple in shape,<sup>19</sup> referred to the teachings of Buddha – his pureness, goodness and glare.<sup>20</sup> Another popular flower is peony. It is depicted in decorations with jagged leaves, coiled or in controlled disarray. The flower is a sign of richness and courtliness according to Chinese symbolism.<sup>21</sup> The peony was adapted as a decorative motif of Vietnam from the mighty neighbour, but its meaning changed slightly: it symbolises happiness and success.<sup>22</sup> Although these flowers have a clear connection to Buddhism, they were present in the natural landscape of Vietnam during the discussed period, which is confirmed by the sceneries depicted on vessels (Fig. 5). As can be seen in Figure 5, a crane is flying over a clearing covered by plenty of lotus and peony flowers. There is a duck nearby. This kind of scenery can symbolize the love of lovers.<sup>23</sup> Above, just beside the flowers mentioned earlier,

<sup>17</sup> Nguyen Long 2004, 96–101.

<sup>18</sup> Wasilewska-Dobkowska 2001, 50.

<sup>19</sup> Eberhard 2007, 137–138.

<sup>20</sup> Adkinson 2009, 377; Kopalinski 2007, 202–204; Ronnberg, Martin 2010, 158.

<sup>21</sup> Eberhard 2007, 195–196.

<sup>22</sup> Wasilewska 2009, 27.

<sup>23</sup> Eberhard 2007, 101.

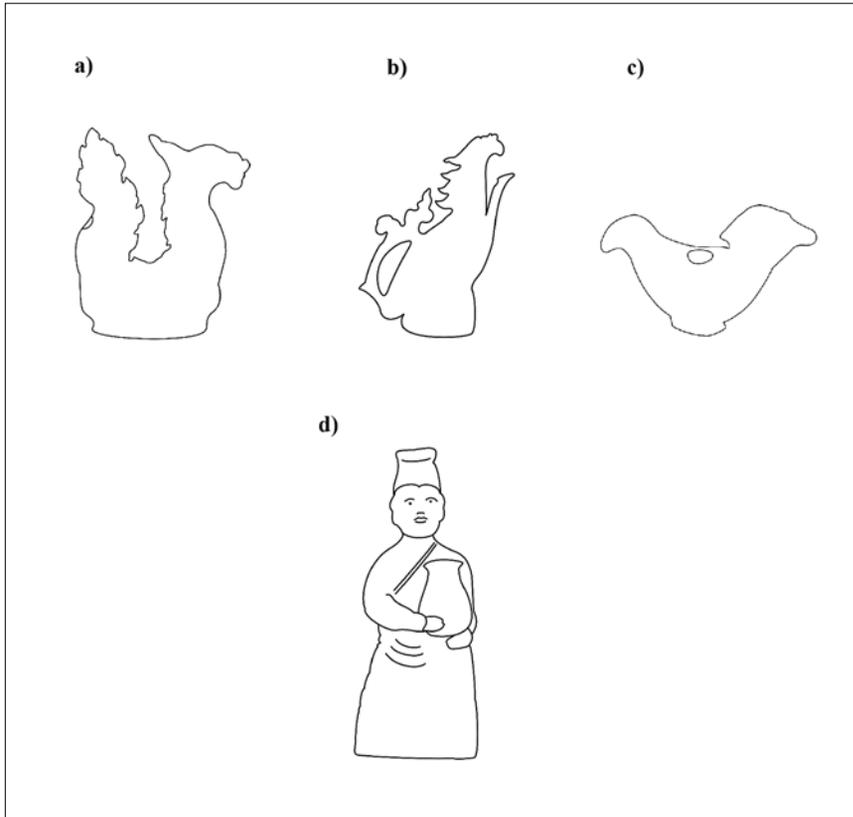


Fig. 3. Animal-shaped and figurative blue and white pottery (schematic examples without scale): a) dragon ewer; b) phoenix ewer; c) bird-shaped pouring vessel; d) male figurine. Drawing by K. Czapska, based on Ysaguirre, Silverman, Paffrath 2000.

