



Research on Dong Ho Folk Paintings: Content, Meaning, and Cultural – Artistic Values of the Artwork 'Húng Dừa'

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ABSTRACT: This study explored the artistic and cultural values of Dong Ho folk paintings, exemplified by the artwork "Húng Dừa" (Catching Coconuts), a typical painting that reflected the labor activities in traditional rural Vietnam. Employing content analysis, comparative methods, and case studies, the paper analyzed the cultural layers conveyed by "Húng dừa." The findings revealed that this artwork not only held high artistic value but also served as a cultural symbol, reflecting the labor, family relationships, and harmony with nature of traditional farmers. The study highlighted the unique position of Đông Hồ folk paintings in preserving and developing folk cultural identity while distinguishing them from other folk art traditions. Additionally, the paper proposed strategies for the preservation and development of Vietnamese folk art in the context of globalization, emphasizing the significance of Đông Hồ folk paintings and "Húng dừa" within both Vietnamese and global folk art.

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"Húng dừa," Đông Hồ folk paintings, folk art, cultural identity, preservation of traditional art.

INTRODUCTION

Đông Hồ folk paintings, a distinctive cultural heritage of Vietnam, vividly reflected rural life while embedding profound spiritual values, representing a perfect blend of art and national identity (Lê, 2013; Lai, 2002). The artwork "Húng dừa" (Catching Coconuts) stood out as a representative piece, characterized by its simple and cheerful themes that depicted labor and family affection. Compared to other works in this tradition, such as "Đàn lợn âm phủ," "Đám cưới chuột," "Vinh quy bái tổ," and "Múa lân," "Húng dừa" emphasized the beauty of everyday life and a sense of intimacy in its portrayal. Its natural, bright colors and realistic imagery created an accessible and relatable experience. Consequently, "Húng dừa" was not only a quintessential work but also a symbol of Đông Hồ folk paintings (Bach, & Kim, 2015). Thus, this study selected "Húng dừa" as a representative subject for the analysis of Đông Hồ folk paintings in Vietnam.

The artwork "Húng dừa" transcended its depiction of nature to convey profound messages about the interconnectedness between humans and the land, as well as the prosperity and fortune rural communities aspired to (Trứ, 2013). The artwork's simple yet culturally rich details—from depictions of labor and beliefs to harmony with nature - were conveyed through rustic yet expressive strokes (Trần, 2000). This piece became a mirror reflecting Vietnamese rural society, where art served not merely as decoration but as a means of preserving and transmitting unique cultural values across generations.

Through analyzing "Húng dừa," this study aimed to explore how Đông Hồ artisans employed art to reflect the prominent characteristics of farmers' lives, customs, and beliefs. The research shed light on the interplay between artistic elements and social values while emphasizing the role of Đông Hồ folk paintings in preserving and promoting national cultural identity. This approach sought to illustrate not only the artistic merit of the painting but also its broader impact on the development of folk art, enhancing awareness of the importance of folk art in preserving and promoting cultural heritage.

Key research questions addressed in this study included: What distinctive artistic and cultural characteristics defined Đông Hồ folk paintings, particularly "Húng dừa"? How did "Húng dừa" reflect artistic and cultural values, and how did it differ from other Vietnamese folk art traditions?

By answering these questions, the study not only decoded the cultural values of Đông Hồ folk paintings and the artwork "Húng dừa" but also reaffirmed the significance of this art form in Vietnam's folk art landscape and its recognition on the global stage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vietnamese folk art, with Đông Hồ folk paintings as a prime example, had long been closely tied to the daily life and beliefs of rural people (Chung, 2010; Lê, 2013; Trần, 2000). This genre of folk painting, especially the piece "Hứng dừa," had attracted significant attention from researchers both domestically and internationally. These studies provided a fundamental understanding of the production process and material elements of Đông Hồ folk paintings, including technical aspects of production and the use of traditional materials such as dó paper, natural ink, and colors derived from natural resources to create works that were deeply imbued with national identity, helping define the distinctive features of Đông Hồ folk paintings (Bakhtiyorovich, & Shodikulovich, 2021; Chung, 2010; Legostaeva, 2012; Lévy, 2017; Loan, 2020). Alongside these scholarly works, many brief articles from businesses selling Đông Hồ folk paintings primarily described and promoted individual pieces. Some of these articles also offered brief analyses of the cultural significance of symbols in the paintings, but these were often subjective, lacking academic rigor, and at times based on imagination and misinterpretation (Bach, & Kim, 2015). Despite the considerable volume of research on various Đông Hồ folk paintings, there remained significant gaps, particularly in decoding the artistic and cultural values conveyed through symbolic elements in the paintings. Furthermore, Đông Hồ folk paintings faced major challenges due to modernization and globalization, which posed a risk of their extinction. Some researchers had warned of the decline in the number of artisans and the disinterest among younger generations in the craft. They had also suggested preservation measures such as digitalizing the paintings and organizing international exhibitions to promote the cultural values of Đông Hồ folk paintings to a global audience (Lê, 2023; Legostaeva, 2012; Nhung, 2022).

