

THE ART OF DECORATIVE EMBROIDERY ON AO DAI IN HO CHI MINH CITY

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Abstract: The Ao Dai is considered the Vietnamese traditional national costume because the shape structure of the Ao Dai is a special shape that does not coincide with any other type of costume in the world today. Furthermore, creating a graceful look, highlighting the beauty of the three body curves of a woman are the dominant feature of the Ao Dai. Therefore, the shaping of embroidered motifs to decorate Ao Dai not only contributes to increasing the beauty of this female costume, but also promoting the traditional art of embroidery and decoration of the Vietnamese nation. The characteristics of decorative embroidery on Ao Dai are specifically shown through designs, colors, materials, and patterns arranged in a harmonious way to create a beautiful layout on the Ao Dai. That further proves the historical value and the core values of decorative embroidery on Ao Dai developed according to the divergence of Vietnamese history in general, especially in Ho Chi Minh City in particular. Today, the modern embroidery styles with diverse embroidery techniques, patterns and textures close to life, rich colors, is closer and more pervasive on all types of traditional Ao Dai Vietnam through their use values such as: Ao Dai embroidered for festivals, performances, gala dinners and especially Ao Dai embroidered with daily wear, contributing to meeting the aesthetic needs of women in Ho Chi Minh City.

Keywords: Ao Dai, embroidery Ao Dai, embroidery motif, decorative embroidery art, historical value

Introduction

For women's clothing, it is rare to find a decorative art form that is as widely applicable and popular as embroidery as it is today. We can easily see embroidery techniques in many genres such as women's wear to work, going out, or going to parties, especially Ao Dai... As can be seen, the art of embroidery is gentle, with exquisite beauty being one of the important factors contributing to the aesthetic beauty of an outfit.

Ho Chi Minh City - the economic, cultural, and fashion center of the South, is in the process of cultural transactions, so the art of embroidery on costumes also has changed to society's needs and tastes. Therefore, the need to understand the change in the art of embroidery on Ao Dai in the period of cultural exchange in Ho Chi Minh City has prompted the researcher to carry out the topic "The art of decorative embroidery on Ao Dai in Ho Chi Minh City" for researcher to have a broader and more

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complete view, serving the fashion design industry in the future. This will be an extremely valuable document, helping readers have a specific understanding of the origin and development, and characteristics of Ao Dai. Especially, the topic points out the characteristics of the current decorative embroidery on Ao Dai in Ho Chi Minh City such as designs, colors, materials, patterns and textures, layout as well as embroidery techniques on the Ao Dai in the current strong cultural exchange process.

In theory, the embroidery topic has been studied in many books, magazines, and research such as articles published in World Heritage magazine, Agency of Vietnam Cultural Heritage Association, No. 3/2010 by Le Thi Tuyet (Tuyet, 2010), and reference books by author Bui Van Vuong writing about "*Vietnamese handicraft heritage*", "*Vietnamese traditional weaving and embroidery*" (Vuong, 2010). These documents introduced the origin of the embroidery, the development process of embroidery and characteristics of traditional embroidery villages in Vietnam.

Group of research works on embroidery techniques such as "*Embroidery craft*" by Thai Van Bon - Nguyen Thi Hanh (Bon & Hanh, 1994), "*Practice techniques of embroidery*" by Trieu Thi Choi (Choi, 1985), "*Art of decorative embroidery*" by Trieu Thi Choi, Nguyen Thi My Hue (Choi & Hue, 2006), "*100 Embroidery Patterns: A Guide to Hand Embroidery Techniques*" by Bich Loan... These documents focused on introducing embroidery tools, preparing stages and instructions on how to perform each stitch; accompanied by pictures illustrating patterns and decorative layouts commonly encountered on costumes.

The group of researching embroidery on Vietnam costumes has author Doan Thi Tinh with "*Vietnamese costumes*" (Tinh, 2006), Ngo Duc Thinh with "*Traditional costumes of Vietnamese ethnic groups*" (Thinh, 2000), Nguyen Thu Phuong with "*Vietnamese costumes from traditional to modern*" (Phuong, 2005). These are useful documents in order to find out the characteristics of embroidery art on traditional costumes based on the history of national costumes. The author Cung Duong Hang with "*The fine art of traditional Vietnamese women's clothing*" (Hang, 2011), has made a number of studies on the types of costumes of ethnic minorities in Vietnam and the characteristics of traditional women's costumes. Thereby, it can be seen that embroidered patterns on brocade are a factor contributing to expressing the unique characteristics of each ethnic group.

These are very valuable documents, helping the author to have a specific understanding of the origin and development process of Vietnamese traditional embroidery. However, the above documents only show the basic characteristics of color, layout as well as traditional embroidery techniques of our nation, without making any changes in design, color, material, motifs or patterns, layouts as well as techniques of embroidery on costumes in the current period of strong cultural exchange. In practical terms, the fashion market has had many designers use embroidery in decorative apparel such as Minh Hanh Designer (Hanh, n.d), Thuan Viet Designer (Thuan Viet, n.d), Duc Hung Designer (Hung, n.d), ... However, so far there has not been a theoretical work summarizing of this embroidery topic.