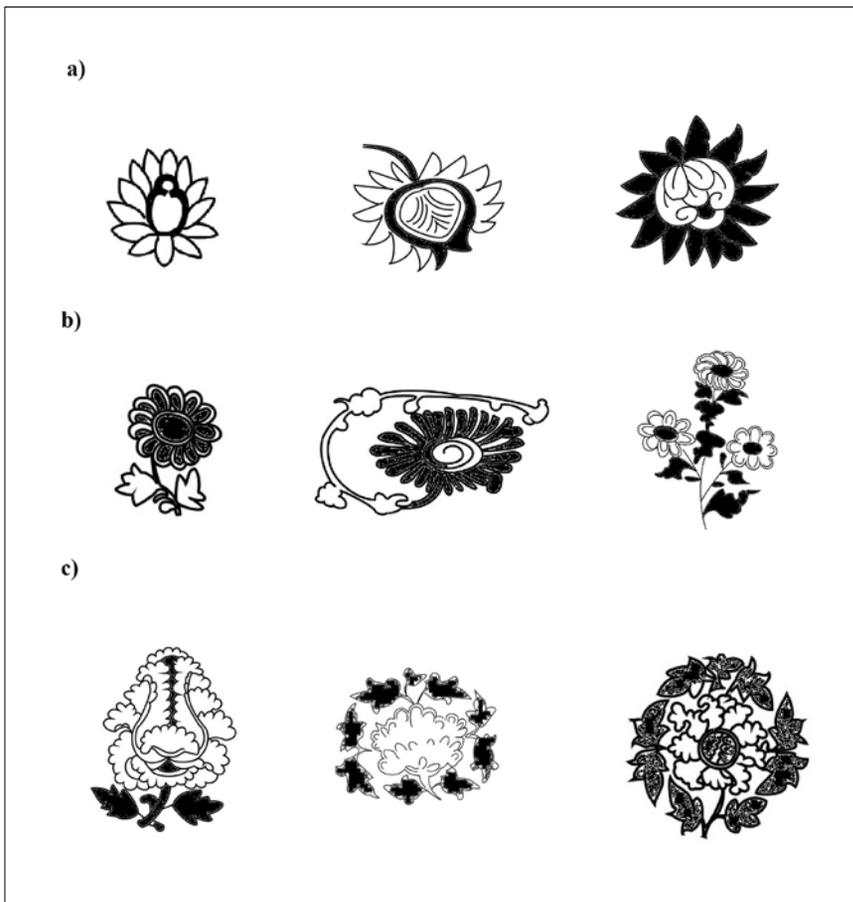


Fig. 4. Floral decorative motifs: a) lotus flowers; b) chrysanthemum flowers; c) peony flowers. Drawing by K. Czapska, based on Ysaguirre, Silverman, Paffrath 2000.

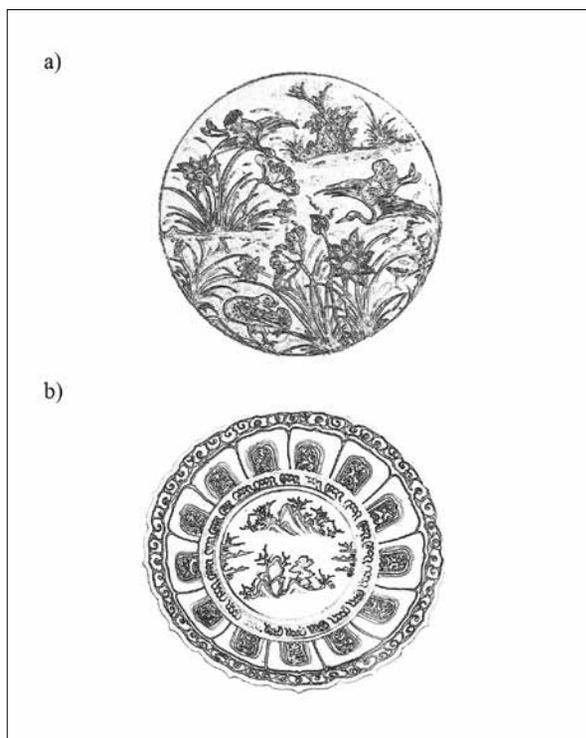


Fig. 5. Landscape decorative motifs. Drawing by K. Czapska, based on Ysaguirre, Silverman, Paffrath 2000, XV (a); May 2000, 172 (b).