In the rural context, Đông Hồ folk paintings had not only served as decorative objects but had also become a medium for reflecting society, conveying cultural values, and symbolizing important aspects of life. Common themes in the paintings included festivals, wedding customs, and symbols of wealth and prosperity, which reflected the desires, aspirations, and relationships within the community (Anh, 2010). This demonstrated that Đông Hồ folk paintings acted as a mirror reflecting the social values and traditional customs of the Vietnamese people. Therefore, an in-depth analysis of the painting "Hứng dừa" could have clarified the role of Đông Hồ folk paintings as not only a unique form of Vietnamese folk art but also a medium for expressing the profound cultural and spiritual values of traditional rural communities.

The research gap in this field had opened the need for further exploration into how the symbolic art in Đông Hồ folk paintings conveyed cultural and philosophical elements. A detailed analysis of the symbols and meanings in the painting "Hứng dừa" would have provided a fresh perspective, helping to better understand Vietnamese folk art and shedding light on the role of Đông Hồ folk paintings in preserving and promoting traditional cultural values. Moreover, this study would have contributed to affirming the importance of folk art in maintaining cultural identity, fostering community cohesion, and preserving spiritual values in the face of modernization and globalization, which had a strong impact on rural life.

METHODOLOGY

The content analysis method had been primarily used to analyze the details of the painting "Hứng dừa," aiming to clarify the cultural messages conveyed by the work. This method focused on examining the visual elements in the painting, such as the coconut tree, the depiction of laborers, the overall composition, and the relationship between these elements and the cultural, social, and spiritual values of the Vietnamese rural community. In particular, the content analysis helped uncover the deeper meanings within the painting. This analysis also demonstrated how the visual elements in the painting reflected notions of family and community in rural society.

Additionally, a comparative approach with other folk painting genres, such as Hàng Trống and Kim Hoàng, highlighted the differences and unique characteristics of Đông Hồ folk paintings, with the painting "Hứng dừa" serving as a representative example of this folk art tradition. This case study not only clarified the uniqueness in content, technique, and aesthetics of Đông Hồ folk paintings but also revealed how this genre reflected traditional cultural values within the modern context. This method could also have been applied to similar studies in the future, providing a foundation for preserving and transmitting the distinctive cultural values embedded in Đông Hồ folk paintings.

This study adhered to fundamental ethical principles, ensuring transparency and objectivity. All information had been used accurately and carefully to ensure the research was conducted responsibly and with respect for the unique cultural values of the community. With these principles in mind, the study aimed to contribute to a deeper understanding of the painting "Hứng dừa" and to protect and honor the cultural values of the community that had produced the Đông Hồ folk art tradition.

The Content and Meaning of Dong Ho Paintings

Đông Hồ folk paintings, originating from Đông Hồ village in Thuận Thành district, Bắc Ninh province, were first created around the 16th century but flourished in the 18th and 19th centuries, becoming a representative product of Vietnam's folk art. According to numerous studies, Đông Hồ folk paintings were not only an art form but also a vivid reflection of the culture and customs of the Vietnamese peasantry (Nhung, 2022; Thăng, 2024; Trọng, 2016). Common themes in Đông Hồ folk paintings ranged from family life and labor to beliefs and festivals. Each painting was a work of art with cultural depth, capturing everyday moments while also embodying humanistic values and national spirit.

