



## Decorative Art at Hoi Khanh Pagoda Ho Chi Minh City Vietnam: Characteristics and Values

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**ABSTRACT:** Decorative art at Southern Vietnamese temples is an important element in the structure of Vietnamese Buddhist art, reflecting the cultural, spiritual, and aesthetic values of the community. Hoi Khanh Temple, located in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam (formerly Binh Duong province), built in 1741, is one of the typical Buddhist structures with a rich system of decorative patterns, influenced by traditional Vietnamese art, Chinese, Cham, and Indian cultures, and the Mahayana Buddhist art of the Southern region. This study aims to analyze the sculptural characteristics, aesthetic value, cultural significance, and artistic symbols in the decorative patterns at Hoi Khanh Temple, based on the integration of theoretical foundations from aesthetics, art history, semiotics, regional cultural studies, and theories of cultural exchange and transformation.

The research methodology includes field surveys, description, motif classification, sculptural analysis, regional comparisons, and the application of interdisciplinary methods between art history, ethnology, history, and cultural studies. The research results show that the decorative art of Hoi Khanh Pagoda possesses unique characteristics such as harmonious composition, exquisite carving techniques, widespread use of motifs of mythical creatures, flowers, and Buddhist symbols; and the localized cultural exchange creating a distinctive decorative style of the former Binh Duong region.

This research not only contributes to supplementing the theoretical basis of Southern Vietnamese Buddhist decorative art but also provides important documentation for heritage preservation and the promotion of traditional art values in the current context.

**KEYWORDS:** Artistic characteristics, Artistic values, Decorative art, Hội Khánh Pagoda, Ornamentation (motifs), Southern Vietnamese fine arts.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Decorative art in Vietnamese religious architecture, especially in temples in the South, is a field that deeply reflects the cultural life, beliefs, and folk aesthetics. In this context, Hoi Khanh Temple in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam (formerly Binh Duong province) stands out as a work of exceptional value in terms of history, architecture, and art. Built in 1741, the temple has undergone numerous renovations and developments, becoming an important Buddhist center of Binh Duong province in particular and the Southeast region in general.

The decorative patterns at Hoi Khanh Temple are rich, diverse, and highly symbolic, demonstrating a blend of traditional Vietnamese art, local cultural elements, and influences from regional art forms such as Chinese, Cham, and Indian. Beyond their aesthetic function in architectural spaces, decorative motifs also reflect the worldview, philosophy of life, and spiritual beliefs of the people of Binh Duong throughout various historical periods.

However, despite their significant cultural and artistic value, the decorative art at Hoi Khanh Pagoda has not been systematically and thoroughly studied. Existing documents mainly focus on the history of Buddhism in Binh Duong province, architecture, or general descriptions of the pagoda, while analysis of the artistic characteristics, carving styles, symbolic meanings, and aesthetic value of the decorative patterns remains limited. This highlights the need for a comprehensive study to identify, classify, analyze, and interpret the decorative art at Hoi Khanh Pagoda from an art-study perspective combined with interdisciplinary approaches.

This paper is developed based on the application of many important theoretical systems, including aesthetics, art studies, cultural semiotics, regional cultural theory, and theory of cultural exchange and transformation. These theories not only help to clarify the aesthetic nature and symbolic meaning of decorative motifs, but also contribute to explaining the context of formation, the mechanism of localization, and the development of decorative art in the cultural and religious life of the local people.



For the above reasons, the paper aims to: (1) identify the system of decorative patterns at Hoi Khanh Pagoda; (2) analyze the characteristics of their form and aesthetic value; (3) explain the mechanism of cultural exchange and the factors influencing the visual language; and (4) affirm the cultural and artistic value of the decorative art of Hoi Khanh Pagoda in the context of Southern Vietnamese Buddhism. This research is not only of academic significance but also has practical value for the conservation, restoration, and promotion of cultural heritage in Binh Duong province in particular and Vietnam in general.

