

Artistic values of Vinh Long red ceramics and orientations for heritage preservation in Vietnam

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Abstract – This paper analyzes the artistic values of Vinh Long red ceramics through the interrelationship among raw materials, production techniques, visual language, color, form, and decorative organization, while also discussing orientations for preserving and promoting this ceramic tradition in the contemporary context. The study adopts a qualitative approach that combines document analysis, field observation, semi-structured interviews, and art-historical analysis of representative product groups from the craft village. The findings show that the identity of Vinh Long red ceramics is shaped by local red clay, traditional firing techniques, unglazed brick-red surfaces, robust yet graceful forms, and a system of motifs associated with daily life, beliefs, and the riverine landscape of southern Vietnam. On this basis, the paper highlights the cultural, aesthetic, educational, and tourism values of Vinh Long red ceramics and proposes preservation strategies based on the documentation of craft knowledge, support for artisans, design innovation, linkages among education, tourism, and digital communication, and the expansion of creative cultural markets. The study provides a scientific basis for safeguarding local artistic heritage in connection with sustainable development.

Keywords: Artistic heritage. Craft village. Heritage preservation. Local culture. Vinh Long red ceramics.

Valores artísticos da cerâmica vermelha de Vinh Long e orientações para a preservação do patrimônio no Vietnã

Resumo – Este artigo analisa os valores artísticos da cerâmica vermelha de Vinh Long por meio da inter-relação entre matérias-primas, técnicas de produção, linguagem visual, cor, forma e organização decorativa, ao mesmo tempo em que discute orientações para a preservação e promoção dessa tradição cerâmica no contexto contemporâneo. O estudo adota uma abordagem qualitativa que combina análise documental, observação de campo, entrevistas semiestruturadas e análise histórico-artística de grupos representativos de produtos da aldeia artesanal. Os resultados mostram que a identidade da cerâmica vermelha de Vinh Long é moldada pela argila vermelha local, pelas técnicas tradicionais de queima, pelas superfícies vermelho-tijolo sem esmalte, por formas robustas, mas elegantes, e por um sistema de motivos associado à vida cotidiana, às crenças e à paisagem fluvial do sul do Vietnã. Com base nisso, o artigo destaca os valores culturais, estéticos, educativos e turísticos da cerâmica vermelha de Vinh Long e propõe estratégias de preservação baseadas na documentação do conhecimento artesanal, no apoio aos artesãos, na inovação em design, na articulação entre educação, turismo e comunicação digital, e na ampliação dos mercados culturais criativos. O estudo fornece uma base científica

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para a salvaguarda do patrimônio artístico local em conexão com o desenvolvimento sustentável.

Palavras-chave: Aldeia artesanal. Cerâmica vermelha de Vinh Long. Cultura local. Patrimônio artístico. Preservação do patrimônio.

Valores artísticos de la cerámica roja de Vinh Long y orientaciones para la preservación del patrimonio en Vietnam

Resumen – Este artículo analiza los valores artísticos de la cerámica roja de Vinh Long a través de la interrelación entre materias primas, técnicas de producción, lenguaje visual, color, forma y organización decorativa, al tiempo que discute orientaciones para la preservación y promoción de esta tradición cerámica en el contexto contemporáneo. El estudio adopta un enfoque cualitativo que combina análisis documental, observación de campo, entrevistas semiestructuradas y análisis histórico-artístico de grupos representativos de productos de la aldea artesanal. Los resultados muestran que la identidad de la cerámica roja de Vinh Long está determinada por la arcilla roja local, las técnicas tradicionales de cocción, las superficies rojo ladrillo sin esmalte, las formas robustas pero elegantes y un sistema de motivos vinculado a la vida cotidiana, las creencias y el paisaje fluvial del sur de Vietnam. Sobre esta base, el artículo destaca los valores culturales, estéticos, educativos y turísticos de la cerámica roja de Vinh Long y propone estrategias de preservación basadas en la documentación de los saberes artesanales, el apoyo a los artesanos, la innovación en el diseño, la articulación entre educación, turismo y comunicación digital, y la ampliación de los mercados culturales creativos. El estudio aporta una base científica para la salvaguardia del patrimonio artístico local en conexión con el desarrollo sostenible.

Palabras clave: Aldea artesanal. Cerámica roja de Vinh Long. Cultura local. Patrimonio artístico. Preservación del patrimonio.

