

Features of Ly Dynasty Stone Pedestals in Red River Delta

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Abstract: Along with being a pedestal supporting Buddha statues, Ly dynasty stone pedestals were also an integral part of the character of Buddhist sculptures, that are intended to magnify their beauty, their solemnity and conveyed various messages of religion and belief. The decorative art on the stone pedestals carried the basic characteristics of the dynasty's art such as the normativity in decorative motifs, fused elements of art and shallow engraving techniques. This study of these stone pedestals is a typical case-study of Ly dynasty's vestiges that remain in the relics.

Keywords: Stone pedestals, Ly dynasty stone pedestals, Red River Delta.

Subject classification: Archaeology

1. Introduction

Currently, there are no intact Buddhist monuments of Ly dynasty. What remains of the Buddhist monuments of the period are only traces such as ancient tower foundations, a few components, some stone statues, pedestals, and even a number of decorative pieces or column supporting foundations scattered in temples.

The stone pedestals play an important part in the overall precious heritage from Ly dynasty which has been preserved to this day. Therefore, studying Ly dynasty stone pedestals in the Red River Delta is the result of a systematic collection through

research, which helps us identify the basic features and unique values of Ly dynasty's art in the flow of the national art and culture and is a testament to a period when the Vietnamese Buddhist art culminated.

2. The normativity in decorative motifs on stone pedestals

Normativity in decoration is a feature that shows uniformity that extends throughout most of the decorative images and layouts. We may easily observe this in each patterns and motifs such as dragons, lions, or water waves.

The image of the dragon had always a special and solemn position on the stone pedestals from Ly dynasty. A few rare dragon carvings on stone pedestals may be found today in Ngo Xa and Phat Tich Buddhist temples. It is typical that the image of the dragon was carved in different moving postures. For example, inside each lotus petal and on the rectangular sides of the octagonal pedestal (*Photo 1*). However, when looking closely at the decorative dragon carvings on the pedestals at the two monuments mentioned above, the researchers unanimously agreed that the pedestals at Ngo Xa temple were dated to the same period as the statues and the octagonal pedestals of the early 12th century, while the lotus pedestals at Phat Tich temple were re-sculpted in the 17th century. Therefore, the shape of the sculpted lotus petals and dragons became rough and no longer smooth as in Ly dynasty.

For the surface decorated with lotus petals, the dragons were sculpted in the moving postures following the lotus petals. A pair of dragons decorated in a symmetrical layout would be in the following moving posture: the heads directed to the middle (with a small bodhi leaf or a pearl with a halo), the bodies circled from top to bottom, radiating to both sides, leaning on the lotus petal, flipping up to the top and the tails clustered at the top of the petal (*Photo 2*). The decorative surface on the octagonal pedestals was relatively uniform and rectangular, which dictated the arrangement of the dragon-shaped layout differently from the shape of the dragon sculpted on the lotus petal or

bodhi leaf. Additionally, the dragon motif had a layout with a pair of dragons as the central pattern. The direct opposite side was carved with a dragon in the flying posture.

The octagonal pedestal at Phat Tich temple was made with three layers: The front side (taking the Buddha face as the indicator) was carved with a pair of dragons adoring a bodhi leaf with the image of a fire halo; between the two layers above and below there were two dragons in a moving posture.

At the top layer, the dragons moved horizontally with the necks raised up high, their heads were pointing towards the bodhi leaf and their tails slightly lifted up, ending at the right corner of the rectangle. At the lower layer, the dragons' necks were lowering down, with the heads still straight forward but slightly bent and ending at the bottom of the bodhi leaf.

The other sides' faces were decorated with a pair of dragons, but the two dragons were not facing each other like on the aforementioned front face but following each other up and down smoothly. However, we see a rule of similarity in Ly dynasty's art that is still present prominently: the dragon's movement was depicted in two postures with high raising necks, looking forward, or with lowered necks, with the head directing forward but being slightly bent.

Comparing the pair of dragons on the upper layer with the pair on the lower layer, we could observe the difference in the head's posture. This was a flexible and skillful application of an artful tactic. The movement of the dragons helped increase the moving effect of the subject, which was

both static and dynamic. The major drawings of the dragon's body were seen as the main feature, while all other supplementary drawings of clouds, twisted patterns, pearls, crests and mane of the dragon followed the winding shape of the dragon's body to add on in line with the already-decided form.