## 2. CONTENT

### 2.1. Literature Review

#### Research on Decorative Art and Buddhist Architecture

The works focus on surveying decorative arts at Vietnamese religious establishments, including pagodas, communal houses, temples, and shrines. Classic works such as *Les Arts Décoratifs au Tonkin* (Bernanosse, 1922), *L'Art Annamite* (Gravelle, 1925), or *L'Art de l'Annam* (Gourdon, 1932) have documented the traditional Vietnamese pattern system in religious architecture, laying the foundation for art studies on Vietnamese decorative arts. More recent studies, such as Bui Ba Nguyen Khanh's "Traditional Decorative Arts on Indochinese-style Architecture in Saigon" (2022), show the connection between decorative arts and the cultural and historical context of each period. Although the study did not directly survey Hoi Khanh Pagoda, it provides a suitable morphological-sculptural approach to analyzing the decorative motifs in this research. However, most works in this group are general descriptions, rarely delving into the sculptural language, artistic characteristics, or symbolic value of each motif, especially in the cultural context of Binh Duong.

#### Research on Hoi Khanh Pagoda and Buddhism in Binh Duong Province

Works by Thich Tue Thong such as "Outline of Buddhism in Binh Duong" (2000), "History of Buddhism in Binh Duong" (2015), and "Pagodas in Binh Duong: Past and Present" (2022) provide important data on the history of formation, architecture, and cultural value of Hoi Khanh Pagoda. However, these works focus more on the historical-religious aspect than on the artistic analysis of the decorative motifs.

Some documents mention Hoi Khanh Pagoda at the level of images, descriptions, or introductions, but no studies have delved deeply into the artistic characteristics of its decoration, visual language, carving style, or the symbolic meaning of its pattern system. This is a crucial scientific gap that this thesis aims to address.

#### Research on Aesthetics, Art Studies, and Semiotics

In the textbook "Aesthetics" (Nguyen Hong Dao, 2015), the author presents concepts and principles of beauty, art, and the relationship between art, culture, and society. M. CaGan's "Morphology of Art" (2004) provides a language for analyzing the elements of form, lines, composition, materials, and color – core components in the study of decorative art. Documents on semiotics and symbolism help decipher the spiritual and philosophical meaning of motifs such as lotus, dragon, phoenix, rosette, and Dharma wheel. These studies have built a solid academic foundation for the analysis of form and the decoding of symbolism.

#### Research on Southern Vietnam's culture and cultural transformation

Interdisciplinary documents in the fields of cultural studies, ethnology, and local studies help explain the context of the formation of the decorative art of Hoi Khanh Pagoda. They show that the Binh Duong region was influenced by the cultural exchange between Vietnam, China, Champa, and India. Decorative art is a product of the process of cultural transformation, localized to suit the beliefs and aesthetic sensibilities of the people of Southern Vietnam. These studies provide a foundation for explaining the diversity, flexibility, and rich symbolism of the patterns in Hoi Khanh Pagoda.

Through the synthesis of these studies, it can be affirmed that: There is no in-depth, comprehensive study on the decorative art at Hoi Khanh Pagoda, especially analyzing motifs, styles, and visual language. Existing works have not delved deeply into explaining the cultural and symbolic meaning of the patterns within the cultural context of Binh Duong. There is a lack of comparative research on the decorative art of Hoi Khanh Pagoda with other pagodas in Southern Vietnam. There are no studies applying aesthetic theory, art history, semiotics, regional culture, and cultural assimilation to systematically analyze the system of decorative patterns. This gap clearly defines the novelty and contribution of the research: providing an in-depth look at the decorative art of Hoi Khanh Pagoda, with an interdisciplinary approach and solid theoretical foundation.

From the overview analysis, the paper identifies the research direction: Focusing on the sculptural characteristics of the decorative pattern system; examining the symbolic semantics, aesthetic value, and cultural role; explaining decorative art as a product of



cultural exchange and assimilation; affirming the position of Hoi Khanh Pagoda in the map of Buddhist art in Southern Vietnam. This direction ensures new, unique, and scientifically significant contributions.

## 2.2. Research Methods

The study of decorative art at Hoi Khanh Pagoda requires a combination of specific methods from art studies and an interdisciplinary approach from cultural studies, history, ethnology, and religious studies. This paper uses the following methodological system:

**The method of synthesizing documents:** This method is used to collect, classify, and synthesize documents related to decorative art, art studies, aesthetics, semiotics, Southern Vietnam culture, and the history of Buddhism in Binh Duong. Data is inherited from domestic and international research that works on traditional decorative art, pagoda architecture, and art theory. From this, a solid theoretical foundation is built and a suitable approach for the research is determined.