The article was studied according to the method of artology, combined with the field of practical research, observation, photography, collection of sources from books, newspapers, magazines, antiquities in museums, surveys, collects and records of actual images. In addition, The article applied the art research method and the synthesis method, and analyse specific embroidery products to highlight the characteristics and values of decorative embroidery on Ao Dai.

This paper was studied to clarify the art of decorative embroidery on Ao Dai in Ho Chi Minh, in the current cultural exchange process. At the same time, this paper affirming the importance of decorative embroidery in the fashion design industry, contributes to improving the aesthetic level of the city's people, and furthermore promotes the traditional values of the nation.

The presentation of the paper has the following layout: Section 1 presents an overview of the topic; section 2 presents the studied information about Ao Dai and characteristic of embroidered Ao Dai in Ho Chi Minh City; section 3 presents result and discussion; and concludes in section 4.

The art of decorative embroidery on Ao Dai in Ho Chi Minh City

Ao Dai - Origin and history

Definition of Ao Dai

Ao Dai is the wear of men and women, covering the torso from the neck to the knees or over the pillow. The tunic can have 2-5 bodies, open edge or middle, high standing neck, low or broken neck, round neck, V-neck, boat neck, solid shoulders, connecting shoulders or fluffy shoulders, long arms or sleeveless, flaps can be long, short, wide, narrow, bear folded, straightened, gliding, right angle, round angle... (The National Council, p.64).

Every country in the world, including the tribes in the dark places with cups, has its color. For Vietnamese women, the Ao Dai is an outfit and also a unique outfit because it has all the characteristics: discreet, luxurious, lyrical, romantic, elegant, and gentle that Vietnamese women must be proud to wear every time they wear it.

It can be confirmed that, in the current period, when it comes to the Ao Dai, international friends know that it is the traditional costume, the national dress of the Vietnamese nation. Ao Dai is one of the few pure Vietnamese words (such as fish sauce, pho, spring rolls ...), which has long been used by foreigners from Vietnamese etymology, without translation, and on text, capitalized, unsigned: AO DAI. Thus, the Ao Dai has become a symbol of beauty in the Vietnamese culture of wearing, known, recognized, and praised by the world. Although it has gone through many stages of innovation and development, so far, the Ao Dai has retained its traditional beauty with its discreet but very sexy lines, gentle and seductive, idyllic but beautiful. Through the long process of development, the Ao Dai has become an outfit with bold national cultural colors, signifying the beauty of the gentle and gentle beauty of Vietnamese women.

History of Ao Dai

In Cochinchina, during the reign of King Nguyen Phuc Khoat (1744), due to the influence of The Ming military (men and women wore pants not skirt), along with a preference for the native Cham people, a reform about the way of dressing had shaped the first style of the Vietnamese Ao Dai (Vietnam Center, 2020, p.67)

In the early 30s, the wave of Western European culture introduced to Vietnam influenced the tastes of the people, especially the aesthetic conception of dresses. Therefore, it had created an innovative movement in color and style, turning the tunic into a kind of outfit that celebrates the beauty of a

woman. A few tunic stylists began to appear during this period, but they almost only managed to remove the connection between the dresses, as western fabrics were woven wider. During this time, the painter Cat Tuong made an important reform: transforming the quadruple into a neo-Lemur-era tunic based on the style of western women's dresses that were not exposed, the flap was long, curved; connecting the assembled shoulders, the hands of the chequered bamboo shoots, the neck cut deep to the chest, the hem of the poster or the neck of the lotus leaf, ... Ao Dai was sewn tightly, and the front row of buttons was shifted to an opening along the shoulders and then ran along one flank. The Lemur Ao Dai was worn with white satin pants, high boots, umbrella arms, and an extra dress. However, the Lemur tunic was deemed too "hybrid" to be boycotted by public opinion (Hang, 2021, p.232) & (Heritage, 2021).

In 1934, the painter Le Prussia removed the hybrid features of Le Mur shirts, and added ethnic elements from the four-body and five-body shirts, creating a harmonious fusion, when combining the old and the new. It is an antique shirt, hugging the torso, while the lower two flaps are free to hover. And this type quickly won the hearts of the females at that time (Hang, 2021. p.233) & (Heritage, 2021). Le Pho Ao Dai designed by the painter Le Pho is considered the standard of style and has survived to this day.

After being shaped in the basic style, the Le Pho tunic had since had innovations and changes to become the typical Ao Dai style as it is today. The first thing to mention was the bold reform of Ms. Trinh Thuc Oanh, principal of Brieux School - Hang Cot Girls' School, Hanoi (1910 - 1954). She pressed the waist darts of the shirt, making it fit close to the graceful lines of the female.

