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## Three Goddesses in and out of Their Shrine

When the spirit medium of Phủ Dầy Temple visited the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology in 2002, she was shocked to see the gold-plated Mother Goddess statues her temple had given to the museum placed on the storeroom floor (for cleaning). This incident led Dr. Laurel Kendall, Ms. Vũ Thị Thanh Tâm, and Ms. Nguyễn Thị Thu Hương to learn more about how Phủ Dầy Temple had conceptualized the manufacture of statues that would never be ritually animated but had been presented to the Goddess as “offerings.” Although ritual animation makes the statue a god, a complex mix of ritual and technology insures that the statue will be an auspicious container and complicates its identity as sacred or mundane.

KEYWORDS: Vietnam—popular religion—museum—material culture—ritual

IN HIS *Art and Agency*, Alfred Gell offers the radical suggestion that objects be understood in a manner analogous to social actors enmeshed in relationships with other social actors, the human beings who make and use them (GELL 1998). Gell's anthropology of art, by his own admission, leads inextricably to the anthropology of religion. In his discussion of how wooden statues function much like spirit mediums as receptacles for the gods, Gell rehabilitates the usually prejudicial term "idolatry" (in Biblical language, the worship of "graven images") as a useful concept for anthropologists: the idol, as "a locus for person-to-person encounters with divinities...obeys the social rules laid down for idols as co-present others (gods) in idol-form" (GELL 1998, 125 and 128). Our story has much to do with proper codes of interaction between idols and human beings, relating how, within the frame of these codes, a renowned spirit medium chose to do something unprecedented, and how, by accepting his gift, the conservation staff of the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology (VME) was called upon to re-examine its own code of conduct regarding the proper relationship between people and things.

At the heart of our inquiry are the three gold-robed Mother Goddess statues that sit in the storeroom of the Museum. Followers speak of "The Mother" (Mẫu) as the creator of the universe but see her manifestation in each of the three Goddesses present in temple statues: the Mother of Heaven who creates the sky and governs the clouds, rain, thunder, and lightening; the Mother of Mountains, a descendant of the Hùng King (the nation's first ruler) who governs the highlands where ethnic minorities dwell; and the Mother of Water, the daughter of the Dragon King who governs rivers and lakes. The VME's three Mother Goddess statues are distinguished by the color of their halters: red for the Mother of Heaven<sup>1</sup> at the center, green for the Mother of Mountains and Forests<sup>2</sup> on her left, and white for the Mother of Water<sup>3</sup> on her right.

The statues sit straight-backed on pedestals, slender bodied and oval faced, with straight noses and long-lobed ears in the image of noble women. Their facial features vary subtly to suggest their distinctive temperaments, and each face conveys an aspect of the Mother's benevolence.<sup>4</sup> In other circumstances, a ritual master would have animated the three statues, calling the goddesses inside them and awakening their senses. As the most venerated objects in a spirit medium's temple, the Goddess-incarnated statues respond to the prayers and petitions of the "the Mother's children." This unrealized potential remains part of the VME statues' identity even in their present lives as museum artifacts.

BACKGROUND: THE MOTHER GODDESS RELIGION (RELIGION OF THE  
FOUR PALACES)

Scholars consider goddess worship an ancient tradition of the Kinh (Việt) people of Vietnam. Some say it is as old as the nation itself, describing the Mother Goddess Religion (Đạo Mẫu) or Religion of the Four Palaces (Tứ Phủ) as having evolved from these antecedents. Scholars speculate that the most ancient goddesses were those vested with the power of placating the forces of nature. National heroes, including heroic women warriors such as the Trung Sisters and Madam Triệu were added to the pantheon over time. The Four Palaces of contemporary Mother Goddess Religion represent four cosmological domains: the realm of heaven, the realm of the mountains and forests, the realm of water, and the realm of earth. Each palace contains a ranked hierarchy of mandarins, dames, princes, damsels, and young boys. During a ritual performance called *lên đồng*, a spirit medium incarnates gods from the different palaces and from each rank. At the head of this hierarchy, the Mother Goddesses are present, but mediums never fully incarnate them during *lên đồng*, even as the Mothers' images are sometimes sequestered in the temple's forbidden room, making them a potent but not readily visible presence.<sup>5</sup>

Followers of the Mother Goddess describe themselves as being showered with the Mothers' boundless favor (*lộc*). The offerings that devotees bestow on visiting deities during *lên đồng* express gratitude to the Mother for success, prosperity, and good fortune. Mediums redistribute offerings to everyone present as a broad bestowal of the Mother's blessing. Those with a certain destiny or "root" (*căn*) to become spirit mediums honor the mother by performing as her mediums (*ông đồng, bà đồng*), incarnating the gods and goddesses of the Four Palaces in possession rituals called *lên đồng*. Receiving the Mothers' favor in the form of good fortune and economic prosperity, mediums return the Mothers' largess by dedicating statues and decorating larger and more elaborate temples.<sup>6</sup>

With the opening of the market economy in the late 1980s and a growing horizon of prosperity in the Red River Delta, popular religion flourishes, creating new markets for paper votive goods, statues, and spirit medium costumes. A diviner might suggest that an individual, family, or community donate a statue to a temple in order to have good luck. Temple keepers also sometimes motivate people to donate statues that the temples need. The donors feel that luck comes to them when they donate statues to temples, or, as many people told us, "Nothing is better than donating to temples, palaces, and pagodas because it means luck comes to their children."