**Field research method (field survey):** The field research method plays a central role in the study, implemented at Hoi Khanh Pagoda to collect direct data on architectural space, layout of the main hall, ancestral hall, and items preserving decorative patterns. The decorative pattern system includes motifs of dragons, phoenixes, lotuses, rosettes, mythical creatures, geometric patterns, relief panels, decorative bands on columns, beams, and decorative panels... Materials (wood, cement relief, gilded paint...), carving and relief techniques through different historical periods.

**Descriptive and analytical method of form:** This is a specific method of art studies, used to analyze in detail the system of patterns according to the following elements: Shape – lines – masses – composition; Proportion – rhythm – visual movement; Color – material – technique. This method helps identify the artistic style, aesthetic characteristics, and structural form of each motif. Combined with the theoretical framework of aesthetics and semiotics, this method also allows for the in-depth analysis of the symbolic and aesthetic value of the patterns.

**Comparative analysis method:** To clearly identify indigenous and culturally influenced elements, the research proceeds as follows: Comparing decorative patterns at Hoi Khanh Pagoda with those in pagodas in Southern, Central, and Northern Vietnam. Comparing the artistic style with influenced art forms such as Chinese, Cham, and Indian cultures.

**Comparing motifs according to historical periods (1741 – 1868 – 1991)** to identify changes in style, materials, and carving techniques. The comparative method helps clarify the uniqueness of the decorative art at Hoi Khanh Pagoda in relation to Southern Vietnamese Buddhist art.

**Semiotic Method:** Based on the theory of cultural semiotics, the study deciphers the symbolic meaning of decorative motifs, including Buddhist symbols: the Dharma wheel, lotus flower, and rosette. Folk symbols – the four mythical creatures: dragon, phoenix, unicorn, and tortoise. Plant, animal, and geometric motifs carrying spiritual, aesthetic, and feng shui meanings. Semiotic analysis helps identify the deeper meaning of each motif within its historical, cultural, and religious context.

**Interdisciplinary Approach:** As emphasized in previous studies, the decorative art at Hoi Khanh Pagoda can only be fully understood when placed within the cultural, historical, and social context of Binh Duong province. Therefore, the study combines: Art Studies: analyzing the form and artistic style. History: clarifying the context of the formation of architectural and decorative periods. Cultural Studies: explaining the process of cultural exchange between Vietnamese, Chinese, Cham, and Indian cultures. Ethnology: exploring the relationship between motifs and the spiritual life of the community. This approach ensures comprehensiveness, objectivity, and scientific rigor in the research.

**Interpretation method:** The interpretation method is used to: Deeply understand the symbolic meaning of patterns in the religious context. Explore the worldview, philosophy of life, aesthetics, and underlying principles embedded in each motif. This method is particularly useful when studying abstract or highly symbolic elements in Buddhist art.

## 2.3. Artistic Characteristics of Decorative Art in the Main Hall of Hoi Khanh Pagoda

The artistic decoration at Hoi Khanh Pagoda is considered a rich system of patterns, reflecting the culmination of traditional visual arts and cultural influences from various historical periods.



Figure 1. The Main Hall of Hoi Khanh Pagoda (Source: phatgiao.org.vn)

### 2.3.1. Characteristics of Form and Craftsmanship

The decorative patterns in the main hall are analyzed through their formative elements such as shape, lines, composition, color, material, and execution techniques. Regarding craftsmanship: Historical documents record the skill of local artisans. In particular, Hoi Khanh Pagoda stands out with: The Eighteen Arhats' relief panels: Created in the year Tan Dau (1921), depicting 18 Arhats in a very unique way. Exquisite carving technique: The carvings on the altar, created in the year At Suu (1925), demonstrate exquisite detail. Unique assembly technique: The "Four Seasons" relief panel attached to the two columns in front of the main hall is a unique characteristic of the veteran artisans of Thu Dau Mot. The construction of the relief panels according to the mold, cut and assembled at right angles, shows the skillful carving technique.