The 1950s were a wide tunic, waistband, front and rear dart press, long dotted heels, high neck lined with hard laces, and narrow sleeves. In the late 1950s, the "Tran Le Xuan" style appeared: a wide open neck (round neck or boat neck), (Hang, 2021, p.237) & (Heritage, 2021).

The Hippy Ao Dai trend in the 60s took place mainly in the South, where the Hippy wave of Western culture strongly influenced. The Hippy tunic style had a narrow and short blouse, and a high waist with a playful, vibrant color worn with trousers or trousers.

In the early 1970s, mini-tunics appeared with narrow flaps, short flaps to the knees, and low necks. Especially during this time, the style of sewing dresses with raglan sewing, devised by Dung tailor in Dakao, Saigon, solved the wrinkles that often appeared on the sides of the armpits. The shoulders of the tunic began to be cut off so that the breasts and sleeves were more hugged, wrinkled less, but less fabric. The sleeve was connected to the torso from the shoulder diagonal. This arrangement converted the row of buttons that were closed from under the neck down to the armpits, and then run along one side of the hip. In addition, this assembly made the fabric close to the body of the wearer from under the armpits to the waist, so the tunic fitted snugly into each curve of the woman's body. Sewing pants were very long with bears up to 60cm wide and sometimes lined with two or three layers.

In the years 1975 - 1990, the tunic was decorated with a lot of embroidery patterns, painted from the chest to the flap. From the 70s to the 90s, tunics did not change much. Sometimes the way of wearing was innovative, such as clothes with the same color, but did not create a profound change. In 1988, the Miss Ao Dai pageant was held for the first time in Ho Chi Minh City. Ho Chi Minh City marked the revival and strong development of Ao Dai with a variety of new designs. In it stood out two

schools: brocade tunics and printed tunics. The brocade Ao Dai made by Minh Hanh designers was based on the brocade materials of some northern localities such as Lai Chau, Bac Ha, Sapa, ... The painted Ao Dai was designed based on the traditional one but shows modern fashion with many lines, colors, and patches of color in the language of painting. This model was initiated by artist Sy Hoang and introduced in many fashion competitions.

From 1990 to the present, Ao Dai trend backed to the wide tunic, the heel-length flap, the pressed dart, the high or flat collar, the round neck, the boat neck, the U-neck, the heart neck, ... sewn with many fabrics with different variations such as chiffon, linen, velvet, jean, lace, etc. In addition, drawing Ao Dai styles, brocade tunics, embroidered tunics had been increasingly popular.

The art of decorative embroidery on the costume in The Nguyen Dynasty

Definition of embroidery

Embroidery is a type of handicraft, that uses needles and threads to create patterns on fabric by hand. Embroidery is one of the decorative forms that can be widely applied to costumes of many genres and ages with delicate beauty (Nguyen Lan, 2000, p.1020).



Figure 1: Traditional hand embroidery (from Embroidery TNC, n.d)

The decorative embroidery on the costume in The Nguyen Dynasty

Embroidery in Vietnam has existed for a long time, but by the feudal dynasties of the Nguyen Dynasty, it flourished and was highly artistic. Therefore, in this paper, the author focused on researching embroidered costumes of the Nguyen Dynasty and clarifying the characteristics of decorative embroidery on costumes of this period.

- **About Silhouette**, the embroidery costume in women's clothing was usually the Giao Linh gown, the phoenix robe, Nhat Binh robe, the lady's robe (Vietnam Center, 2021, p.174), (Bui Van Vuong, (2010), *National cultural identity of Vietnam - Vietnamese traditional pottery*, p. 69)



Figure 2: Phoenix Robe of Empress, (from Nguyen Thi Minh Hue, 2022)

- **Color:** The main color of the royal embroidery costumes was yellow, but not all yellow colors were the same. Depending on the status, type of outfit and time of using, the yellow color on the costume was also different.
- **The material** was woven with extremely precious silk, commonly known as satin, brocade, etc... (Trinh Quang Vu, 2008, p.311)
- **Embroidered patterns** on royal costumes were not only decorative, but they also carried many symbolic meanings, expressing the aspirations of a dynasty and of the ancient feudal society, such as: dragons, turtles, phoenixes, bats, flowers, mountain, kanji, antiques, etc. The dragon motif symbolized the supreme power of the king (Lua Viet Studio, 2022). The phoenix is the king of all birds, also known as the sacred bird. According to legend, the phoenix appeared only during prosperous dynasties. The image of the phoenix itself was a gentle, ethereal image, carrying a deep and noble spiritual meaning. So the phoenix motif was considered to be the aspiration of a peaceful life, of a peaceful dynasty. Turtle was an animal that can live up to several hundred years. So this motif was a symbol of longevity. The mountain motif symbolized the "stability and sustainability" of the country and the dynasty (Doan Thi Tinh, 2006, p.78)