At Ngo Xa temple, the side-faces of the octagonal pedestals were not of the same size, with two pairs having short edges and two pairs having long edges. On the two pairs of the short-edged sides, only one motif of dragon was sculpted, the moving posture was similar to that of the decoration at Phat Tich temple.

From the study of the layout and the dragon decorative motifs on Ly dynasty stone pedestals, the high normativity and unity is visible. Even though being governed by the feudal court's strict rule on ideology, due to the aesthetics, creativity, and sometimes emotional thinking, the artists produced unique artworks. However, when comparing the stone pedestals at Phat Tich temple with those at Ngo Xa temple, it was found that the art styles were very similar. Though being 50 years away from each other chronologically, the aesthetic value of Ly dynasty's stone pedestals there is traditionally consistent from the second half of the 11th century to the early 12th century with their features, the symmetry that abides by normativity, and decorations covering the whole surface.

While dragon motifs were common in the decoration of Ly dynasty stone pedestals, *the cloud motifs* were auxiliary details to present the layers, not particularly attached to the dragon image. Though the

cloud motifs always made the background, they were very much transformative. Sometimes the clouds wrapped around the dragon, sometimes they shrunk into strips with one end round and the other stroking thinner in a tentacle shape winding like a wave. In comparison with the Tran dynasty, the cloud features were created clearly with twisted cloud clusters with quite long tail bands, sometimes flexibly winding cloud strips and ending parts rolling up. In the later period, the shape of these clouds was usually stylised as a blade (in the 17th-18th centuries it was as a spear, while in the 19th-20th centuries - usually as a pennant).

The motifs of clouds and dragons were combined with each other to become symbols in the carvings which carried the meaning of prayers for favorable wind and rain, lush crops, and prosperity for every family by people at that time.

In Buddhist sculptures under Ly dynasty, *the lion image* was often sculptured on the Buddha pedestals, and divided into two variants: A single lion (the most common type) or a pair of lions (only left at the vestiges of Phat Tich and Ngo Xa temples).

Common features in the art of carving lions included them carrying a lotus on their heads. Firstly, this meant that they were tamed by Buddha, being enlightened and, therefore, voluntarily transporting Buddha everywhere to educate sentient beings. The presentation of the image of the lion included exaggeration in the shape and form, the mighty and majestic appearance with a firm square face, the kneeling position to carry the lotus pedestal, the mouth with a pearl in, and the eyes opened wide.

The carved image of a single lion was found in Huong Lang temple (also known as Lang temple in Van Lam, Hung Yen province), Ba Tam temple, Hoang Xa temple and Thay temple (*Photos 3, 4, 5 and 6*).

As only one lion was sculptured in the centre, the head and the face would be created in the direct front side. The carvings of the single lion here were bigger and coarser than elsewhere with two lions. Particularly, on the heads of the lions at Ba Tam and Huong Lang temples, there is the Chinese character *Vuong* (王, pinyin: Wang). The lion's eyes were open wide but not goggled, which showed a pure Vietnamese characteristic, completely different from the Chinese lion carving art. The big nose was made of gentle lines to become delicate. The mouth opened wide keeping a precious pearl inside, the mustache formed a wavy shape. The lion had four sinewy feet to support the entire weight from the back. The lion's body was covered with a cloak embroidered with swirling petals, frill lines with the question mark pattern. The lion's tail was stylised with silky smooth hair.

The art of creating a pair of lions at the Phat Tich and Ngo Xa temples still bore common features of Ly dynasty's artistic style. Due to carving a pair of symmetrical lions, there was a difference in shaping the side and one part of the lion. The lion's mane was stylised, many hair stripes with flame shape were rolled in the bottom up direction and ended at the top of its head. The tail had a lot of smooth, fluffy and wavy hair like the tail of a dragon. That made the carved figures on the lion become

more clear-cut, rather than being in a jumble otherwise.

Ly dynasty's artists brought the lion image into the art, each typical detail was chosen to decorate and create a perfect model, and then that ideal model would lead the way for the art and directing the artist's hands during the creation. In the lion image created by Ly dynasty's artists, the contours are not all the same as those of the lion in reality, the blocks are neither rough nor hard, all were refined, and taken away were petty unnecessary details, while typical common features were kept to build up according to imagination.

The water-wave pattern motif was decorated at the bottom of the Buddha's pedestals and this position reflected a common spirit of the stratified structure of normativity, using it connect the segmental structure in Ly dynasty's pedestal decoration.

In general, the normativity in the decorative motifs on the pedestals was shown from two angles.