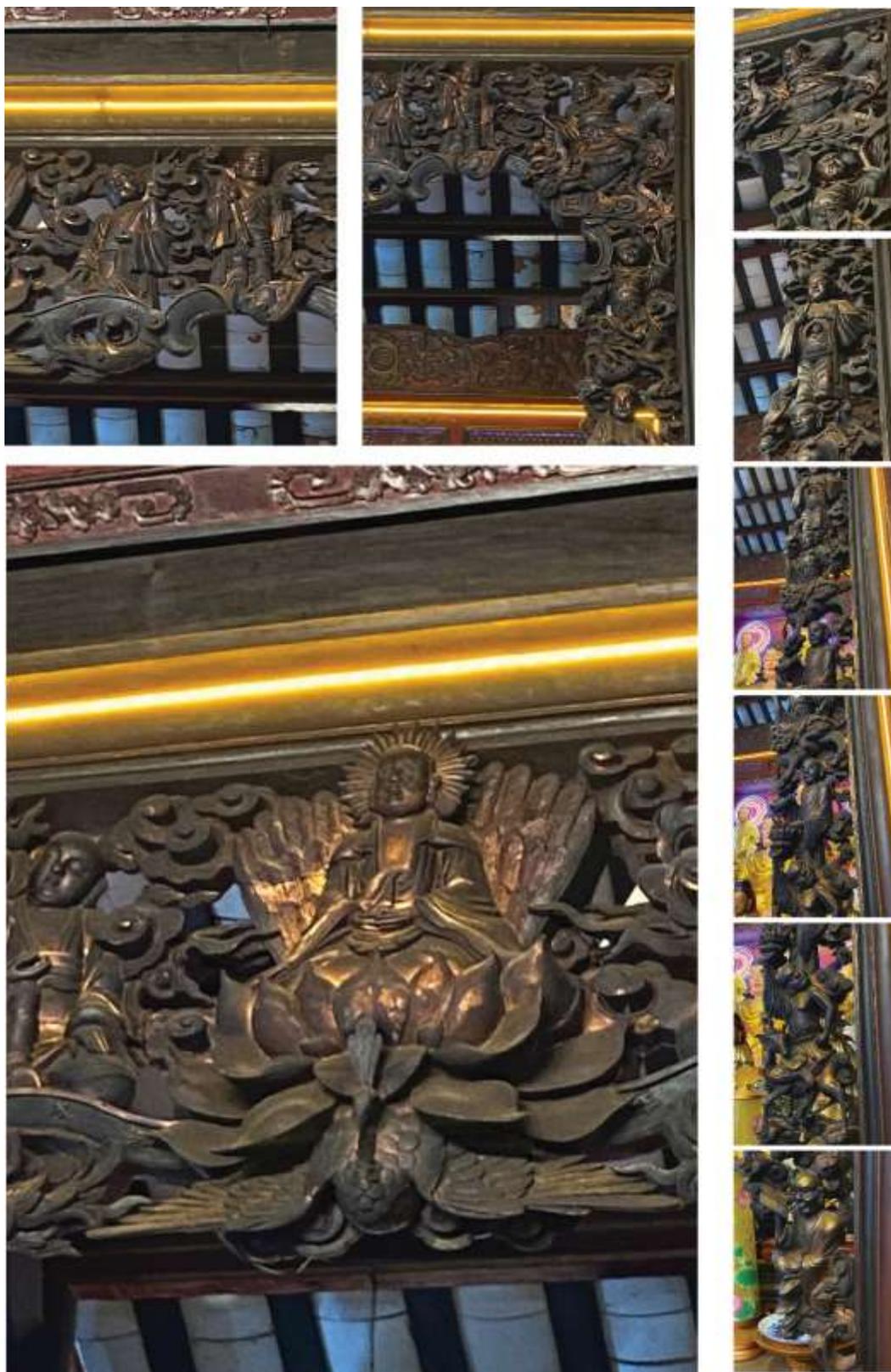


Figure 2. Detail of the Right Section of the Eighteen Arhats Wooden Screen

### 2.3.2. Stylistic Characteristics and Composition

The decorative art at Hoi Khanh Pagoda bears the strong imprint of a style combining court and folk art of Southern Vietnam. The patterns use a soft, lively, and highly symbolic visual language. The layout is flexible, as evidenced by the rich decorative motifs. The patterns are carefully studied to ensure harmony with the surrounding architectural space and landscape.

