

Gilt Lacquer Art in Luang Prabang: History and Cultural Diffusion

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Abstract: This study is part of the research titled “Form and Symbol of Gilt Lacquer Art in Luang Prabang”. This research aims to study the history, forms, symbols and factors affecting the change of the Gilt Lacquer Art in Luang Prabang. This research paper presents only single objective the history of the Gilt Lacquer Art in Luang Prabang. Research tools include field surveys and unstructured interviews. Data collection is from documentary evidences of art and field experts. Study findings are as follows. History of the Gilt Lacquer Art in Luang Prabang is divided into five phases: the early Lan Xang period, the middle Lan Xang period, the late Lan Xang period, the external influences period and present (2017). The middle Lan Xang period was the time of King Setthathirat, as well as the time of the origin of Gilt Lacquer Art in the country which was inspired by the Thai Lanna gold gilding works. Another period is the influences from outside the country when Luang Prabang at that time was under the political power of Siam, thus, the Thai-Rattanakosin art style played a significant role in the pattern and artwork. The extension of this kind of artwork is based on the cultural diffusion theory of which the British believe that the occurrence of things in parallelism is difficult in other words, creation of works was from a more prosperous source spread into another source in a linear pattern.

Key words: History, cultural diffusion, Gilt Lacquer Art in Luang Prabang, linear pattern, surveys, interviews

INTRODUCTION

The city of Luang Prabang is in Luang Prabang Province, one of the provinces of current Lao PDR. Luang Prabang is about 200 km away from Vientiane capital. The province is subdivided into 12 districts, 792 subdistricts with a total population of 71,090 households. For the geographical features, the province borders Phongsali Province to the North, the provinces of Houaphan and Xiangkhouang to the East, Vientiane Provinces to the South and the provinces of Oudomxay and Xayabuli to the West. Luang Prabang has been registered as a World Heritage Site by the UNESCO on December 2, 1995. The area that has been listed has a width of 250 m and a length of 1 km (Suwit Trasuwan, n.d.). Rich in natural and cultural resources, the people of Luang Prabang still have a way of life that is bound to nature including the traditional faith about the Phi Fah Phaya Tan and the respect for Naga. It is believed that these have preserved the land and people in Luang Prabang, since, the past. Even today such beliefs still affect the people’s practice of ghost worship (Singyabuth, 2008). In addition to the beliefs about the unseen, another belief that affects the people of Luang Prabang is the Buddhism that they have practiced, since, the reign of King Fa Ngum (Phothisan, 2015), resulting in a variety of Buddhist art that meets the faith of the people. There are many religious

temples in Luang Prabang. To represent the faith of the people, the art inspired by Buddhism was created, appearing 5 types of artwork, e.g., woodcarving, sculpture, painting, glass mural painting and Gilt Lacquer Art (Saengdaikon Vongsa, personal contact, 10th April 2017).

The Gilt Lacquer Art or Lacquer and gold-gilding crafts is one of the artwork that belongs to Luang Prabang. It is a two-dimensional image of gold on a smooth surface of black or red color. The black surface is black rubber while the red surface, cinnabar is the main material for surface preparation (Detwongya, 2001) This type of artwork of Luang Prabang is preferably for the decoration of the elements of Buddhist buildings, including walls, ceilings, doors and windows, etc. The temples in this city are all decorated with Gilt Lacquer Art.

Luang Prabang’s Gilt Lacquer Art is not work of art originally created by the city’s craftsmen. From the field surveys, the study found that Luang Prabang’s Gilt Lacquer Art has been inspired by the art of a neighboring country-Thai of which details and the history of the Gilt Lacquer work is described in the following order.