Firstly, there were strict rules for each type of decorative motif, especially with dragons, lions, and water-wave patterns. As analysed above, the dragon image was only used to decorate monuments which were in palaces associated with the royal court.

Secondly, the features of normativity were shown in the motifs with uniformity in the overall decoration. For example, the dragon images were decorated on lotus petals or on different octagonal pedestals; they all had head and body with the accompanying details like clouds shown exactly in the same way. Other motifs such as a single lion, a pair of lions, chrysanthemums, lotuses, water-waves, and

twisted patterns in any position also carried the prescribed common design. If we look further to the period after Ly dynasty, the uniformity in decorative motifs was no longer present. For example, in the dragon motifs of Tran dynasty: in the early period, the dragons looked supple with many similarities to Ly dynasty's dragons, but in the later period of Tran dynasty (especially at the end of the 14th century), the dragons had a rough style, therefore, appeared stronger and bigger. This feature again reflected the uniform standards in the Buddhist architectural art of Ly dynasty.

The decorative parts of the stone pedestals had a harmonious design, clearly delineating upper and lower parts with definitive layers. The lowest part had water-wave features, above which were dragon images and precious flowers. The sophistication of the pedestals and the elegance of the statues, when joined together, create a standard classical model.

Ly dynasty's art could be used as a model to decide on and provide a solid foundation for the independent creative activity - the spirit of independence and autonomy of the Vietnamese people. It is the necessary and sufficient conditions that urged for artistic creation, laying the foundation for the initiation of the country's independent advanced arts.

3. The density and the nature of spreading of decorative motifs

The lotus motifs: In Ly dynasty's plastic arts, the lotus appeared in the form of a

face-up sphere. Lotus petals sprung two or three layers to create a lotus tower. In each layer, there were extra petals placed between the main pairs. The common feature of Ly dynasty's lotus petals was slightly inflated, however, the decoration inside the lotus petals depended on whether that relic was a major, middle-scaled, or small pagoda/Buddhist temple. Relics built by the king would use dragon decorations. The monuments created by nobles, mandarins or Imperial Concubine Y Lan (1044-1117) did not have dragon decorations but had simple carvings instead. All of the above shows that this was one of the very clear and highly normative rules in using decorative motifs for each type of monument.

Therefore, the lotus petals in stone pedestal decorations were divided into two types: patterned or plain.

The plain lotus style was found at temples called Huynh Cung, Hoang Xa, Huong Lang, Hoang Kim and Cheo.

At Phat Tich temple, the decorative motifs on the inside of the lotus petals were carved with alternating patterns, covering the whole surface with many small and delicate dragon-shaped details for the upper part of the lotus petals and chrysanthemums to fill up the empty space. This creativity in expressing ideas and applying sculpting techniques created a harmonious balance.

The chrysanthemum motifs were carved shallowly on the flat surface of the stone and were trimmed very small but still induced with a lively touch. The stylised flowers presented the recent budding in many different angles and the leaf band connected them into a sinusoidal winding

with repetitive layout that showed the special creative dedication of the folklore artists, making the viewer feel unable to see either the beginning point or the end (*Photo 7*).

The lotus was only present on the surface of the pedestal, while the chrysanthemum formed bands covering all sides of the octagonal part, filling up the inside of the lotus petals. The lotuses and chrysanthemums in Ly dynasty's art were always stylised selectively and became examples for the later times.

In addition to the two quite common flowers mentioned above, on the stone pedestals, there were other typical patterns such as those resembling vine tendrils; or shaped as loofah tendrils, or '*tay muróp*' in Vietnamese, as question marks; or spiral, sinusoidal, geometrical patterns. In Ly dynasty, most of the aforementioned patterns were carved alternately with blank patches or on rectangular borders, often used as a background for the main decorative pattern.

Although the area of reliefs was fully decorated, one would not feel stuffiness because of the arrangement of the shallow and deep blocks. If the blocks seen in reality are replaced with the contours on the rubbing version, we would observe the surface full of decorative patterns, thereby producing different effects in the handling of three-dimensional space and resulting in an outstanding achievement of decorative arts. The intertwining and density of the decorative patterns softened the work of art and made it graceful.