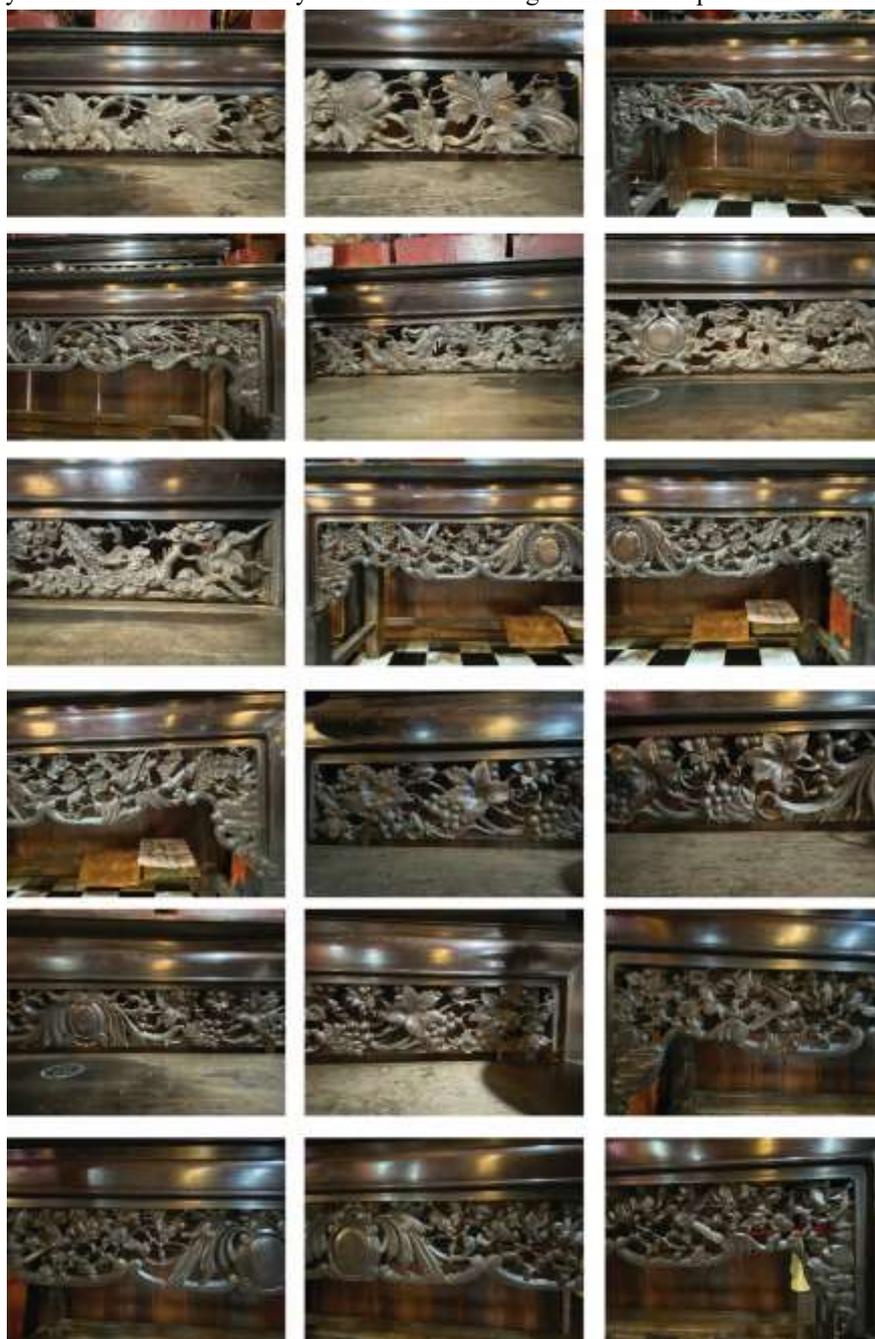


Figure 3. Decorative Detail of the Arhat Altar at Hoi Khanh Pagoda

### 2.3.3. Cultural Factors and Acculturation

The decorative art at Hoi Khanh Pagoda is the result of a long process of cultural exchange and adaptation between the local communities (Vietnamese, Chinese, and Cham) under the influence of Mahayana Buddhism and traditional Eastern cultures (India,



China). Although absorbing the essence of foreign art, the decorative art at Hoi Khanh Pagoda is not a mechanical copy but rather a selective and localized form, creating multi-layered motifs. The rich motifs include dragons, unicorns, turtles, phoenixes, lotus flowers, vines, patterns, the four seasons, and folk figures such as bats holding coins and cranes in attendance.