For Luang Prabang, the use of the Gilt Lacquer Art is mainly for religious purposes, noticing from the designs that appears on the artwork surface are mostly related to Buddhism, namely Buddha’s history the biography of

Table 1: Timeline of Luang Prabang's Gilt Lacquer Art

Periods	Timeline of Luang Prabang's Gilt Lacquer Art
Early Lan Xang period	King Fa Ngum-King Photisarath about 1353-1547
Middle Lan Xang period	King Setthathirat-King Suriyavongsa 1548-1695
Late Lan Xang period	(Split into 3 Kingdoms) Chao Kingkisarath-Chao Suriyavong (overlapped) 1703-1791
	Siam colonialism (Chao Suriyavong-Chao Khamsouk) 1779-1893
External influences period	French colonialism (1893-1954)
	The transition to communism (1975)
	New imagery (1986)
	World heritage (1995)
Present period	Present days (2017)

Lord Buddha, the story of the Buddha and Jataka tales, concerning the previous births of the Buddha. There is also a story of local legend "Chanthapanich", believed to be the founder of Xieng Dong Xieng Thong city or the current Luang Prabang.

In addition to the image that can tell stories, Gilt Lacquer Art is also designed in many decorative patterns to decorate the space of the building such as the Kandok pattern, Kod pattern, Puranakhata Pot pattern, etc. In the present day, craftsmen in Luang Prabang still use this type of artwork to decorate Buddhist buildings. This reflects the importance of the Gilt Lacquer Art to the city, so, remarkably. Luang Prabang's Gilt Lacquer Art created from the beginning to the present period (2017) has a history according to chronological events of each period in the following timeline.

From Table 1, details of the occurrence including the history and distribution of the sequential works can be described as follows.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Early Lan Xang Period: This period ranged from the reign of King Fa Ngum until the reign of King Photisarath (1353-1547). King Fa Ngum was the first King of the Kingdom of Lan Xang (Sisamang, 2002). It was the beginning of the history of the country and the coming of Buddhism modeled from Cambodia as King Fa Ngum had a Queen called Phra Nang Kaewkengya who was the daughter of the King of Cambodia. This event said to have enshrined Buddhism in Luang Prabang was considered a great time. At that time, there was a story about the coming of a buddhist monk who had an in-depth knowledge in Buddhism including craftsmen, monk's attendants, a sampling of Sri Maha Bodhi tree and a Buddha statue named "Pra Bang Buddhalawan". (Thongprasert, 1991). According to the history, at the end of his reign, King Fa Ngum was exiled and died in the city of Nan (currently a province in Thailand).

After that for many reigns, despite record of the building of temples in this city, there was no clear evidence to assume that the early Lan Xang period was the beginning of inspiration for creating Gilt Lacquer Art. Anyway, this period is regarded as the first time for artists

who created works of art for Buddhism. There is not enough evidence to conclude that the Gilt Lacquer Art was originated in this era. It can only conclude that in the early Lan Xang period, Buddhism inspired fundamental thoughts for the craftsmanship of Gilt Lacquer works in later periods.

Middle Lan Xang period: Important events in this period were the factors that contributed the Gilt Lacquer works in Luang Prabang in the reign of King Setthathirat (reigned 1548-1571) (Sisamang, 2002). His mother was the daughter of the King of Chiang Mai. The city of Chiang Mai at the time was the center of Lanna Kingdom. According to research by Damrikun (2001), Lanna during the 22nd Buddhist century appeared to have created the Gilt Lacquer works. The Gilt Lacquer works of Lanna was a role model that inspired the Gilt Lacquer Art in Luang Prabang.

According to the chronicles of Luang Prabang (Collection of Historical Archives, Volume 11, 1919), including the chronicles of Chiang Mai. (Collection of Historical Archives, Volume 5, 1917), the relationship of events between King Setthathirat and Lanna Kingdom that when his grandfather died, the noblemen invited King Setthathirat to rule the city of Chiang Mai. However, 16 years later, his father (King Photisarath), King of Luang Prabang, died, King Setthathirat returned to rule over Luang Prabang too. This kind of ruling the two Kingdoms at once dissatisfied the noblemen of Chiang Mai as they didn't want to become a colonial state of Luang Prabang. Therefore, the noblemen decided to invite King Mekuti (Yun Bayin) to rule the kingdom instead. This resulted in King Setthathirat to reside in the city of Chiang Saen with hopes to reclaim Chiang Mai back to his power but it was unsuccessful. He went back to Luang Prabang and at that same time, King Bayinnaung of Hanthawaddy Kingdom had expanded his power to rule the whole kingdom of Lanna, resulting in King Setthathirat to move down South and found a new city-Vientiane, to take refuge in that war.