a chrysanthemum flower can be seen. This is a plant that exists in Vietnamese nature and has pure Far Eastern origin. Farmed in China, it was later adopted further to the east, in Japan, followed by Vietnam to the south and later on, Europe. As a symbol, it was associated with Japan and the imperial family. In Chinese culture, the chrysanthemum is associated with seasons. It is depicted on porcelain as a synonym for autumn, however it is mostly connected with longevity and affluent life.<sup>24</sup>

Depictions of fauna are different. In Vietnamese decorative motifs, the images of mythological animals adopted from Chinese culture or naturally existing in the local environment are clearly depicted. Potters imitated the surrounding world by placing small birds or common wild ducks or geese among tree leaves on the vessels. The birds are usually presented in their natural sceneries. They can also be seen amongst lotus and peony flowers, perceived as symbols of richness and splendour.<sup>25</sup>

A landscape itself is not a new motif in Far Eastern art. In the Chinese language, a landscape – *shanshui* (山水)

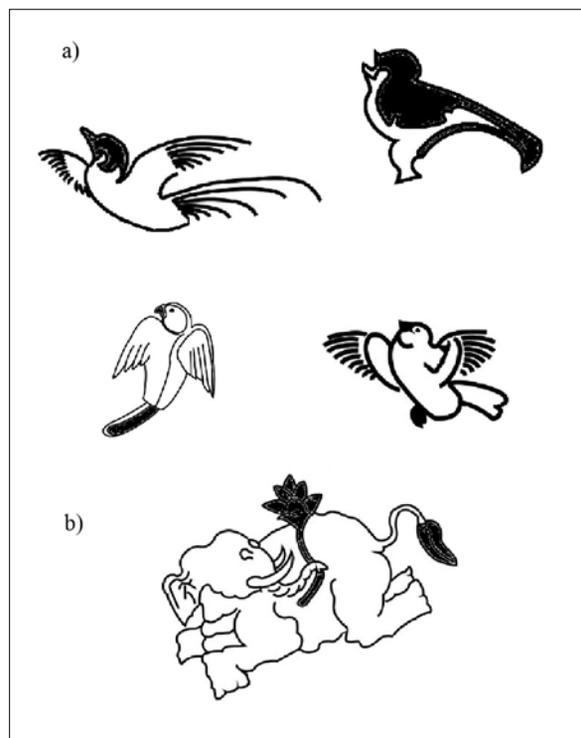


Fig. 6. Animal decorative motifs: a) birds; b) elephant. Drawing by K. Czapska, based on Ysaguirre, Silverman, Paffrath 2000.

水) – is translated as mount and water. These two elements symbolise Space and all together refer to Taoist philosophy.<sup>26</sup> When depicted on pottery, landscape motifs consist of marine-mountainous sceneries but also more common, mundane motifs of fields and gardens.<sup>27</sup>

There are also some motifs typical for blue and white pottery but unknown in Chinese art of this period. A good example is the peacock, a long-tailed bird considered as the symbol of the nation. In Chinese literature, this bird is described as The Bird of the Viets.<sup>28</sup> For the Vietnamese nation, it was also a symbol of their fight for independence and victory over Chinese domination.<sup>29</sup> In general, the symbol of a bird in Eastern beliefs is strongly associated with bringing happiness.<sup>30</sup> This is why people were pleased to be surrounded by these depictions: it was not only nice to the eye, but also acted as a talisman (Fig. 6).

Another little-known motif in 15<sup>th</sup>- and 16<sup>th</sup>-century AD China was the elephant (Fig. 6). In Vietnam, it became a popular theme under the rule of the early Ly dynasty.<sup>31</sup> The elephant was depicted on underglaze paint-

<sup>24</sup> Hall 2007.

<sup>25</sup> Eberhard 2007, 217–218.

<sup>26</sup> Lurker 2011, 116.

<sup>27</sup> Nguyen Long 1999, 116–121.

<sup>28</sup> May 2000, 58.

<sup>29</sup> May 2000, 58–60.

<sup>30</sup> Kopalinski 2007, 343.

<sup>31</sup> May 2000, 58.