Figure 3: Dragon, phoenix, turtle, (from Nguyen Thi Minh Hue, 2022) and (the author)



Figure 4: Some pattern embroidery such as bat, flower motifs, and Ho Chi Minh Historical Museum, (from the author)

In general, the decorative symbols of the Nguyen Dynasty carried the symbol of auspiciousness, aspirations derived from Eastern culture. Decorative costumes express wishes and wishes for good things such as wealth (peony, phoenix), long life (tortoise, crane, peach fairy), peace and joy (phoenix), prosperity, affluence, wealth, many perks (bats, fish), a comfortable and free life (chrysanthemums, apricots, cranes)

- **Embroidery layout**, in The Nguyen Dynasty was rich, but main focus on two styles. First of all, the patterns are spread all over the garment. In this layout, the motifs were the same size. The highlight were the groups of flowers, clouds, turtles, cranes and groups arranged in the style of four statues and five elements. In the hemline, there were three mountains, waves... And then, the central decorative position was at the neck, front of the chest, the pattern size was larger than other positions, and usually using dragon or phoenix in the round shape. (Vietnam Center, 2021, p.180), (Nguyen Hai Anh, 2009, e.18)



Figure 5: The layout of pattern embroidery on Empress Gown, 19th century, Ho Chi Minh Historical Museum, (from Nguyen Thi Minh Hue, 2022)

- **Embroidery technique:** During The Nguyen Dynasty, the embroidery technique on the Ao Dai of ancient women often used certain stitches such as long and short stitches, stem stitches, French knots, etc., combined with sequins, beads, and thread inlaid with gold or silver to make the flowers stand out.



Figure 6: Embroidery stitches on The Nguyen Dynasty's costumes, 19th century, Ho Chi Minh Historical Museum, (from the author)

Embroidery not only aimed to create luxurious and aristocratic costumes, but the ruling class also relied on embroidery patterns or motifs to express the power, position and role of the wearer in the feudal society at that time. This was shown very clearly in the regulations on the patterns and motifs embroidered on the costumes of The Nguyen dynasty. From which looking at the patterns, we could recognize that it was the aristocracy. Especially, only the royal class was permitted to wear embroidered court costumes, while the aristocracy and mandarins wore the costume woven by a fake embroidery technique called brocade weaving.

The art of decorative embroidery on Ao Dai in Ho Chi Minh City

Embroidery on Ao Dai in Ho Chi Minh City is changing day by day to meet the needs and tastes of society and to attract tourists from all over the world.

In the content of this research, the author studies the characteristics of decorative embroidery on Ao Dai such as the silhouette, color, material, pattern, texture, layout, and embroidery technique.

Silhouette and styles

In general, in terms of the style of Ao Dai, there are 2 styles such as the classic style and the modern or innovative style. With the classic style, Ao Dai is usually a collared shirt from 2-5cm high, raglan arms up to the wrists, narrow sleeves, button-down tops with the right button from neck to waist, flap over-the-knee lengths, worn with wide trousers.

Innovative forms of Ao Dai are often heavily stylized at the neck, sleeves, and flaps. There are many stylized collars such as boat neck, heart neck, square neck, misaligned neck, ...; stylized sleeves like flared hands, badger hands, short-sleeved, gruff hands; and stylized flaps such as wide flap, the back flap is stretched like the tail of a wedding dress, ... sometimes worn with hugging pants. In addition, in recent years there were bold stylizations such as the cut-out back, which gave very new touches to embroidered Ao Dai (Figure. 7).



Figure 7: Classic and modern style of Embroidery Ao Dai style, (from Han Quy, 2013) & (Thuan Viet Designer, n.d)

On the market in Ho Chi Minh City, Ao Dai is now worn by people to go to ceremonies, pagodas, especially Tet holidays, or parties and performances. The national dress is worn to important meetings, on the day of the flag salute of some schools, ... In everyday life, Ao Dai is also the uniform of postal workers, companies, banks, restaurants, and shops... The image of this Ao Dai not only creates grace and confidence but also shows seriousness in places of frequent diplomatic contact, in offices, or schools... Thus, Ao Dai are used in a variety of environments and circumstances, leading to a variety of styles of dresses. For the above cases, the Ao Dai usually has a neck or no neck, narrow hands, or flared hands, but the flap has little modification.

The character in figure 8 was an employee of the Small Market post office, on Man Thien Street, Thu Duc City, due to the work requirements, the boat neck-style Ao Dai, and flared hands are very suitable. Black embroidery textures combined with lilac purple, creating lightness and comfort. Ao Dai was made from light, soft mousseline material that created comfort when working. Stylized flowers were embroidered mainly on the chest, wrists, and flap. Especially, the hand-to-hand hybrids and flaps were embroidered in the form of curves and cutwork, making the Ao Dai more vivid and suitable for the working environment in the post office.



