

The Literature of Lacquer Art: A Vietnamese Traditional Art Technique and its Glory

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Abstract

This research paper focuses on lacquer art and its role in Vietnamese history, as well as in the modern world. It explains the harsh labor conditions and time-intensive process that go into creating a piece of lacquer art, and attempts to explain why, in spite of its difficulty, it is still made today. Lacquer art has traveled through many Asian countries, and yet this paper focuses on one specific type: Vietnamese traditional lacquer art. As an art technique unique to the culture and history of Vietnam, it is distinctive and not just taken from other countries. Though the process of creating a piece is intense and restless, even leaving marks upon the artist's skin, the resulting product is truly unmeasurable. Vietnamese lacquer art has been the country's traditional art form for over 2,000 years, with it serving as relics in pagodas and spiritual items for Buddhism, worship paintings, communal houses, etc. Its labor, history, and the application of this traditional technique combined with artistic creations of older and younger artists has formed it into what it is today. Though this art form is not usually known in modern society, in the art world and among older generations, this art form is extremely valuable due to its materials, labor, and the history that it holds, which is why there are so many collectors from around the world collecting these pieces.

Keywords: Vietnamese traditional lacquer art, sơn mài, history of lacquer art

Introduction

Lacquer art was used in 1930s Vietnam when artists from both French and Vietnam collaborated at Hanoi University of Fine Arts. The history of Asian production of lacquer art dates back much further, however. It started with the Chinese Shang dynasty from 1384 to 1111 BC when lacquer was used, merely for simple decorations that were paired with bamboo and wood due to its durability [9]. Lacquer paintings were a crucial part of several dynasties, specifically to nobles as they played a role as ornaments to decorate the palace alongside with other elements. Over time, lacquer art became known in other countries as well, including Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. Vietnamese lacquer has been a tradition for more than 2,000 years, starting with the Dong Song when artisans already knew how to make lacquer paint and art. In Northern Vietnam, ancient tombs were found that dated back to the Ly Dynasty, which was around the 11th century or earlier, when lacquer was used as an ornament in spiritual spaces like pagodas and temples. Citizens who knew about this craft learned it from their ancestors and extraordinary pieces were awarded by the King. Though it is not a popular art form in the modern world, people still collect and discuss it, especially in Hanoi. Neighbouring areas and art collectors still preserve lacquer art and they keep the piece clean and prevent them from becoming damaged, like the one in the sunken boats that belonged in Southern Vietnam more than 100 years ago. Not only was lacquer art a cherished relic, but it also helped their economy with

a new market idea [4]. During the 1990s, producers of other goods such as handicraft goods were struggling to make ends meet. While this was going on, the Eastern Europe industry lost their protocol beforehand. With these changes, the governments decided to take action and transform lacquer art into a market. Due to lacquer art's materials and the time it took to produce, it was quick to meet ends meet. Not only that, but it also improved industrial life and offered opportunities to meet and sell with other countries. Though it was hard to create a piece of lacquer art in such a short amount of time—lacquer art usually takes around 3 to 5 months or more depending on the side of the canvas—it created a lot of opportunities for people and the economy during this time period. This medium of art has played an important role in helping Vietnamese people express their emotions through art [8]. Not only that, but art is something that Vietnamese people do to enrich their culture, usually beliefs, rural life, or social issues. It helps them have a mind of their own since so many things from Vietnam are colonial influences, meaning that other people don't see Vietnam as its own country but rather as copies of countries such as China, France, etc. For example, during the War in Vietnam, a lot of art was created to unite communities and express resilience. Although no individual piece can be named due to the circumstances that they were in, it still played a large role in boosting the nation's morale and portrayed the Vietnamese citizens' and government's spirit. Throughout the history of lacquer, most pieces were created by women or featured images of women. This reflects the cultural values, societal norms, and limitations present in Vietnam's history [6]. Women in society typically held roles like homemakers, mothers, caretakers, and performed other household duties. Lacquer art was used to express these ideas and depict Vietnam's gender roles. Women often faced barriers in the art world because society would not accept them. However, when they were able to create art with the help of lacquer art, their work reflected that discrimination and what life was like for them, giving them a voice.

According to artist Nguyen Van Minh, lacquer paintings not only express the familiarity of daily life due to most of the painting revolving around life in Vietnam, usually farms and cities, but also sparks creativity [4]. The author expresses that she was able to express her artistic feelings while learning patience and other characters that would not only help her during her lacquer art journey, but also in real life. Nguyen's research confirms that lacquer art is a traditional art primarily from Southeast Asian countries. However, Vietnamese lacquer art is one of the leading countries for lacquer art due to the materials that they have that lacquer from other countries don't--razor clam [7]. Furthermore, Vietnam is a country that shows understanding and improvement in the formation, development, and creative use of lacquer paintings.