Family life and emotions in Đông Hồ folk paintings were expressed through images like "Đám cưới chuột" (The Mouse Wedding), which was playful and satirical, symbolizing love and happiness in social life. The painting "Đàn gà mẹ con" (Mother and Chickens) highlighted maternal affection, protection, and care within the family, depicting warm and close family relationships. "Đánh ghen" (Jealousy) subtly reflected the complexities of marital relationships, offering sharp satire on jealousy within society.

Regarding labor and rural life, Đông Hồ folk paintings often depicted the diligence and industriousness of farmers, as seen in "Đàn lợn âm dương" (Yin-Yang Pigs), symbolizing harmony and prosperity, particularly in agricultural work. "Chăn trâu thổi sáo" (Buffalo Herding with Flute) combined labor with relaxation, illustrating the peaceful simplicity of rural life.

In themes of prosperity and good fortune, the painting "Vinh hoa" (Glory) reflected aspirations for success and wealth, especially in the context of traditional society. "Phúc lộc song toàn" (Complete Happiness and Prosperity) expressed family happiness and belief in good luck. "Tranh tài tiền lộc" (Racing for Wealth) symbolized hopes for prosperity and abundant wealth for the family.

Beliefs and faith were a particularly important theme in Đông Hồ folk paintings. Paintings like "Lý ngư vọng nguyệt" (Carp Looking at the Moon) symbolized perseverance and the desire to improve, reflecting belief in a bright future. "Rước rồng" (Dragon Procession) was a symbol of folk festivals, revering the deities with hopes for growth and prosperity.

Đông Hồ folk paintings also depicted festivals rich in folk cultural identity, an integral part of Vietnamese cultural life. These paintings vividly illustrated activities such as wrestling, lion dancing, and Quan Họ singing. These paintings were often associated with the Lunar New Year, bringing joy while symbolizing purification and celebration during the festive season. "Bịt mắt bắt dê" (Blindfolded Goat Catching) or "Đông Hồ đánh đu" (Swinging) were lively images emphasizing community spirit and joy, bonding people together during festivals. These events were not only occasions for enjoyment but also opportunities to affirm community values, traditions, and faith in the enduring nature of national culture.

Paintings reflecting moral and humanistic values were diverse as well. "Lễ trí - Nhân nghĩa" (Wisdom and Benevolence) honored intellect and compassion in society. "Thầy đồ cóc" (The Frog Teacher) added humor and satire, reflecting mockery and sometimes criticism of education and social values. "Thiên hạ thái bình" (World in Peace) symbolized peace, stability, and societal harmony. "Vinh quy bái tổ" (Returning to Honor Ancestors) depicted a person returning home, showing respect for ancestors and the glory of those who had achieved success. From these paintings, one could see the richness of Vietnamese cultural life, with humanistic values, ethics, and social relationships reflected through the art of Đông Hồ folk paintings.

Content of the Painting "Hứng Dừa"

The painting "Hứng dừa" depicted a scene of rural family life in Vietnam, with two children and their parents participating in the activity of picking coconuts in their garden. The painting was printed on dó paper using traditional woodblock printing techniques. The coconut tree in the painting stood tall and strong, its leaves spread widely, bearing a bountiful harvest of coconuts. The husband, depicted shirtless with a muscular build, wore brown "ta" pants (a type of coarse fabric with wide legs) and was climbing the tall coconut tree to harvest fruit. The wife, with long hair and barefoot, stood at the base of the tree, wearing a green "yếm" (traditional bodice) and a brown skirt. Her posture was graceful as she used the wide hem of her skirt to catch the falling coconuts. The two children, a boy and a girl, were eager to join the activity, with the girl in a blue dress and brown shirt, and the boy in brown pants, also shirtless like his father, eagerly looking as though they wanted to climb the tree with him. In the upper-right corner of the painting, there was a title and a couplet in Hán Nôm (the traditional writing system of the Vietnamese people): "Praise who skillfully molds the coconut, You climb, I catch, for a perfect couple."

The painting used simple, natural colors like black, green, yellow, red, and white, creating a warm and peaceful scene. The entire painting "Hứng dừa" was a beautiful and simple depiction of rural life, reflecting the values of labor, family bonds, and traditional Vietnamese culture.



Figure 1: "Húng Dừa" painting, Author's photo.

The Artistic and Cultural Value of the "Húng Dừa" Painting

The "Húng Dừa" painting was not only a remarkable work of art but also contained profound humanistic values, reflecting the concepts of family, labor, and rural Vietnamese culture. By exploring the theme and imagery of the traditional farming family, the painting portrayed the connection between humans and nature, as well as the philosophical worldview of ancient society. It also honored the labor and cultural values unique to the Vietnamese people.