The events that made King Setthathirat travel back and forth to two Kingdoms for several times were factors that contributed to the creation of various types of artworks including the Gilt Lacquer works as in his

return from Lanna, King Setthathirat gathered many of the Lanna troops and people there (Sunet Phothisan, personal contact, 7th April 2017). Among these people were craftsmen who still have had traces of the settlement in Luang Prabang at present.

During the reign of Chiang Mai and Luang Prabang of King Setthathirat, it is the same time that falls into the 22nd century, contemporary with the origin of Thai Lanna patterns of Gilt Lacquer works. It is very likely that the Gilt Lacquer work of Lanna is the conceptual model for the Gilt Lacquer Art in the city of Luang Prabang.

Late Lan Xang period: This era witnessed the Kingdom of Lan Xang divided into three sub-kingdoms, namely Luang Prabang, Vientiane and Champasak. Every of the three Kingdoms wanted not only independence but they also tried to declare war against each other too. For this period, Luang Prabang in some of the first years was ruled by Chao Kingkisarath and by later succeeding reigns to King Suriyavong. In that time, evidences appeared to witness that many Buddhist temples were built. For example, Wat Sansukharam (built in the reign of Chao Kingkisarath), Wat Nong Sikounmueang (built in the reign of Chao Inthasom), Wat Sibunrueang (built in the reign of Chao Chotikuman), for example (Boonyasurat, 2012). These temples are still present with the ornamentation of Gilt Lacquer Art. Creation of this type of artwork must have been derived from the previous periods, since, the appearance of the Gilt Lacquer works had appeared in the city of Luang Prabang, since, the period of King Setthathirat.

External influences period: Since, the year 1779, Luang Prabang was influenced and took external policies which affected the capital city in many ways. The Gilt Lacquer Art during this period was affected as well. In the period of external influences, the event can be chronologically divided as follows.

Siam colonialism: During this time, Siam has a political influence over Luang Prabang but in accordance with the factors that influenced on the pattern of Gilt Lacquer works were probably the Rattanakosin period from the reign of King Rama I to the loss of all Lao territory to France. According to the chronicles of Luang Prabang that mentioned the relationship between Siam and Luang Prabang, in the reign of King Rama I, Chao Anuruth was appointed to govern Luang Prabang, together with Chao Uparat Naka as viceroy. In the reign of King Rama II, after Chao Uparat Naka died, Chao Anuruth had supported Chao Mangthaturat and appointed him as the viceroy. When Chao Anuruth died, King Rama II appointed Chao Mangthaturat to succeed Luang Prabang. And when King

Rama II died, Chao Mangthaturat travelled from Luang Prabang to Bangkok to attend the Royal funeral as well as went to an ordination as a Buddhist monk in dedication to the late-King Rama II (Collection of Historical Archives, Volume 11, Chronicles of Luang Prabang, 1919)

Above relationship is only some examples of the events that show the good relationship between Siam and Luang Prabang at the monarch level. According to Buddhism affairs, it was recorded that temples was built from time to time including the restoration of old and ruined temples as well. Temples in this period were all decorated with Gilt Lacquer Art. The Rattanakosin art style appeared to have been also mixed with the Buddhist art of Luang Prabang such as the temples of Wat Pa Ruak and Wat Si Phutthabat that have the art style of Rattanakosin. Mural paintings in Wat Pa Ruak and Wat Xieng Man were also in the style of Rattanakosin art, especially for some of the patterns, images, character's jewelries in the Gilt Lacquer works. These were all Rattanakosin art patterns. It can conclude that Rattanakosin art was an exemplary and inspirational model for the Gilt Lacquer Art of Luang Prabang. The creativity process itself may have been long inherited from the previous periods.