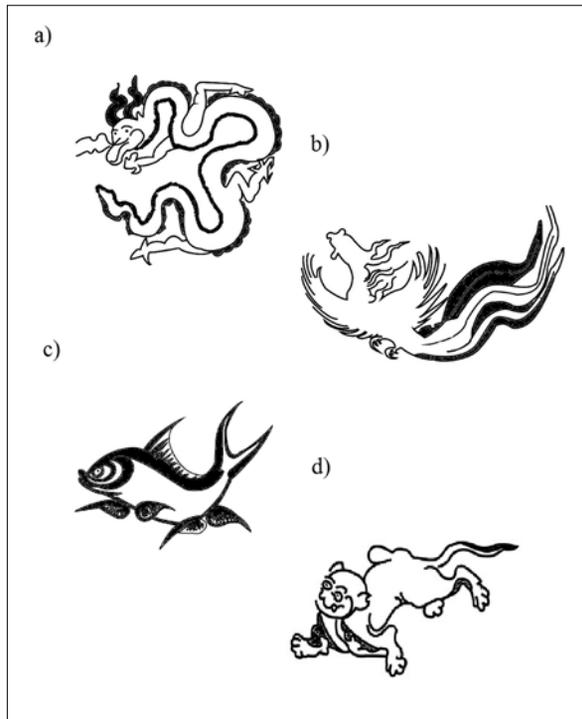


Fig. 7. Mythical animal decorative motifs: a) dragon; b) phoenix; c) fish; d) tiger. Drawing by K. Czapska, based on Ysaguirre, Silverman, Paffrath 2000.

ings. Figurines of elephants were also created, including ceramic miniatures.<sup>32</sup> This animal is strictly connected with Buddhism. It probably came to Vietnam from India through Thailand, a country that remained under the strong influence of Indian culture. As a decorative motif in blue and white pottery, it was a sacred animal symbolising strength and wisdom.<sup>33</sup>

Besides animals living in the local environment, the decorative motifs also include some mythological creatures, such as the phoenix, dragon or tiger (Fig. 7). These are amongst the so-called Eight Mythic Animals, alongside the unicorn, turtle, fish, bat and crane.<sup>34</sup>

The dragon is one of the most popular themes in Far Eastern culture. It probably appeared in Tonkin under Chinese rule, as one of the numerous influences absorbed from the culture of Vietnam's northern neighbour.<sup>35</sup> Even in its own symbolism, the dragon evokes royal authority, alluding to the Emperor, which would

confirm the Chinese roots of this motif.<sup>36</sup> An interesting fact is that in Vietnamese tradition, the word 'dragon' is present in the original name of the capital, Thang Long, which can be translated as 'the Town of the Dragon Flying Upwards'<sup>37</sup> or 'Ascendant Dragon'.<sup>38</sup> This name was created in the 11<sup>th</sup> century AD when the Ly dynasty (called The Late One) bestowed the status of capital on present-day Hanoi. The society of the Viets viewed the dragon as a symbol of power and protection and hence it became a very popular theme for tattoos placed on the chests of male warriors as an auspicious motif. On pottery, the dragon is depicted with a long body, dangerous jaws, sharp claws and two-horned head (Fig. 7).

Very similar types of vessels also bear depictions of the phoenix. This creature is identified with the homeland and national pride and evokes symbolic associations very similar to those of a peacock.<sup>39</sup> The phoenix is the second most popular mythological animal after the dragon represented on pottery.<sup>40</sup> Very importantly, the Asian phoenix has no connection with the European one. This symbol came from the Chinese bestiary of magic animals. It was imaged as a bird with wide wings, a long torso and very abundant feathering. It was associated with the delicacy and grace of women and thus became an attribute of femininity and also the Empress herself.

The tiger is also a very frequent decorative motif on vessels. Images of this animal are often surprising. In the eyes of the artists of that time, it was a massive, slightly grotesque creature with long, dangerous teeth. With this representation in mind, it is hard to compare the Tonkin tiger with the august and noble image of the wild cat (Fig. 7). The potters were probably trying to capture something that they had never seen or knew little about. The tiger appears very frequently in Vietnamese art, especially under Chinese rule. Despite its unusual portrayal, the tiger had an important function as a symbol of secular power and courage.<sup>41</sup>

Amongst the appearing motifs, there are also fishes and turtles. They first came from Chinese culture where fish (魚) *yu* is a homophone of (裕) *yu* – rich, abundant. The fish as decoration is used on plates or other tableware, where it serves as a symbol of abundance and prosperity.<sup>42</sup> Turtles take the shape of small figurines which are symbols of longevity and wisdom in Vietnamese tradition.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Catalogue 1989.