Introduction

Vinh Long red ceramics constitute a representative branch of the ceramic traditions of southern Vietnam, closely associated with settlement history, local craft production, and the riverine cultural landscape of the Mekong Delta (Ban Quản lý Di tích tỉnh Vĩnh Long, 2017; Hoàng Xuân Chinh, 2011; Trần Khánh Chương, 2001). In recent years, the brick-and-ceramic landscape of Mang Thít has increasingly been highlighted as an important resource for contemporary heritage preservation and cultural tourism development in Vinh Long Province (Chánh Tuy, 2022; Huỳnh Biển, 2024).

However, under the pressure of industrial products, market volatility, the shrinking number of skilled artisans, and the demand for product innovation, many traditional formative and decorative values of Vinh Long red ceramics are at risk of erosion or simplification (Bình Nguyên, 2021; Ninh Ngọc, 2018). At the same time, studies on Vietnamese and southern ceramics have often focused on historical development, techniques, and product typologies, while giving less systematic attention to visual language and to the possibility of translating the artistic values of Vinh Long red ceramics into contemporary creative practice (Nguyễn Đình Chúc; Trần Thanh Hưng, 2022; Nguyễn Nghĩa Phương, 2022).

Beyond its material expression, Vinh Long red ceramics may also be interpreted through the framework of intangible cultural heritage. UNESCO defines intangible cultural heritage as the practices, knowledge, and expressions that communities

recognize as part of their cultural identity and transmit across generations; within this framework, traditional craftsmanship constitutes one of the major domains of living heritage. In this sense, the value of Vinh Long red ceramics lies not only in finished objects but also in embodied know-how, technical vocabularies, firing routines, intergenerational learning, and the meanings attached to making and using ceramic products. Recent studies likewise show that traditional crafts can reinforce place-based identity, support sustainable tourism, and function as educational resources when safeguarding strategies remain community-based and culturally sensitive (UNESCO, n.d.-a; UNESCO, n.d.-b; Cerquetti et al., 2022; Duan et al., 2023; Guillén-Peñafiel et al., 2024).

Against this background, this paper pursues two objectives: (i) to identify the core artistic values of Vinh Long red ceramics through materials, techniques, color, form, and decorative language; and (ii) to propose orientations for preserving and promoting this heritage in contemporary cultural and artistic life.

Methods

The study was conducted using a qualitative approach. The sources of evidence included publications on the history and culture of Vinh Long, studies on Vietnamese and southern ceramics, technical works on ceramic production, and media sources addressing the current situation of preservation, tourism use, and craft-village development in Vinh Long red ceramics. These secondary materials were contrasted with field observation and semi-structured interviews in order to clarify the relationship between production techniques and the aesthetic values of the products.

The fieldwork component was undertaken in Vinh Long Province, with particular attention to the Mang Thit kiln landscape and nearby production households that continue to shape the local ceramic identity. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 11 participants, including master artisans, household producers, kiln owners, local cultural managers. Participants were selected purposively on the basis of experience, active involvement in ceramic production or heritage management, and willingness to discuss technical and artistic issues.

Methodologically, the paper combines: (1) document analysis to reconstruct historical context and craft knowledge; (2) direct observation to describe materials, forming processes, surface tonalities, and structural forms; (3) semi-structured interviews with artisans and local informants to incorporate insider perspectives from the craft community; and (4) art-historical analysis to assess lines, masses, decorative composition, iconographic motifs, and the capacity of the products to express local identity.

Interview notes and field records were organized through thematic coding. Initial codes focused on material selection, clay preparation, firing control, tonal variation, formal preferences, decorative motifs, transmission of know-how, market pressures, and preservation expectations. These codes were then grouped into broader analytical themes aligned with the five criteria used in the study. This procedure strengthened the interpretive dialogue between field evidence and art-historical analysis.

The analytical framework is organized around five criteria: materials and techniques; themes and product types; color; form; and decorative language. On this basis, the values of Vinh Long red ceramics are discussed in relation to heritage preservation, art education, cultural tourism, and the creative economy.

Results and discussion

Characteristics of raw materials and production techniques

One of the main foundations of the identity of Vinh Long red ceramics lies in the use of local red clay. This material generates a clearly recognizable brick-red body after firing and enables artisans to exploit hand-based techniques such as kneading, wheel forming, modeling, relief application, and surface finishing (Nguyễn Trọng Dũng, 2021; Phạm Xuân Yên et al., 1995). Unlike ceramic traditions that rely heavily on glazed surfaces, Vinh Long red ceramics express their aesthetic value directly through the material itself and through the thermal effects of the firing process.

Traditional firing techniques determine not only mechanical durability but also the tonal range, porosity, and tactile quality of the ceramic surface. In this sense, technical procedures are inseparable from artistic expression; the production process itself becomes a constitutive element of the aesthetic language of this ceramic tradition.