The water-wave patterns were also very popular in the artistic decoration of Ly dynasty. The decorative motifs on Ly

dynasty stone pedestals used three types of patterns: wave-shaped, mountain-shaped and mushroom-shaped. The design of the water-wave pattern was three continuous parallel sinusoidal curved lines, the crest of the wave rising and then bulging up, the body tightening into the mushroom-like shape. On the gaps between the two wave crests, there were three extra waves. Because of being hidden by the main waves, the extra waves were discontinuous. According to physicists those are called dephasing waves. The style of decoration with one layer overlapping the other layer created a space on the bottom of the pedestal, that showed the row on row of waves and the continuous endless image (*Photo 8*) [1, pp.192-193].

In the plastic art of Ly dynasty in general and its decoration on the pedestals in particular, it was very difficult to find any unintentional blanks, the surface was usually fully covered by designs and supplementary details, which created the background to embellish the main figure. From the drawing lines, the sculpture blocks to the pattern motifs on the stone pedestals, they all followed strict rules but were still balanced and rhythmic.

The art critic Thai Ba Van commented on Ly dynasty's art: the contour was delicate and closed, not knowing where the start was and where was the end, evoking the concept of reincarnation in the symbol and creating a complete and peaceful circle in the feeling. Standing at any point, a viewer might observe the whole block. That was the norm of all classical sculptures in the world [4, p.293].

The nature of decorative patterns spreading on the surface like the integrity of Buddhism in the Ly dynasty spread to the life of all social strata. Furthermore, the rigid layout presented in each and every little detail, therefore, it is felt that just a slightly change in the carved patterns would lead to changes in all other things.

4. Fused elements on the stone pedestal decoration

In terms of geographical location, the historical context of Vietnam defined its northern region as a buffer zone between two major cultural civilisations of the ancient orient: China and India. Thus, there were distinct features in Vietnam, coming from elements of both North and South to blend with the Southeast Asian indigenous culture. In this context, the author will not discuss which cultural factors prevailed in the process of cultural exchange, but rather wishes to emphasise the fusion of culture and particularly art.

Buddhism came to Vietnam very early, with the first Zen schools being introduced from both India and China. This may easily be observed in the cultural and artistic activities of Ly dynasty which had a harmonious combination of Chinese, Indian, and Champa cultures to create the unique art style of the dynasty.

In Ly dynasty, the architecture through the exchange in the Liangguang region was influenced by the architectural style of the Tang and the Song, and through the Champa route, influenced by the architectural style

of the Indian peninsula. It is difficult to identify clearly on Ly dynasty's stone pedestals which motifs were made with indigenous elements and which came from the North or the South. The greatest common feature of Ly dynasty's art is the harmonised combination and transformation of indigenous traditions with external elements, based on the country's reality.

With all efforts and encouragement of the culture and self-esteem of a nation, Ly dynasty was a powerful one, imbued with the Vietnamese identity in the national history, especially with preserving this identity after thousand years of Northern domination. However, the rise of the dynasty came not out of nowhere. The traditional indigenous culture followed the brilliant Dong Son culture, which was still hidden inside the Vietnamese (such as in the arrangements of the dynasty's decoration patterns with stripes, rectangular and round patterns, and the accentuation of sinusoidal rhythms, water-waves, and pattern resembling vine tendrils). Although this style was disrupted after a thousand years of Chinese domination, together with the influence of foreign cultural elements, Vietnamese people were still able to create the art of architecture and sculpture, which was very Vietnamese while also carrying various elements of foreign civilisations.

After a thousand years of Chinese domination, Dai Viet was born and started a new era of independence. What the people from the North brought about and left in the Vietnamese culture was significant and still influential. Moreover, the Buddhist art in China under the Tang dynasty extended to

the Song dynasty and was considered by experts as a period of culmination in its development. Under Ly dynasty, Dai Viet had a relationship with the Song dynasty in China as an independent and autonomous country that facilitated the development of Vietnam-China cultural exchange, especially in the field of Buddhism (including the import of scriptures, among the monks, in the similarities in the thought of Zen...). Therefore, many elements of Chinese art can still be seen on the pedestals of Ly dynasty's statues in particular and in the works of sculpture of the dynasty in general.

There were many statues in Ly dynasty not simulating the appearance, but only simulating the structural method of Chinese art. For example, in China the two mythical dragons appeared more than 2,000 years ago and developed until the end of feudalism. If merely comparing the style, Ly dynasty's dragons were completely different from the Chinese dragons. But if comparing their structure, it might be observed that there were many similarities in these arts such as the mane, moustache, legs, scales, pelvic fins, and the body. Ly dynasty's dragons in Vietnam date back later than those of China (in the 11th century). Therefore, it might be thought that the complex structure of the dynasty's dragons referred to, and partially drew lessons from Chinese dragon samples. Secondly, the dragons' features, although with different forms, still became a symbol of kingship - staying in the middle of the waves and clouds and acting as the full-power representative of heaven to the people and vice versa.