Figure 8: Postal worker, (from the author)

However, when attending important events, holidays, and weddings... with a desire to express themselves, most women often choose Ao Dai with colourful embroidered dresses or modern style to create an impressive luxurious, and aristocratic look. Especially in beauty contests, many contestants

chose an embroidered Ao Dai for their traditional costume contests. Typically, at the Miss Universe 2011 contest, the beauty Hoang My chose a white tunic, high neck, embroidered with lotus flowers designed by Thuan Viet, at the welcoming party in Guaruja landmark. She made a deep impression and received many compliments from international friends. This was also a classic embroidered outfit (Figure 9).



Figure 9: Hoang My at Miss Universe 2011, (from Trung Duc, 2011)

Typically, at the Miss Universe 2015 contest, the beauty Pham Huong chose a white tunic, high neck, embroidered with lotus flowers designed by Thuan Viet Designer. The beautiful Pham Huong wore a white Ao Dai, silk material, in which the crane motif was hand-embroidered with silk thread very elaborately and meticulously, embroidered all over the front and back of the flaps (Figure 10). This was also a classic embroidered Ao Dai, with a wider flap, keeping the traditional neck style.



Figure 10: Pham Huong at Miss Universe 2015, (from Hoang Lan, 2015).

Colors

Ao Dai is designed with diverse, full of colours such as red, pink, orange, yellow, ocher, green, sky blue, charcoal purple, light purple, white, black, etc. (Figure 15). In general, there are 2 main color schemes on Ao Dai. The first is the color scheme between embroidery patterns. The second way is to mix color between the pattern and the Ao Dai background. Accordingly, there are color schemes that create similarities or contrasting mixed colors. The patterns, motifs, and background of the Ao Dai were mixed in hot colors: red-yellow-orange, carrot orange - orange - yellow - green; cold or

contrasting colors such as black - orange - brown - yellow soil, or a combination of colors that stand out on a white background, etc. These color schemes were all aimed at creating high efficiency when communicating (Figures 11, 12, 13, 14).



Figure 11: Contrasting mix and making homology on embroidered Ao Dai, (from Quat Dong Vietnam hand embroidery art, 2020)



Figure 12: Mixed color on embroidery Ao Dai, (from Sh – Vietnam, n.d).



Figure 13: The color combination of embroidery thread on white background, (from Quyên Nguyễn Wedding & More, n.d)



Figure 14: The color combination of embroidery thread on black background, (from Ao Dai Trung Hieu & Linh Bui, n.d)



Figure 15: Color block trend in Sen Viet Collection on Embroidery Ao Dai by Thuan Viet Designer, (from Vietgiaitri, 2012)

Materials

The Ao Dai embroidery materials often change according to fashion trends. The favourite materials used to sew embroidered Ao Dai are silk, lace, linen, chiffon, muslin, brocade, ... In the last two years, the use of velvet material to sew embroidered Ao Dai is a popular trend.

First of all, it must be followed by the Ao Dai that the Beauty Tourism contest Miss Vietnamese people Huynh Thi Ngoc Han wore when participating in the event at the National Youth Week, in Australia. In the middle of King George Square in Brisbane's city center, she wore a white chiffon Ao Dai embroidered with rose lotus flowers, sitting at a table displaying many of the calligraphy she made. On the table, there were bamboo palms, ship squid, and statues of Vietnamese girls wearing tunics, quadrupeds with conical hats, and sports hats, ... bringing a charming corner of Vietnam, and attracting visitors. The beauty Ngoc Han not only impressed international friends with her ability to write calligraphy, but also with her gracefully embroidered tunic in soft chiffon material (Figure 16).

Secondly, This Ao Dai model was a part of Ngoc Han's new Ao Dai collection – “Old road with white clouds”, made from natural fibers such as brocade. Embroidery motifs were mainly embroidered with flowers, leaves and birds, bringing the meaning of peace and serenity. Beads were dotted on the hem of the Ao Dai to enhance the clarity (Figure 17).



Figure 16: White chiffon embroidery Ao Dai, (from Thanh Kien, Jorge Gallardo, 2012)



Figure 17: White brocade embroidery Ao Dai (from Ngan An, 2018)

Thirdly, the lace itself is already beautiful thanks to the pre-woven pattern. Therefore, when using lace, the designers used contrasting or similar color schemes to put embroidery patterns on the lace material, and at the same time used embroidery stitches to create strokes such as stem stitch, French knot stitch, and chain stitch, ... to create a pattern. For example, the white lace Ao Dai model worn by the beautiful Ly Nha Ky, the lotus flower pattern on the Ao Dai was embroidered with layers to create a 3D effect. The arrangement of embroidered motifs stretching from the collar to the bottom with puffy sleeves enhances the wearer's height. Ly Nha Ky appeared in the Ao Dai by designer Dinh Van Tho looked a noble, modern, luxurious, pure and traditional Vietnamese beauty (Figure 18).