French colonialism: According to an interview with Sunet Phothisan including the knowledgeable people about the events in Luang Prabang during the period, the French focused only on war and paid no attention to Buddhism. Bricks from many temples have been removed to build new buildings in the Western style to be work place for the French. This caused many temples in the past to disappear as the French didn't respect Buddhism like the people of Luang Prabang. However, referring to documents of Khamman Vongkodratana, some of the French donated money to repair Phra That Makmo in Wat Vixounrat. This can be assumed that the French that come to occupy Luang Prabang are not always that bad. The Gilt Lacquer Art at each temple may have been maintained in conditions they best they could at that moment, not that flourished as it was before when the patronage was fully extended.

The transition to communism: In 1975, the Lao government changed its socialist regime following Vietnam and Cambodia. The Lao government set aside traditional beliefs to lead the development of the country, even Buddhism is destroyed. Religious objects and old beliefs were taken away from the official inspection. When the situation was like that the Gilt Lacquer works of Luang Prabang were abandoned; some of them may have been destroyed like the other religious objects.

New imagery: When entering the year of 1986, the Lao government reviewed the implementation of the new administration and development policy, introducing a new policy called “New imagery” with a leniency rule. As a result, the Gilt Lacquer Art including Buddhist art and objects of beliefs, gradually recovered and flourishing in later periods.

World heritage: In 1995, Luang Prabang was registered as a World Heritage site with cultural tourism promotion. Therefore, pieces of artwork in the cultural heritage city have been restored to the same beautiful conditions for a tourist town. Many temples have been completely repaired, maintaining the original style (Nosaeng Saivongduean, private contact, 10th April 2017). For example, Wat Xieng Thong has many renovations; the latest was in the year of 2014 (Saengdaikon Vongsa, personal contact, April 10, 2017) but many of the temples were not completely renovated like the temple Wat Pa Kae where the original structure was only maintained in the same conditions. The Gilt Lacquer Art was used to decorate the space of the building in every temple to express the identity and taste of the people of Luang Prabang.

Present (2017): The year 2017 was the time of this research field surveys in Luang Prabang. After times of data collection, the surveys found that the Gilt Lacquer Art was still preferable for the decoration of religious places like it was in the past. However, the material and creativity process have been greatly improved. In ancient times, the craftsmen would use genuine gold leaf to apply on the space of the stencil mold. But now a days, they use the imitation gold in either form of color paint or spray to mark or spray onto the stencil mold. For example, the ornamental pattern with imitation gold paint on the outside poles of the temple of Wat Aham of which the craftsmen painted through the stencil mold. The pattern on the outside wall of Wat Manorum of which the craftsmen used a brush with gold color to draw directly on the original pattern, no needs to use stencil molds. This saves time and budget. Based on the field survey, traditional way of Gilt Lacquer works and materials uses were reduced in number significantly. In the future, these types of artworks tend to vanish gradually as a result of global changes in every dimension.

Arrival of materials and creativity process: Luang Prabang’s Gilt Lacquer Art is an artwork that needs to rely on materials for creation. The creativity process is another factor that contributes to this kind of work. There are

two types of materials that are important for the Gilt Lacquer works Rak Lacquer and genuine gold leaf. Understanding the entering of these main materials would help to clarify the assumption about the emergence of this work in Luang Prabang.

Rak Lacquer in Luang Prabang: According to the field surveys and interviews with the experts in the culture of Rak Lacquer use in Southeast Asia, the study found that most of the countries in Southeast Asia including Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam have the knowledge of the use of Rak Lacquer derived from China. Luang Prabang learned how to use the Rak Lacquer to create Gilt Lacquer Art from the Thai Lanna (Sanan Rattana, personal contact, 20th March 2017). That was the same time that King Setthathirat went to rule Chiang Mai and before returning to rule Luang Prabang. On his return, King Setthathirat took a number of people from Lanna to Luang Prabang, among those are craftsmen skilled in Gilt Lacquer Art. At that time, the Rak Lacquer craftsmanship of Chiang Mai was very famous. This also appears in the chronicles that when King Bayinnaung seized Chiang Mai, he gathered a number of Rak Lacquer craftsmen from Chiang Mai to Hanthawaddy Kingdom as well (Damrikun, 2001). This indicated the expertise and reputation of these craftsmen, so much, King Bayinnaung wished to use this group of craftsmen.