The lion image did not appear in the early days of Chinese art but it was introduced alongside the indoctrination of Buddhism. The origin of the lion image lies in Western Asia, being introduced into China during the Tang dynasty, and then in the Song dynasty. The lion was considered the "Lord of all animals" as depicted in the image of Bodhisattva Manjushree (*Bồ Tát Văn Thù*) riding a lion among traditional Buddhist statues. The lion image from China was spread to Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and all of Southeast Asia. However, depending on the different perception in different countries, the image was expressed in different ways.

Due to the conceptual influence of Chinese culture, the lion images on Ly dynasty's stone pedestals were merely symbolic animals with stylised appearance and without details of a real lion. If comparing the posture, the appearance in details such as eyes, nose, mouth, ears, and nails of a single lion variant would be very close to the lion image in the Tang-Song art. However, in terms of contours and shapes, dynasty's lion had a purely Vietnamese posture, not being as ferocious as the Chinese lion.

According to Tong Trung Tin, regarding the Chinese influence, Ly dynasty sculptures did, sometimes, simulated the main motifs. However, artists of the dynasty only studied a few supplementary details to add to their works for highlighting their central decorative images with a number of Chinese art elements of the Tang-Song times in some of Ly dynasty's sculptures. The influence was not as massive or bold but just moderate and expressed at various degrees [3, pp.172-174].

Researcher Nguyen Tien Dong writes that, a thousand years of the Chinese domination for the Vietnamese people were much of fatigue, and it was time the cultural resistance exploded. That was the reason why Ly dynasty was inspired by Champa and broadly by the Indian civilisation. This Southern cultural influence on the Vietnamese was one of the factors lessening the influence from the North, or, as said by the late Professor Tran Quoc Vuong, [a factor of] decinisation [2, pp.82-89].

The stone pedestal structure of Ly dynasty allowed for asserting that its function is to be a seat for a single statue, which follows the architectural model of supporting one statue only. Accordingly, one can deduce that this was clearly a remnant of the decoration element of the Hynayana style left in Buddhist artifacts, which was completely different from the worship architecture in Mahayana Buddhism.

Champa culture was associated with Ly dynasty's art in the development of Dai Viet's culture, the dynasty used slaves and craftsmen to build and create their artistic works. Therefore, we could observe the influence of chrysanthemum motifs from Cham sculpture on the pattern of the lotus and those resembling vine tendrils. On the pedestal at My Son E1 (built from the 7th to the 8th century), or My Son A1 temple tower (10th century). Comparing the plastic arts between those of Ly dynasty and Champa carvings, the author realised that the blocks on the lotus petals, chrysanthemums, and patterns resembling vine tendrils on Ly dynasty's stone pedestals were all plump and fully round, like the sensuality in creating small details in Champa carvings.

The analysis of artistic elements from decorated patterns such as chrysanthemums and those resembling vine tendrils on Ly dynasty's stone pedestals can lead to the conclusion that there was the influence of the Champa art style. Moreover, the common forms and features of being dense, spread and interwoven without any space in between on the dynasty's stone pedestals were very similar to those in the decoration and carvings of Champa and Buddhist art. This could not be observed in the art of the Tran or other dynasties. For example, on the rectangular Tran dynasty's stone pedestals, the space above the lotus petals, together with the body or the base of the pedestals, might be even left plain.

To conclude this section, the author would like to quote Thai Ba Van: "We have not seen the art [of a country/a region] which stands alone as an island. So, saying that Ly dynasty's fine arts were influenced by near or far waves is something quite [proper as it is something true for/of the entire] humanity... In the form of Ly dynasty's art, there was a discreet revolt of a resolute but soft artistic will. That is a feature of the national identity, manifestly demonstrating the spirit of Dai Viet [4, p.297].

5. Conclusion

Based on the remaining documents and relics, researchers were able to withdraw conclusions that Ly dynasty stone pedestals were shaped as round cylinders on the upper parts with the lower and middle parts being tied up. The structure of Ly dynasty stone

pedestals consisted of the following main components: the lotus image, a lion statue, and an octagonal pedestal. Considering the shaping layout and structure mentioned above, researchers all highly appreciated the art of using the symmetrical, harmonious layout and vertical stratification. The way of handling the shaping was very skillful in combination with the religious elements and their contemporary aesthetic thoughts.