Figure 18: Embroidered Ao Dai made from lace, (Phi Long, 2018).

And another fabric to sew Ao Dai is Velvet. Velvet fabric has a fine layer of fur on the surface, with a smooth, shiny appearance for a soft, luxurious, noble effect, especially when combined with hand embroidered motifs, ... The hand-embroidered details in velvet Ao Dai, are the highlight points that enhance the aristocratic beauty of the person wearing the outfit. For example, Linh Nga, a talented dancer, famous in Vietnamese showbiz, was a black velvet embroidered Ao Dai (Figure 19). Flowers and leaves of lotus were meticulously embroidered, arranged stretching from the chest to the hips, making the wearer look loving, luxurious, and aristocratic.



Figure 19: Linh Nga in black velvet Ao Dai, (from Thuy Anh, 2022)

Let's see the yellow silk Ao Dai that two contestants Ngoc Chau and Do Nhat Ha wore when participating in the semi-final night of the Miss Universe 2022 contest took place in Ho Chi Minh City: high collar, slightly flared sleeves. Sleeves and flaps were embroidered, combined with embossed prints (Figure 20).



Figure 20: Ngoc Chau and Do Nhat Ha with silk embroidered Ao Dai at Miss Univer 2022 Contest, (from Quynh Danh, Phuong Lam & Quoc Minh, 2022)

Embroidery patterns, motifs

Designers often use motifs or patterns embroideries that are diverse and rich such as flowers, flower string, stylized leaves, curves, characters, letters, shapes... and so on. About flowers, there are lotuses, orchids, roses, chrysanthemums, dahlias, sunflowers, apricots, peach blossoms, bronze flowers, Pensée flowers, poppies, etc. In addition, there are animal patterns such as phoenix, peacock, butterfly, fish, bird, dragon, ... Furthermore, there are traditional patterns of ethnic minorities or stylized royal patterns: clouds, water waves, fireballs... (Figure 21, 22). These are motifs in daily life, close to nature and people. Although they still use ancient royal embroideries like dragons and phoenixes, these motifs now no longer carry the symbolic meaning of power or status, but only want to bring beauty to nature lovers and love embroidered costumes. Therefore, today's modern motifs are embroidered on a variety of costumes for different purposes such as going out, party, wedding, event, holiday (Figure 23).



Figure 21: Flower embroidered patterns, (from the author)



Figure 22: Animal embroidered patterns: pheonix, fish (from the author)

In beauty contests, when designers used embroidery patterns on costumes for beauties, they also focused on the auspicious message or meaning of embroidery patterns. In order to honour the spiritual and intellectual beauty of the beauties, designers often use flowers or motifs with similar symbolic

meanings to embroider on the costumes. For example, the yellow orchid not only contains a message of resilience and strength, but also exudes the elegance and nobility of the wearer. And the message of a strong, resilient girl with beauty of soul and intellect was sent by designer Thuan Viet on Ao Dai embroidered with yellow orchids for Huong Giang, ... (Figure 23).



Figure 23: Orchid embroidered motifs on event Ao Dai of Thuan Viet Designer for the beautiful Huong Giang to wear in the Miss Universe Contest. Embroidery motifs here were mainly orchids, arranged in a triangular layout: one flower in the middle, three flowers around rotate in different directions and then combined with a few flowers, small leaves, interlaced layout, filling the upper part of the bust and extending down to the waist (Thuan Viet Designer, n.d)

The image of a lotus flower is growing from the mud but still fragrant, brilliant, rising full of vitality which helping us to think of the nobility, extraordinary energy, and indomitable mettle of the Vietnamese people - A country that has also grown from the war, difficulties and hardships. Therefore, to show a Vietnamese woman with idyllic beauty, resilient and intense spirit of Vietnamese people, the designer had included the image of a lotus flower in the costume. The Ao Dai of the beautiful Ly Nha Ky is a typical example (Figure 18)

At Miss Universe 2013, Truong Thi May's national costume, ranked 4th in the top 10 most beautiful national costumes, was described by Missosology page with words such as luxury, elegance and royal character. Designer Thuan Viet took the main idea from the nation's national flower - lotus to create this unique costume. All lotus motifs on the body were carefully hand-embroidered and pressed with gold emulsion, creating a striking and luxurious look. This lotus-inspired national costume was not only beautiful and eye-catching, but also symbolized the purity and tenderness of Vietnamese women (Figure 24).

There are also some nationalistic motifs included in Ao Dai such as bamboo leaves and cranes. The image of the crane symbolizes the quintessence, noble qualities, strength to face difficulties, and brings a lot of luck. And the bamboo leaf symbolizes resilience, and strong will of man. For example, beautiful Pham Huong's Ao Dai at Miss Universe 2015 with the theme Dance of Cranes, with all the textures on the body of the Ao Dai are cranes and bamboo leaves (Figure 25).