Methods

In *Nguyen Art Gallery: The Process Of Making Lacquer Paintings in Vietnam Fine Art*, the author mentions that lacquer art is a labor-intensive process that can take up to several months depending on the materials and techniques the artist chooses and the layers of lacquer [5]. The process of creating lacquer art takes a lot of time with many steps and resources involved in the process [2]. First, a design needs to be drawn out on parchment paper that matches the canvas, which is a specific type of painted wood. Then, a ballpoint pen with another piece of paper under the parchment paper would be used to trace the sketch. After tracing the design onto the canvas, eggshells, or other types of shells, would be etched first in areas of the design, depending on the artist's artistic ideas; usually, it would be on mirrors, small objects, birds, glass objects, etc. They would then pour a small amount of lacquer paint onto the glass palette and mix it with colored powder. After that, black powdered dye would be mixed into the lacquer paint, creating a standard outline color. With this paint, the artist would trace over the design they have created. The artist

should ensure that the paint strokes are tall enough so that they don't lay flat on the canvas; this way, the outline won't be lost when sanded down. Once the outline is finished, the painting will lay to rest inside a dark place with a water bucket underneath to avoid sunlight and dry atmosphere, ensuring that it's moist and secure. Once the outline dries, which usually takes around three or more days depending on how big the canvas is, another colored lacquer paint will be mixed. The artist would fill the desired area with the color they have mixed: background, shapes, objects, etc. At this rate, they can color over the outline but keep it within the area they are trying to color. Then, they cover it with thin silver or gold sheets; gold sheets are only used in specific areas that are yellow. The artist repeats this process until the whole canvas is colored, filled with silver or gold sheets, and brushed with a standard makeup blush brush. The artist then puts it to rest once more in the racks. After the coloring comes the sanding. The artist must ensure that the whole canvas is dry before approaching this step. To do this, sandpaper and water are required. The artist will pour the water onto the canvas and sand out the surface. The artist will make sure that the surface isn't sanded to the point that the color is gone, just until the color is showing clearly and the outline can be seen. After the color appears on the canvas, the artist will repeat the coloring and sanding multiple times. This will help the painting look more alive and have more saturated colors and shades, too. When the artist is satisfied with the product, they will go over the details with a small fine brush. This will include going over the lineart again to make it more prominent or adding other details to the painting. Last but not least, the artist will add their signature to the painting, either with a paintbrush or gold covered surface and a dull pencil tip. The artist will then seal the canvas with a thin layer of normal lacquer paint and put it into a frame, after which it is completed [8]. Caring for the painting, however, does not need much work. Lacquer painting is very durable as its canvas is wood-based and its surface is protected and can easily be polished by the palm of the hand. Because of the wood-based canvas and the sealed surface, it can last for generations while only needing little care, making it a truly remarkable and unique art technique.