Luang Prabang at present also appears to have Lacquerware made of Rak Lacquer or what they call “Kueang Nam Kiang” which is quite similar to Chiang Mai Lacquerware. This evidence emphasizes that facts that some of the Rak Lacquer craftsmen from Chiang Mai has emigrated to Luang Prabang. Anyway, the use of Rak Lacquer in Luang Prabang becomes greatly reduced due to the replacement of materials easier for uses, saving more time and budget over the use of traditional Rak Lacquer as in the past.

To conclude, the Rak Lacquer used in the gilt Lacquer art of Luang Prabang emerged in the reign of King Setthathirat and the source of origin was in Thai Lanna. In addition, the creativity process may have come with the materials used in the creation as well.

Genuine gold leaf: In Luang Prabang, there appears to have a gold source in the city of Chiang Ngoen which they call “Bo Kham” (Khamvieng Veeravongsa, personal contact, 10th April 2017). Bo Kham is currently not in use as of lack of personnel knowledgeable about processing gold into gold leaf. Gold leaf is known to Luang Prabang’s craftsmen as “Kham Piw” sheet (Nosaeng Saivongduean, personal contact, 10th April 2017).

In the early Lan Xang era, there was a record of an arrival of the wisdom of gold to Luang Prabang. It said that when the Buddhism entered Luang Prabang from Cambodia in the reign of King Fa Ngum, there were artisans traveling along with him at that time, among these artisans were the Goldsmiths (Thongprasert, 1991). According to the historical record, craftsmen in that period were likely to know how to use gold to cover or decorate the surfaces, especially, the Buddha statue that must have the gold surface, according to the Scripture of Mahapurisalakana 32 (the 32 characteristics of the Bodhisattva or Lord Buddha (Department of Religion in 1982).

Since, the early Lan Xang era that the artisans have derived the use of gold to create and decorate Buddhist art from Cambodia, they still employed the knowledge that way until the middle Lan Xang era. In the reign of King Setthathirat, troops and craftsmen taken from Chiang Mai, also created Gilt Lacquer Art that followed the Lanna art. Such knowledge would have continued through time until Luang Prabang became a colonial state of France. At present, the knowledge of gold processing into gold leaf to use to create pieces of gilt Lacquer art has lost in time. As at present (2017), Luang Prabang must have to import genuine gold leaf to repair the gilt Lacquer art from the neighboring countries Thailand and Myanmar (Saengdaikon Vongsa, private contact, 10th April 2017).

The traditional process of creating a piece of Gilt Lacquer Art was using a stencil mold to block the gold. This old process was assumed to have come into Luang Prabang when King Setthathirat returned from Chiang Mai to Luang Prabang to rule the country. Since, the most importance part of this work is the gold gilding through the space of the stencil mold. According to the interviews with Sanan Rattana (personal contact, 20th March 2017) and Sunet Phothisan (personal contact, 7th April 2017), the two interviewees correspond to the creativity process of the Gilt Lacquer Art is derived from the pattern of Gilt Lacquer Art of Thai Lanna as at that time, the Lanna Kingdom had had the Gilt Lacquer decoration for the religion buildings years before.

For methods and techniques for the Gilt Lacquer works, ever since, they have derived the Lanna art to create the religious art at temples of Luang Prabang, the craftsmen have inherited the same techniques from time to time. Even if some points in time, there were events and situations that deteriorated that, at present, the use of such methods can be found as decoration of the elements of many Buddhist temples. For example, the Gilt Lacquer Art on an empty space in the temple of Wat Xieng Thong, Wat Pa Phai, Wat Chiang Man, etc. Some of the materials has been modified from genuine gold leaf to imitation gold paint. Anyway, the stencil mold is still in use when

applying the gold color through the gaps of the mold. This appears in many places such as the wall of the temple of Wat Sob Sikharam, door and window panes at the temple of Wat Jum Khong, for instance. Such changes are applied to save budget and time. For some places such as the outer wall of the temple of Wat Manorom, there are more changes than other sources as there was a use of brush to draw the gold color on the wall, tracing along the original design, no needs of stencil mold like the other sources.