Figure 24: Lotus patterns on Ao Dai, (Quang Loc, 2015)



Figure 25: Bamboo leaf and cranes patterns on Ao Dai, (Quang Loc, 2015)

In wedding event, the red peony in the Nguyen Dynasty was an image of wealth, joy, and happiness. Continuing the tradition, this pattern along with phoenix, lotus flower, peach blossom and some other flowers with auspicious meanings are used to decorate the bride's wedding dress on her big day.



Figure 26: Embroidery pattern on the bride's wedding Ao Dai: peach blossom, phoenix, lotus flower, red peony (from Mai Ami, n.d) and Quyên Nguyen Wedding & More, n.d)

Embroidery Ao Dai also appears in a number of other important occasions such as Tet holidays, anniversaries, yearbook shooting, ... in Ho Chi Minh City. On these events, Embroidered patterns on Ao Dai are extremely diverse and rich, as long as they create beauty for the Ao Dai and have a color suitable for the intended use: apricot blossom, peach blossom, willow, lily, chrysanthemum, etc.



Figure 27: Embroidery patterns on Ao Dai: lily, chrysanthemum, (from Quyên Nguyen Wedding & More, n.d) and (Boxshop, n.d)



Figure 28: Embroidery patterns on Tết's Ao Dai: apricot blossom, daisy, apricot blossom (from Boxshop, n.d)

Decorative layout

Different from the spreading layout as on the previous royal costume, in Ho Chi Minh City now motifs and patterns on Ao Dai have been often placed in important places to emphasize, create the illusion, and highlight the advantages of the wearer such as collar, chest, shoulders, wrists, chest or from the chest running down to the waist; in front of the waist or from the waist running down the flap, behind the back, only front body or both the front and back body... Embroidered motifs placed on the collar would lead the eye forward to the face of the wearer, or placed at the waist will emphasize the slim waist. And if embroidery was placed on the chest, it would create the illusion of a fuller bust. If the pattern was stretched from the chest to the hem of the flap, it would help the wearer look taller and slimmer (Figure 29).



Figure 29: Pattern layout on Ao Dai, (from Aodaimissvan.com, n.d) and (Sh – Vietnam, n.d)

However, sometimes some styles of embroidered dresses have a skewed composition but still create a good aesthetic effect. To shed some light, the researcher analysed the layout of the impressive 15.1m peacock embroidered tunic performed by Ngoc Han - Miss Vietnam 2010, which was presented by Nhat Dung to the Southern Women's Museum on the occasion of celebrating Vietnam Women's Day 20th October 2012 (Figure 30).



Figure 30: Unsymmetrical layout with Peacock embroidery Ao Dai, (from Duyen Ao Dai Fabric, n.d)

Embroidery technique

Today, most of the traditional embroidery techniques are used on Ao Dai such as long and short stitch, satin stitch, French knot, stem stitch, chain stitch, etc... Besides using traditional stitches, embroiderers also use other modern stitches like random straight stitches and 3D flower stitches... If in the past to embroidery flowers for royal costumes, embroiderers often used gold-plated thread, silver-plated thread, sequined, beaded to decorate Ao Dai etc., the current embroidery patterns usually use cotton or silk thread for embroidery. However, the combination with beads or sequins is still used, but in a different style, a more modern and novel way than before.

If you look closely at the patterns on the Ao Dai, the area for embroidering flowers has many forms such as tiny, medium, and large flowers (Figure 31). With flowers of medium and large sizes, the embroidery technique often used to make the flowers is long and short stitches to full space inside. Flowers with a small area could be used with many different stitches, for example, long and short stitches, French knot stitches, satin stitches, random straight stitches, etc. In addition, people often use several stitches to block, the border around the flower with different colors to create a highlight. For patterns that do not require solid embroidery, workers often use chain stitches, back stitches, or stem stitches to border (Figure 32).



Figure 31: Long and short stitches, French knot stitch on Ao Dai, (from *afamily.vn*, n.d)



Figure 32: Long and short stitches (a,d), French knot stitches (b) and chain stitches (c), (from *Dongphucsongphu.com*, 2021)

There are many new embroidery stitches used on Ao Dai to create novelty and fit with current trends. For example, random straight stitches, created a rose motif as shown in figure 20, an embroidery stitch that has never been used to embroider Ao Dai (Figure 32).



Figure 32: Random straight stitches on embroidery Ao Dai of salesman at XQ embroidery showroom, (source: the author)

Results and Discussion

The current embroidered Ao Dai models in Ho Chi Minh City have a variety of designs, colors, as well as materials. Especially the patterns, motifs and embroidery techniques on Ao Dai today, have inherited and promoted the beauty of the old traditional decorative embroidery art, bringing a modern and sophisticated beauty to embroidered Ao Dai today.