The block shapes are not only beautiful, their decorative motifs were also one of the important criteria in creating value and style for the artwork carved on the pedestals. This was the first style showing the normativity in decorative motifs, from the rule of using decorative motifs for each object attached to the monuments to the arrangement and creation of solid strokes - all of these were very delicate. Under Ly dynasty, not many pattern motifs were used. There were mainly lotuses, chrysanthemums, dragons, lions,

water waves and patterns resembling vine tendrils. In contrast, the layout of the decorations was diverse with symmetrical layouts for dragon pairs, a central pattern layout in a closed decorative frame, and a repeated layout for chrysanthemums and patterns resembling vine tendrils. Along with that, the feature of density and interwoven pattern which fully cover the surface is a noticeable point in the art of the dynasty.

Ly dynasty produced the art in its early period of a feudal nation with a high standard, carrying many unique artistic values that were the result of the absorption and creativity of the great arts from China and Champa. However, the dynasty's art still retained the artistic elements of internal capacities of the indigenous Vietnamese culture. All of these brought about the unique identity in the movement of self-development of the civilisation of Dai Viet in the time of independence and autonomy.

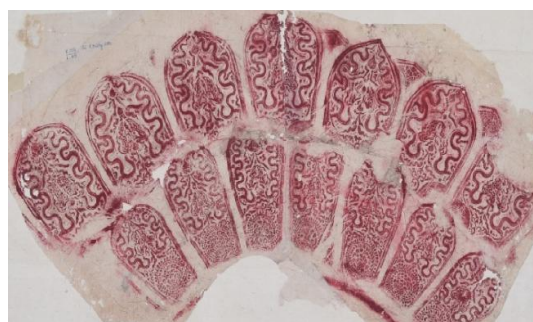
ILLUSTRATIONS

Photo 1: Octagonal Pedestal
in Phat Tich Temple



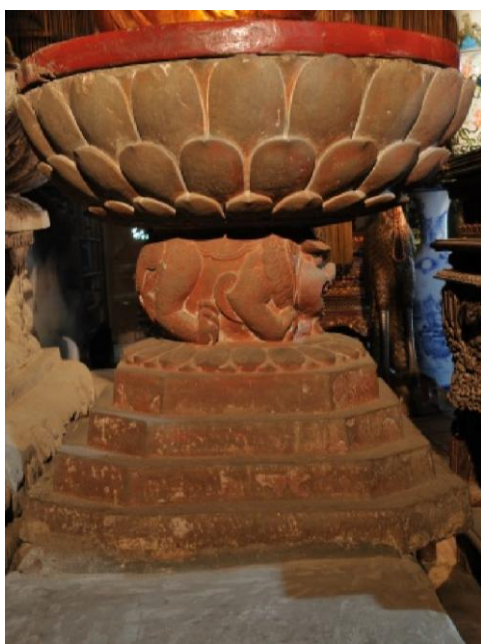
Source: Vietnam Institute of Fine Arts.

Photo 2: Rubbing of Lotus Petal Patterns
Decorated on Dragon Image
in Ngo Xa Temple



Source: Vietnam Institute of Fine Arts.

Photo 3: Lion Statue in Thay Temple



Source: Vietnam Institute of Fine Arts.

Photo 4: Lion Statue in Ba Tam Temple



Source: Vietnam Institute of Fine Arts.

Photo 5: Lion Statue in Lang Temple



Source: Vietnam Institute of Fine Arts.

Photo 6: Lion Statue in Hoang Kim Temple



Source: Vietnam Institute of Fine Arts.

Photo 7: Rubbing of Chrysanthemum Patternon Pedestal in Phat Tich Temple



Source: Vietnam Institute of Fine Arts.

Photo 8: Wave Pattern on Pedestal in Phat Tich Temple



Source: Vietnam Institute of Fine Arts.

Photo 9: Pedestal at Phat Tich Temple



Source: Vietnam Institute of Fine Arts.

Photo 10: Pedestal at Ngo Xa Temple



Source: Vietnam Institute of Fine Arts.

Photo 11: Rubbing of Patterns on Octagonal Pedestal at Phat Tich Temple



Source: Vietnam Institute of Fine Arts.

Photo 12: Lions at Phat Tich Temple



Source: Vietnam Institute of Fine Arts.

Note

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