A craft-based perspective from the field reinforces this connection between technique and aesthetics.

Figure 1 – Preparation of local red clay and hand-forming stages, showing the plasticity of the raw material and the manual shaping processes that condition the final texture and profile of Vinh Long red ceramics.



Source: Author.

Themes and product typologies

The product system of Vinh Long red ceramics is highly diverse, including utilitarian wares, gardening and architectural objects, and decorative or artistic products. Such diversity indicates that the craft village has long served not only daily practical needs but also the aesthetic organization of living environments. Local accounts and heritage-related reports further suggest that Vinh Long red ceramics have been increasingly mobilized as a marker of cultural identity in tourism and local image-building (Bá Dũng, 2023; Huỳnh Biển, 2024; Thanh Vy, 2021).

In thematic terms, the products simultaneously reflect two major content streams. The first comprises motifs closely associated with agrarian and riverine life, including plants, flowers, birds, fish, landscapes, and scenes of everyday labor. The second consists of motifs linked to beliefs, traditional symbols, and local cultural memory. The intersection between practical function and representational content gives Vinh Long red ceramics an interdisciplinary character: they are at once objects of use, aesthetic artifacts, and carriers of cultural memory.

Figure 2 – Representative product groups of Vinh Long red ceramics, illustrating the diversity of utilitarian, gardening, architectural, and decorative objects discussed in the text.



Source: Author.

Characteristics of color and form

The brick-red color is the most distinctive identifying feature of Vinh Long red ceramics. This is not merely a visual attribute; it is a material indicator of local clay resources and traditional firing technology. Within the broader Vietnamese cultural frame, red often evokes vitality, warmth, and auspiciousness. In Vinh Long red ceramics, however, this color also gains a specifically local dimension because it is inseparable from craft memory and from the kiln landscape of the Mang Thit area.

Compared with several southern ceramic traditions described in studies on Bien Hoa, Lai Thieu, and Sai Gon ceramics, Vinh Long red ceramics tend to minimize dependence on glaze and to emphasize the beauty of the clay body, volumetric form, and surface rhythm (Huỳnh Ngọc Trảng, 2020; Huỳnh Ngọc Trảng; Lưu Kim Chung, 2020; Phan Đình Dũng et al., 2004). The forms of the products generally privilege stability, solidity, and simplicity, yet without becoming visually heavy. In many cases, curved profiles are handled softly in order to achieve a graceful appearance suitable for contemporary living spaces and decorative preferences.

Figure 3 – Tonal variation of the fired red surface, highlighting differences in oxidation, heat exposure, and surface finish produced during the kiln process.



Source: Author.

Figure 4 – Typical formal solutions in vases, planters, and utilitarian wares, emphasizing stable volumes, softened curves, and the balance between robustness and gracefulness.



Source: Author.

Characteristics of decorative language

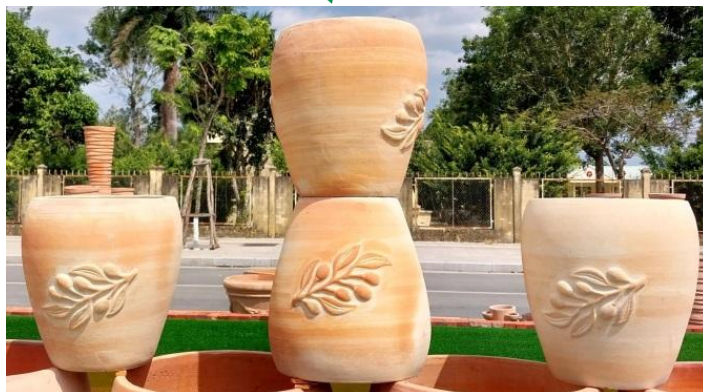
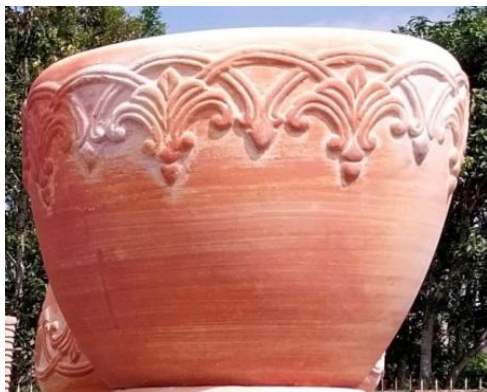
The artistic value of Vinh Long red ceramics is clearly expressed through the organization of lines, masses, and decorative composition. The products often balance the raw background of the ceramic body with incised, carved, relief-applied, or

rhythmically repeated details. As a result, decoration does not function as a detachable surface layer but as an integrated component of the object's overall form.