After language, clothing is a sign, the second most important information to identify different peoples in the world. Each costume has distinct cultural values, contributing to the expression of the unique cultural identity of each nation. And the art of hand embroidery, formerly only serving the royal class in the feudal period, still exists up to now, proving that the old high-class aesthetic tastes are still popular today.

Ao Dai is now the national costume of Vietnam, while the art of embroidery also has a long history of development with the country. Therefore, the application of decorative embroidery on Ao Dai today is a form of maintaining the national cultural origin, promoting the unique beauty, and creating exchanges with other cultures.

The relationship between inheriting and promoting the value of decorative embroidery on Ao Dai

At present, decorative embroidery has become a heritage, bringing cultural values typical for high-class beauty. And at the same time inheriting the spiritual values of traditional embroidery art which are the delicate beauty, gentleness of Vietnamese women, showing high-class aesthetic tastes. Moreover, decorative embroidery has changed through beautiful and delicate stitches, better thread quality and colours, especially the change of new motifs, and patterns to suit the development of society in the current period of cultural exchange. It is a change from a system of patterns with symbolic meanings (dragon, phoenix, turtle, crane, rain clouds, water waves, ...) to a simple motif, pattern system with natural beauty, and rustic, with no mention in the meaning of the patterns or motifs (flowers, leaves, animal, ...).

Embroidered Ao Dai fashion today is not only rich in designs with many different uses, but also serves a wide range of economically viable customers and different social classes. That is the active development and expansion of decorative embroidery on Ao Dai in the current period.

Conclusion

In this article, the researcher has learned the characteristics of embroidery art on female Ao Dai of the Nguyen dynasty. The characteristics are expressed through designs, colors, materials, patterns, embroidery patterns, decorative layouts and embroidery techniques of the Nguyen Dynasty. Especially, embroidery patterns and motifs of this era are decorated with symbolic art expressing the desire for life and good wishes from Eastern cultures. Decorative symbols expressing a whole system of aspirations are the most prominent feature in the symbolism of the Nguyen Dynasty. From the patterns of thunder clouds, water waves, sparks, water waves, the three mountains all show the power of nature. And mascots such as phoenix and turtle represent the wish of the owner of the costume for sustainability, longevity and wealthy.

The art of decorative embroidery on Ao Dai in Ho Chi Minh City has now had many changes to suit new needs and tastes, especially the change in patterns, textures, and modern embroidery techniques. Especially, decorative embroidery is not only applied to beautify costumes and Ao Dai, but also a factor linking tradition with modernity. The application of embroidery on traditional Ao Dai but still updating modern fashion trends aims to maintain the national cultural origin while creating exchanges and integration with other cultures. In this article, the author studies the art of embroidery on Ao Dai in Ho Chi Minh City, the research results not only show the changes of embroidery art to suit the times but also show the enduring value of decorative embroidery art in life, culture and society nowadays. Specifically, the change of objects wearing embroidered ao dai, decorative layout and the system of patterns and embroidery motifs on costumes. Women of any class, if they have money, can buy embroidered Ao Dai to wear. And the choice of patterns and textures is mainly based on the purpose of use and more personal preferences and desires. Typically, choosing Ao Dai embroidered with red peonies for the wedding day with the wish of joy, happiness and wealth.

Embroidery has created sustainable values over time. Therefore, preserving and promoting the traditional values of embroidery art is a necessary work in the current period.

Although wearing embroidered Ao Dai is popular, it also faces the following challenges and difficulties. Firstly, the appearance of Ao Dai with too much frequency, everywhere you can see it, from students to staff, from teachers to restaurant waitresses... In general, Ao Dai is worn anywhere, any occasion and anyone can wear. Secondly, the current trend, the types of Ao Dai are being loved such as embroidery, beaded, hand-painted, a combination of embroidery and beading, ... However, these types of embroidery Ao Dai, the cost is much higher than digital printing Ao Dai or heat transfer printing Ao Dai. Finally, the popular status of the modern Ao Dai with modern prints, especially the innovative Ao Dai worn with skirts. From the three challenges above, it can be seen that now the modern, printed Ao Dai is very popular, worn by a variety of people on any occasion. This makes the Ao Dai - with its position as the traditional costume of the Vietnamese people, gradually reduce the solemnity and respect. Therefore, the researcher proposes: the innovative Ao Dai form is still necessary to show the dynamism and transformation suitable for life, but should not be worn with skirts to preserve the traditional, non-hybrid features. At the same time, wearing Ao Dai should only be for formal occasions such as weddings, New Year holidays, and some professions related to education, communication, foreign affairs, culture and art, ...

Scope of further research

If I have a chance to continue, the researcher will study about the art of decorative embroidery on dress, or suit.

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Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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