## 2.4. Aesthetic and Cultural Value of Decorative Patterns

The decorative patterns at the main hall of Hoi Khanh Pagoda are not only aesthetic elements but also play an important role in expressing thoughts and beliefs.

### 2.4.1 Aesthetic Value

The decorative art at Hoi Khanh Pagoda is the culmination of folk art, Buddhist spirit, and local cultural identity. Furthermore, the patterns reflect the aesthetic sensibilities and consciousness of the Southern Vietnamese community, and are a subtle combination of Vietnamese folk art and regional cultural elements. Moreover, the application of Aesthetic Theory helps to define the aesthetic value of the patterns not only in technique but also in their ability to evoke emotions, aiming for timeless beauty. According to aesthetic philosophy, the beauty of art is intentional beauty, processed through spiritual relationships.

### 2.4.2. Symbolic and Religious Value

Decorative art is a form of expressing faith, the visual language of religion, where the supernatural world and Buddhist ideals are symbolized. Motifs such as dragons, lotus flowers, clouds, the four mythical creatures, and the eight treasures are not merely decorations but the crystallization of folk artistic thinking and indigenous religious knowledge. For example, the lotus flower symbolizes purity and enlightenment. Furthermore, the decorative system reflects the combination of Mahayana Buddhist thought and local folk beliefs, including images serving the purpose of teaching and spreading the faith.

### 2.4.3. Historical and Cultural Value

Decorative art is evidence of the spread and transformation of Buddhist culture throughout the historical and social process in Southern Vietnam. Hoi Khanh Pagoda is highlighted as a distinctive cultural heritage, possessing outstanding artistic value. Furthermore, the decorative art at the pagoda clearly reflects the cultural identity of the Vietnamese people during the southward migration, bringing with it a system of beliefs, customs, and traditional visual arts. Moreover, studying the decorative patterns of Hoi Khanh Pagoda contributes to affirming the pagoda's unique artistic position within the flow of Southern Vietnamese Buddhist art, and offers solutions for preservation and development in line with modernization trends.

## 3. CONCLUSION

The study of decorative art at Hoi Khanh Pagoda has provided a comprehensive picture of the system of patterns, visual language, and symbolic meanings within the cultural and historical context of Binh Duong province. The results show that the decorative art at Hoi Khanh Pagoda not only has aesthetic value but also serves as important documentation reflecting the formation, development, and cultural exchange of the Southern Vietnamese community over the past three centuries.

Firstly, the pagoda's decorative patterns are rich in motifs, diverse in form, and highly symbolic, featuring various animal motifs (dragons, phoenixes, unicorns), plant motifs (lotus, rosettes, stylized flowers and leaves), geometric patterns, and reliefs with Buddhist themes. This richness demonstrates the creativity of the artisans and their flexible assimilation of the essence of traditional Vietnamese art within the local context.

Secondly, the sculptural language at Hoi Khanh Pagoda clearly demonstrates the artistic characteristics of Southern Vietnam with its soft lines, expansive composition, high degree of stylization, and harmonious combination of dynamic and static elements. These characteristics show the continuous development of artistic techniques through different periods, while also reflecting the aesthetic identity of the people of the Southern region.

Thirdly, from a semiotic perspective, the decorative motifs carry profound symbolic meanings, including the religious and philosophical meanings of Buddhism, the folk and royal meanings of the dragon and phoenix motifs, as well as the localized meanings in Southern Vietnamese cultural life. This rich system of symbols not only enhances aesthetic value but also creates cultural depth for the pagoda's space.

Fourthly, the study affirms that the decorative art at Hoi Khanh Pagoda is a product of the cultural exchange and adaptation process between Vietnamese, Chinese, Cham, and Indian art styles. This localization process created the unique style of the pagoda, contributing to shaping the artistic landscape of Southern Vietnamese Buddhism. Finally, through an interdisciplinary approach, the study has shown that the decorative art of Hoi Khanh Pagoda is not only an aesthetic element but also plays a crucial role in



preserving community cultural memory, reinforcing local identity, and transmitting the spiritual values of the people of Binh Duong. Therefore, the research results have practical significance in the conservation and restoration of cultural heritage, while also contributing to the academic treasury of Vietnamese Buddhist art.

In the future, further research could expand in the following directions: comparing the decorative art of Hoi Khanh Pagoda with other pagodas in Southern Vietnam; and analyzing in greater depth the impact of each restoration phase on the artistic style.

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