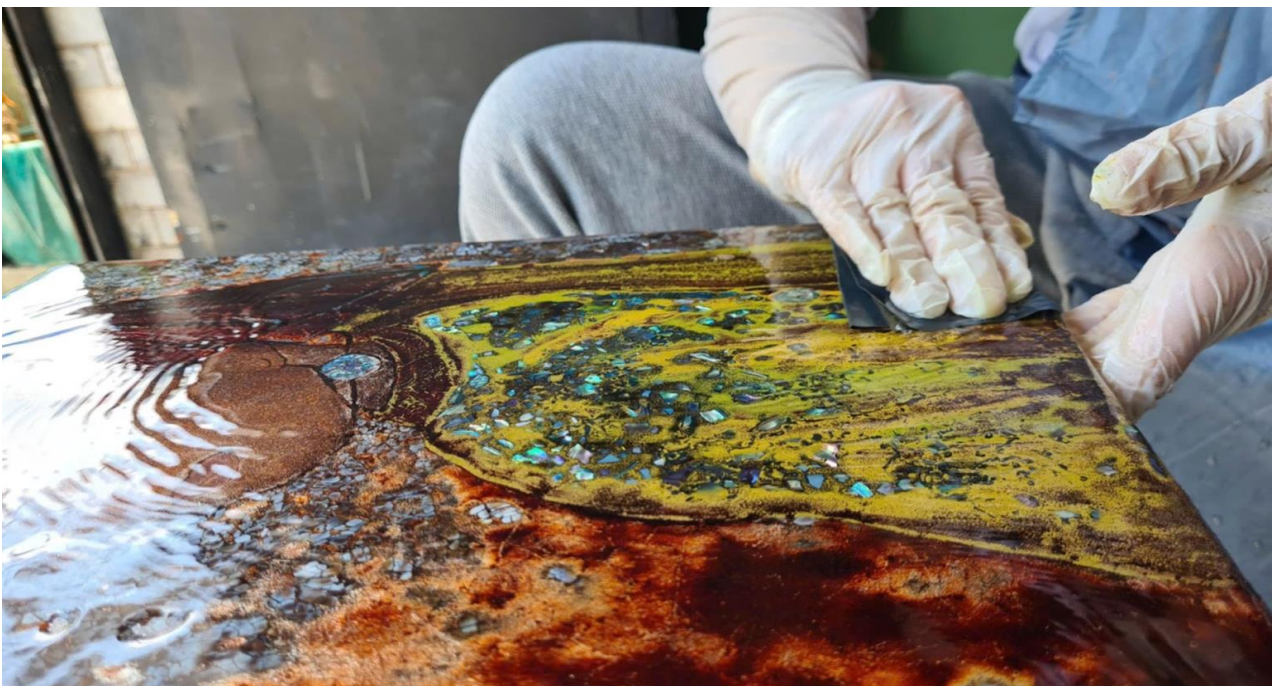


Figure 1: Tran, Thao Anh. Shows Sanding Process During Lacquer Painting After the First Layer. 26 July, 2025.

Chemistry Involved

Lacquer art, also known in Vietnam as Sơn mài--sơn for paint and mài for layering/grinding-- comes from a tree called *Toxicodendron vernicifluum*, also known as Urushi [3]. The chemicals in lacquer paint include nitrocellulose, which causes an allergic reaction when skin is exposed in its presence. It was also the first resource used for guncotton due to its explosive nature when the paint isn't sealed properly. Nitrocellulose, also known as Cellulose acetate butyrate, was used in lacquer art because of its resistance to heat and chemicals which improved the coating of the surface on a lacquer piece. When nitrocellulose dries, it is unreactive to these components so it is the best option for lacquer art. However, despite this, it still has a few cons. Nitrocellulose is extremely sensitive to temperature changes which is why the process of letting the paint dry, it is stored in a not too sunny and dry area for it to set properly. The *Toxicodendron vernicifluum* tree is found in Phú Thọ province in Việt Trì City [1]. It is harvested by cutting the tree and collecting its sap, which is a similar technique to rubber tapping. Fresh lacquer is usually white but it turns brown when exposed to air. In order to make black lacquer which is usually more dark brown than black and is the more standard color of lacquer, it has to be stirred with an iron rod for several days, causing a chemical reaction. The reason why there are specific materials designed to deal with lacquer paint is due to its solvent. Solvents in the lacquer, toluene or acetone, can interact with existing rust on the metal part of a standard paintbrush, which is why a specific paintbrush was created for the paint. This paintbrush is made by compressing animal hair, usually horse or cow tail, and clamping it between flat pieces of bamboo for a steady grip. Additionally, materials such as eggshells, gold leaf, and seashells combined with chemical solvents and pigments create a high-quality layer that cannot be achieved through other media, like acrylic. Each material reacts differently when its place along with lacquer, and artists must understand how these components unify together and how they will appear after multiple rounds of sanding the canvas. These layers form the depth and shine that lacquer art is known for. Safety is also an important part of working with lacquer. Since the solvents can produce strong smells and irritate the skin, artists must wear protective gloves, masks, and long sleeves to avoid direct contact with it even if it's only in the air. These chemicals and the environment are why lacquer art is both challenging and rewarding. It demonstrates not only artistic ability but also scientific understanding. This dangerous art technique is what makes Vietnamese lacquer art so unique.

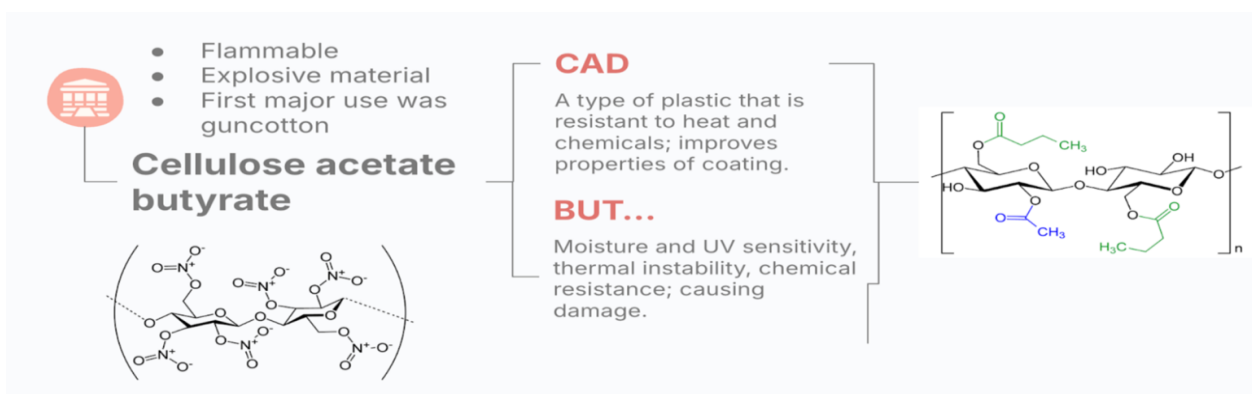


Figure 2: Tran, Thao Anh. Shows the chemical used in lacquer art and its pros and cons, along with its chemical structure. 31 October, 2025.