<sup>33</sup> Ronnberg, Martin 2010, 264–267.

<sup>34</sup> Müllerová 2009, 13.

<sup>35</sup> Müllerová 2009, 15.

<sup>36</sup> Eberhard 2007, 234–235.

<sup>37</sup> Müllerová 2009, 15.

<sup>38</sup> Guy 2000, XVIII–XIX.

<sup>39</sup> Guy 2000, XVIII–XIX.

<sup>40</sup> Very interestingly, 'phoenix' is a European name. This is why it is not the same creature – only the phonetic sound, *feng* (鳳), is similar. The current Western use of the word stems from the lack of a better term for this magic bird.

<sup>41</sup> Müllerová 2009, 21.

<sup>42</sup> Müllerová 2009, 19.

<sup>43</sup> Kopalinski 2007, 514.

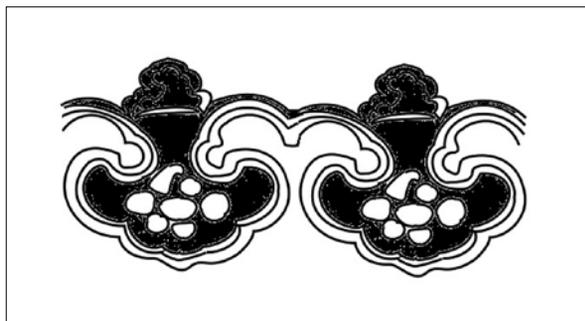


Fig. 8. *Ruyi* motif. Drawing by K. Czapska, based on Ysaguirre, Silverman, Paffrath 2000.

A very interesting pattern depicted on blue and white pottery at the time of the late Le dynasty is a motif of *ruyi* (Fig. 8). This symbol is associated with Chinese Buddhism. In Chinese, *Ruyi* (如意) means literally “as one wishes”. This phrase appears in the auspicious inscriptions from the Han dynasty in China.<sup>44</sup> In Vietnamese decorations, it was adopted from the northern neighbours. According to Jochen May, this symbol can be explained as fortune, as everything supposed to happen according to the will of the interested person.<sup>45</sup>

### Summary

An analysis of the depictions on blue and white Vietnamese ware makes it apparent that their symbolism is an inseparable element of Vietnamese culture. The fact

that some of the decorative elements were borrowed from China does not downgrade the richness of Viets’ culture. The symbolic imaging of nature became a part of the local tradition. The decorative motifs used in pottery workshops can be clearly divided into national symbols (lotus flower, peacock, phoenix), symbols of power and strength (chrysanthemum, dragon, tiger, *ruyi*),<sup>46</sup> beauty (peony, landscape), and prestige (bird, elephant, fish, turtle). This reflects the very rich imaginative potential of the artists and their ease of creation expressed especially in the pottery of that period. Admittedly, the majority of symbols used in ceramic paintings are adopted from Chinese culture. However, it is possible to notice differences in the stylistic rendering of graphical visualisations. The ornithological themes are an example of Vietnamese artists’ imagination. The artists painted native birds with a characteristic style, capturing all details with great accuracy. Moreover, not all of the symbols used in the decorative motifs on Vietnamese blue and white have Chinese roots. Both the peacock and the elephant have a purely Southeast Asian origin. These examples provide additional evidence that Vietnamese workshops were mixing the local tradition with adapted technology of ceramic production.

The potters successfully combined form with paintings, forging their own tradition associated with the elements of the popular Buddhist cultural current. The result is a product of high artistic and aesthetic value. The words of Kerry Nguyen Long are undoubtedly true: although studies on blue and white Vietnamese ware are still ongoing, it certainly gained its own individuality and national character.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Williams 2006, 330.

<sup>45</sup> May 2000, 150.

<sup>46</sup> These symbols are auspicious, similarly to the fish, turtle and bat.

<sup>47</sup> Nguyen Long 1999, 126.

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