Artistic Value

Choice of Theme and Typical Imagery: The "Húng Dừa" painting focused on the familiar rural family life, close to the everyday life of the Vietnamese people. The painting not only told a story about labor but also highlighted a message of unity within the family, among generations, and between husband and wife. By choosing a simple yet meaningful subject, combining images of family, labor, and culture, it created a profound and humanistic work of art. The act of coconut-picking, a common task in rural life, was elevated to an artistic level through the construction of the image. The painting depicted an ideal farming family (husband and wife, their children) together cooperating to gather the fruits of their labor in a peaceful setting. These images were not only realistic but also symbolic, from the father as the family's pillar to the mother as the caregiver, and the children as the next generation. From this, the painting created an ideal model of a traditional farming family.

Artistic Material: The use of Dó paper in the "Húng Dừa" painting was an important factor that enhanced the artwork's artistic value. Dó paper, made by hand from the bark of the native Dó tree, was soft, durable, and reflected a connection to nature. This material not only gave the painting a rustic, natural feel but also contributed to its unique characteristics. To create a piece of Dó paper, artisans selected specific bark from the Dó tree, harvested from the forest, and then followed multiple steps: drying, soaking, pounding, mixing the pulp with water, filtering the paper, pressing, drying, and finally polishing it with a lacquer. The colors used in the painting were also made from local natural materials, resulting in harmonious, gentle, and natural tones,

symbolizing the bond between humans and the Earth. The colors in Đông Hồ folk paintings, such as red from local stones, yellow from safflower, black from bamboo charcoal, green from indigo leaves, and white from crushed seashells mixed with rice flour, were traditionally handmade. The combination of folk printing techniques and traditional materials increased the artwork's value, making it not only beautiful but also deeply cultural.

Woodcut Technique and Folk Printing: The “Hứng Dừa” painting employed the traditional woodcut technique to create its images. Each detail in the painting, from the coconut tree trunk, the figure of the person climbing the tree, the wife's skirt used to catch the coconuts, to the expressions on the characters' faces, was meticulously carved, vivid, and full of emotion. The woodcut technique allowed the painting to achieve precision and sharpness, highlighting small details in the family scene. The painting vividly depicted the labor activities and family life of rural Vietnamese people. For example, the coconut tree, a prominent symbol in the painting, was drawn with a curved yet sturdy trunk and lush, healthy leaves, creating a sense of vitality and resilience in nature. The coconuts were depicted as full and heart-shaped, symbolizing the abundance and happiness of the family. The characters (husband, wife, and two children) were drawn with soft lines, yet very lively, highlighting the emotions and mental states of each figure. The husband climbed the tree with strength, creating a contrast with the wife below, gently yet decisively using her skirt to catch the coconuts. After carving, the painting was printed on Dó paper, creating sharp images while maintaining the simple and natural beauty of folk art. These techniques demonstrated the skilled hands of Đông Hồ folk artisans.

Color Coordination and Subtle Coloring: Despite using a simple color palette, the painting was highly effective in conveying emotions and shaping its forms. The “Hứng Dừa” painting used a modest, warm, and pleasant color scheme that was not overly bright but very deliberate: the green of the coconut leaves and surrounding plants symbolized the freshness and growth of nature, reflecting the fertility of rural land. The light brown and green of the coconuts highlighted the image of the coconut tree and symbolized prosperity, with both ripe and unripe fruits representing a bountiful harvest. The coconuts were symbols of abundance and prosperity in the rural economy, representing the warmth and sufficiency of the family. The dark colors, such as brown and black in the characters' clothing, reflected the fabric typical of traditional farmers, creating a clear contrast with the bright colors of nature and the coconuts. These colors also expressed the hardships, hard work, and sacrifices of the laborers. The harmonious blending of black, green, yellow, red, and white created a balanced, realistic, and easy-to-look-at composition. The refined coordination of colors made the painting not only visually appealing but also meaningful, representing harmony and connection in all relationships.