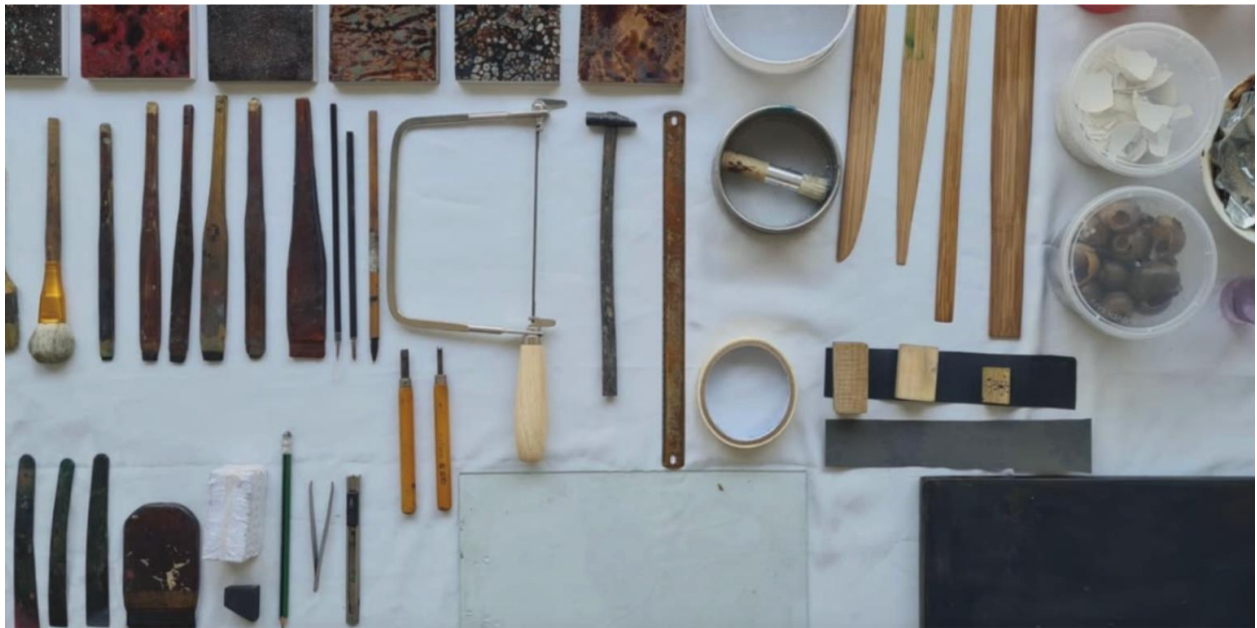


Figure 3: Tran, Thao Anh. *Shows the chemical used in lacquer art and its pros and cons, along with its chemical structure.* 20 February, 2025.



Figure 4: Photo of tree sap being collected to make lacquer paint. “What’s so special about Vietnamese Son-mài lacquer painting?” *Saigoneer*, Saigoneer Media Co., 26 August, 2016, www.saigoneer.com/saigon-music-art/2589-what-s-so-special-about-vietnamese-son-mai-lacquer-painting

Conclusion

Vietnamese lacquer art is more than just an artwork that is merely for aesthetic purposes, it is a cultural archive, a historical creation, and a reflection of the identity and culture of the Vietnamese people. From its origins in other cultures to its role in shaping Vietnam's economy and society, lacquer art is an art form that shows how much one can do with their artistic intentions and hours of labor. Its labor-intensive process not only shows the skills in creating this piece but also the patience put in it, discipline, and creativity that different generations of artists have contributed to keeping this tradition alive. Even as modern society becomes increasingly digitized, lacquer art continues to hold cultural value because of its unique materials and the history within each layer.

Understanding the chemistry, techniques, and cultural stories behind sơn mài explains why it is internationally still one of the most valuable techniques today. Vietnamese lacquer art is not simply an artistic technique; it is a symbol of heritage, a representation of the young and older generations who made artworks out of it, and a reminder of the power of traditional art to connect people across time, borders, and communities, even after generations have passed.

Acknowledgement

This paper was completed under the guidance of the Fall 2025 UCI X GATI High School Research Paper Writing Program.

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