In terms of motifs, one can observe the presence of foliage, sacred creatures, familiar animals, folk symbols, images of working people, and references to riverine landscapes. Importantly, these motifs do not merely adorn the surface; they articulate local identity through a condensed visual language. As suggested in studies that treat ceramics as a medium rich in artistic potential, the vitality of ceramics lies not only in utility but also in their ability to carry memory, symbolism, and visual emotion (Nguyễn Nghĩa Phương, 2022).

Figure 5 – Decorative motifs and compositional arrangements on Vinh Long red ceramics, showing how incised, relief-applied, and repeated elements articulate local identity and visual rhythm.





Source: Author.

Heritage values and orientations for preservation and promotion

From a heritage perspective, Vinh Long red ceramics embody historical, aesthetic, craft-knowledge, and place-identity values at the same time. Safeguarding this ceramic tradition is therefore not limited to preserving objects or techniques; it also means maintaining a cultural ecosystem that includes artisans, kilns, craft memory, landscapes, and the social relations surrounding the village (Ban Quản lý Di tích tỉnh Vĩnh Long, 2017; Chánh Tuy, 2022).

This interpretation is consistent with UNESCO's approach to intangible cultural heritage, which emphasizes community-recognized practices, knowledge, and skills rather than isolated objects alone. It also converges with recent studies showing that the safeguarding of traditional crafts is strengthened when heritage transmission is linked to education, tourism interpretation, and place-based cultural meaning (UNESCO, n.d.-a; UNESCO, n.d.-b; Cerquetti et al., 2022; Guillén-Peñafiel et al., 2024). In a related way, recent research results have highlighted how artistic practices, memory, and identity can reinforce belonging and cultural visibility in local contexts (Pereira; Andrade, 2025; Souza; Reis, 2025).

Under current conditions, the preservation and promotion of Vinh Long red ceramics should be approached in an integrated way. First, craft knowledge should be systematically documented, including production procedures, technical vocabulary, product models, and village narratives in digital formats. Second, greater support should be provided to artisans, especially in intergenerational transmission, design

renewal, and access to creative cultural markets. Third, stronger linkages should be developed between the craft village and art education, handicraft design, experiential tourism, and digital communication so that heritage becomes a dynamic development resource rather than a static object of conservation.

Finally, innovation should be grounded in respect for traditional materials, techniques, and formal identity. The sustainable future of Vinh Long red ceramics will be more viable when contemporary design, tourism, and market strategies are built upon the tradition's core aesthetic values rather than replacing them with alien imitations.

At the same time, recent tourism research suggests that excessive commercialization may weaken perceived authenticity, while cultural identity and meaningful involvement are central to long-term visitor loyalty in intangible heritage settings (Cao et al., 2025; Xiao et al., 2025). For Vinh Long red ceramics, this implies that preservation policies should encourage innovation and tourism use without disconnecting products from their material, technical, and symbolic roots.

Study limitations and future research

This study has some limitations that should be acknowledged explicitly. Empirically, it concentrates on Vinh Long Province and therefore does not claim to represent the diversity of ceramic traditions across southern Vietnam. The field evidence is qualitative and interpretive, and its explanatory power depends on the breadth of observations and the diversity of interviewees included. In addition, field visits capture the craft at specific moments in time and may not fully reflect seasonal variation in production rhythms, fuel use, market demand, or tourism flows. Future research could strengthen this line of inquiry through comparative studies across ceramic villages, longer-term ethnographic observation, systematic interview sampling, and a fuller integration of artisan narratives, workshop histories, and design case studies.

Final considerations

The study shows that the artistic values of Vinh Long red ceramics are constituted by the organic interaction of local materials, traditional firing techniques, unglazed red surfaces, robust forms, and a decorative language rooted in the everyday life, beliefs, and landscapes of southern Vietnam. These elements shape the distinctive identity of the tradition and also create significant potential for artistic creation, heritage education, and cultural tourism.

From the perspective of preservation, the paper emphasizes that safeguarding Vinh Long red ceramics should go beyond the conservation of individual objects and instead focus on craft knowledge, cultural space, and the practicing community. From the perspective of promotion, it is essential to strengthen linkages among artisans, educational institutions, designers, tourism destinations, and digital media platforms in order to expand the vitality of this heritage in contemporary life. This is also the basis on which Vinh Long red ceramics may continue to exist as a living artistic heritage within the sustainable development of the locality.

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Interest Conflict		The author declares that there is no conflict of interest related to this study.
Availability of underlying research data		The underlying data consists of field notes, visual records, and interview materials, available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical restrictions.
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