Modifications as mentioned above are factors that affect the style and sophistication of this urban art. Luang Prabang artisans come in many groups; each of them has a different idea of creating a different work, so, it has a great influence on the changes in the pattern of the Gilt Lacquer Art (Saengdaikon Vongsa, personal contact, 10th April 2017)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The cultural spread of the Gilt Lacquer Art from outside to Luang Prabang: During the period that King Setthathirat or in the middle Lan Xang era had a close relationship with Thai Lanna, the pattern of Lanna Gilt Lacquer Art inspired Luang Prabang art. The spread of art in that time was in a linear pattern from Chiang Mai (Thai Lanna), heading towards Luang Prabang. The extension of art in this type follows the theory of cultural diffusion of which the British said that the emergence of things in parallelism is unlikely. Creation of any artwork or invention must begin first at a more prosperous land, then send inspiration and patterns to another source (Srisontisuk, 2009).

Another time that the Gilt Lacquer Art of Luang Prabang was inspired by art of the other countries was when Luang Prabang was governed by Kingdom of Siam in the Rattanakosin period. Anyway, Gilt Lacquer Art of Luang Prabang inspired by the art style of Rattanakosin may have mainly come from some of the artworks only as the artisan of Luang Prabang have had materials and creativity process derived from previous periods themselves. Apart from this, Siam (Rattanakosin dynasty at that time) didn't prefer this style of craftsmanship like Lanna. Therefore, Rattanakosin art that affected the inspiration to gild Lacquer art of Luang Prabang should have come from only of a few artistic styles. For instance, portrait paintings, jewelries for character decoration, some other patterns that can be compared to Rattanakosin art. The extension of art in this style is also based on the theory of cultural diffusion of the English group as well as the middle Lan Xang era.

Conclusion of the timeline and the distribution of Luang Prabang gilt Lacquer art: Gilt Lacquer Art is derived from

Table 2: The history and distribution of the Luang Prabang Gilt Lacquer Art

Early Lan Xang	Middle Lan Xang	Late Lan Xang	External influences	Present
King Fa Ngum derived Buddhism from Cambodia	King Setthathirat ruled Lanna Lanna Gilt Lacquer Art	Separation in Chao Suriyavong's reign	Siam French Communism Rattanakosin art style	New imagery world heritage Present day

being exemplary and inspired by the outside, not what the artisans of Luang Prabang invented themselves. Timeline can be divided into 5 periods and the exemplification including events that affect the Gilt Lacquer Art in many period of time as shown in Table 2.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that Luang Prabang Gilt Lacquer Art is the expression of basic thoughts of Buddhism. At the time when King Fa Ngum asked for Royal favors from Cambodia. In the middle Lan Xang period or in the reign of King Setthathirat who ruled both Lanna and Luang Prabang, this resulted in the Gilt Lacquer Art to spread from Lanna to Luang Prabang, causing craftsmanship in Gilt Lacquer works. Later to the period of external influences, the Rattanakosin art style was handed down to some patterns and some designs in the Gilt Lacquer Art. After that period, there was a political change, resulting in the deterioration of many art works in Luang Prabang. It is revived back again during the new imagery period and became more prosperous during the period of World Heritage site registration. Until the present (2017), Luang Prabang Gilt Lacquer Art is still widely known and important to this city, even if there are some changes in materials and processes.

The diffusion of the Gilt Lacquer Art is mainly from the Lanna Gilt Lacquer work, the pattern, methods, the use of materials are all the same model of Lanna. Later in the Rattanakosin period, the inspiration for the Gilt Lacquer works was only from the art pattern. The

materials and methods have been inherited from the past periods. The spread of the art in the two periods is based on the theory of cultural diffusion of the British group which is a linear pattern from one source of work to another, developing a unique identity of their own.

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