Cultural Value

Worldview and Philosophy of Life: Beyond symbolizing the Vietnamese belief that a complete family must have both sons (nếp) and daughters (tê) to be considered whole, the “Hứng Dừa” painting also embodied philosophical ideas such as “matched couple” and the proverb “If husband and wife are harmonious, they can drain the East Sea.” This idea of harmony and cooperation created perfection in work (Quy, & Minh, 2019). This was clearly expressed through the images and the Han Nom couplet in the painting: “Praise who skillfully molds the coconut, You climb, I catch, for a perfect couple.” The coconut tree, with its heavy bunches of fruit, served as a symbol of the harmonious coordination between the husband and wife. Additionally, the image of the two children eagerly following their father to climb the tree and pick coconuts reflected the saying “like father, like son,” symbolizing the continuation and inheritance of virtues and traditions from the ancestors in the Vietnamese ideal of life (Loan, Tuoi, & Ngoc, 2024).

Celebrating the Value of Labor, Labor Division in Family and Society: The “Hứng Dừa” painting also clearly expressed the value of labor in the rural family. Every family member had an important role, from the husband climbing the coconut tree, the wife catching the coconuts, to the two children clinging to the tree trunk. In real life, a woman could not use such a delicate skirt to catch heavy coconuts, so the image of the wife in the painting, ready to use her skirt to catch falling coconuts, carried a strong symbolic meaning. It represented the traditional virtues of Vietnamese women, who courageously and responsibly sacrifice for the family. The husband, who performed the most difficult task of climbing the tree, was not only the financial provider but also the protector of the family. The children, though young, also participated in the labor and learned the values of hard work, patience, and love. The painting affirmed that labor was the foundation of development and prosperity in both the family and society. If we compare the dangers of climbing the tree to pick coconuts with the danger of using the skirt to catch falling coconuts, the wife's task was just as perilous as the husband's, even though women were considered the weaker sex. This highlighted the admirable role and position of traditional Vietnamese women in society: the tasks they performed, though often perceived as lesser and easier by society, were just as difficult and risky as those of men. This emphasized the contrast between harsh realities and the spiritual values women brought to the family.

The Cultural Significance of the Coconut Tree Symbol: In the painting, the coconut tree was not only a natural resource or a product of labor but also a profound cultural symbol, connecting people with nature and each other, reflecting the culture and spirit of the Vietnamese people. With its sturdy trunk and healthy, high-reaching foliage, the coconut tree symbolized the enduring strength and vitality of people in the face of nature's challenges. The coconut tree became a bridge between the past and the present, between generations in the family, where the husband climbs the tree, the wife catches the coconuts, and the children join in the labor, demonstrating harmony and unity. This image could be analyzed not only through the visual depiction but also more clearly

through the Han Nom couplet in the painting, elevating the coconut tree as a symbol of perfect coordination within the family, thus honoring the value of labor and the balance between humans and nature: "Praise who skillfully molds the coconut, You climb, I catch, for a perfect couple."

CONCLUSION

This study has deeply analyzed the distinctive cultural and artistic values of Đông Hồ folk paintings through the case of the painting "Hứng dừa," a representative work of the genre. This piece not only vividly depicts the rural Vietnamese life but also captures a simple moment, reflecting the spirit of labor, family bonds, and connection with nature. Through this, "Hứng dừa" offers a realistic and optimistic view of rural life, creating a notable distinction within the Đông Hồ painting tradition.

With familiar images and rustic symbols, the painting conveys the spirit of unity, faith in life, and harmony between humans and nature. The details in the painting are not just descriptive; they also carry symbolic meanings, reflecting the beliefs, spiritual values, and simple lifestyle of ancient Vietnamese people. This helps clarify the role of folk paintings in expressing and preserving traditional cultural values.

The Đông Hồ painting tradition, with "Hứng dừa," is not only an artwork but also a symbolic folk cultural heritage that connects generations and preserves the memory of national identity. This piece, with its ability to reflect and promote cultural values, demonstrates the importance of folk art in maintaining and transmitting the core values of the Vietnamese rural community.

This study also provides a new perspective on the painting "Hứng dừa," emphasizing the potential of the work in the context of global culture. The research results show that "Hứng dừa" can be viewed as a unique cultural symbol, combining profound artistic value with rich traditional meaning. At the same time, this work opens up opportunities for further exploration, reinterpretation, and development of the value of other Đông Hồ paintings in the modern context, contributing to affirming the place of Đông Hồ folk art on the world cultural map.

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