Many statue carvers see their own prosperity as linked to blessings from the Mother Goddess, and several of them are spirit mediums with their own private temples, a development that further stokes the production of religious goods. Ông Đồng Đức, the keeper of the Tiên Hương Palace, Vietnam's premier spirit medium temple, commissioned the three Mother Goddess Statues that are at the center of

our story as a devotional act but with some necessary compromises insofar as the statues' intended destination was a museum exhibit rather than a temple.

#### THE STATUES IN THE MUSEUM

As a new museum, the VME sent a research group to Phủ Dầy temple complex (Kim Thái commune, Vụ Bản district, Nam Định province) in 1997 to conduct research and collect objects. With help from the local People's Committee and the Relics Management Board, the Tiên Hương Palace's keeper and resident spirit medium, the late Mr. Trần Viết Đức, donated statues and related material to the Museum, including the three Mother Goddesses displayed in the Museum's permanent exhibit of Kinh culture. When the VME, in collaboration with the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), organized the exhibition *Vietnam: Journeys of Body, Mind, and Spirit*, the curatorial team decided to include a section on the Mother Goddess Religion. The VME requested three more statues from the Tiên Hương Palace and Ông Đồng Đức agreed to provide them, refusing the Museum's offer of payment and assuming the responsibility for the cost of production himself. Since Ông Đồng Đức saw the exhibit as an opportunity to present the Mother Goddess religion to overseas Vietnamese and to an American audience, his contribution was an act of devotion, "giving to the Mother's children." He explained, "Taking money (from the Museum) would be like selling the Goddesses. Instead, I mobilized followers from all over the country to contribute to making the statues." The Palace organized a ceremony asking the Mother Goddesses to witness the offering of the carefully carved and gilded statues intended for the exhibition in New York. Like the earlier gift of statues, the three Mother Goddesses were covered with red cloths to avoid the gazes of curious lay people, and transported to the VME with firm instructions not to open the cloths until the statues reached the museum. Once at the VME, ritual protocol gave way to museum practice as the staff catalogued the statues and housed them in the storeroom without further ceremony. Following conservation procedures for textiles, they removed the red cloths and the silk turbans on the statues' heads and stored them separately.

The statues arrived at the VME at an unfortunate moment in the history of the American exhibition. The financial crisis that hit New York City in the wake of 9/11 forced the curators to drastically trim their objects list to a third of their original intention. Innocent of the Tiên Hương Palace's emotional investment in having the statues exhibited in New York, indeed innocent of the high quality statues that had arrived at the museum, the American curator, Laurel Kendall, suggested that the pinched exhibition budget could not accommodate shipping large, fragile, and heavy objects. In December 2002, during the final months of preparation, the curatorial team realized that they could not represent the world of spirit mediums and their rituals without some representation of the Mother Goddesses. Kendall saw the gilded statues and realized her mistake too late to ship



FIGURE I. Putting a packet into the statue's cavity in a *bỏ thần nhập tượng* (literally “calling the god into the statue”) ritual in Định Trạch palace (Nam Định province). Vũ Thị Thanh Tâm, VME archive.

what were still large, fragile, and heavy objects or to accommodate them in the all-but-final exhibition design.

Nguyễn Văn Huy, the VME Director and Vietnamese curator of *Vietnam: Journeys of Body, Mind, and Spirit*, asked Ông Đồng Đức's advice regarding the appropriateness of using some of the smaller statues in the VME collection. Ông Đồng Đức's wife and fellow spirit medium, Bà Đồng Đức, agreed to come to the VME and meet with the curatorial team to discuss the options. In anticipation of her visit, the VME conservators brought the three gilt statues out of deep storage and carefully cleaned them in an open space on the storeroom floor. This well-intentioned act backfired when Bà Đồng Đức saw, to her horror, that the statues had been placed on the floor and were bereft of their turbans and the protective red cloths. Nearly two years later, Ông Đồng and Bà Đồng Đức still spoke heatedly about the statues that had been “placed on the floor,” an act they regarded as not only disrespectful

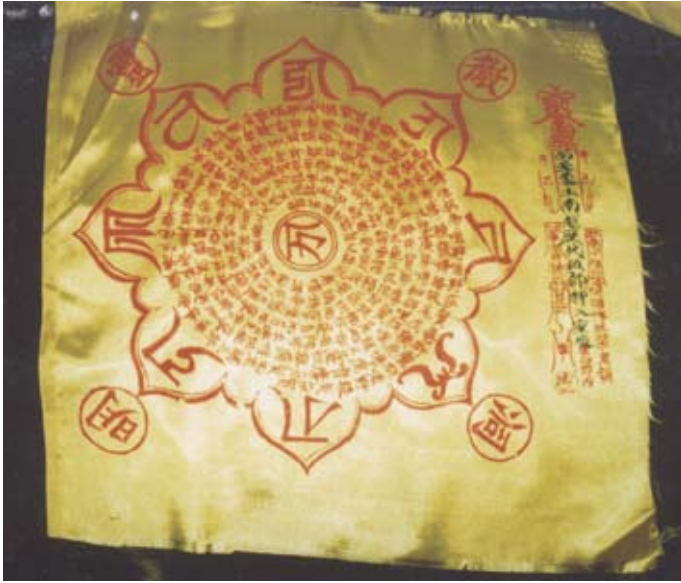


FIGURE 2. Cloth amulet inscribed with Sanskrit and Chinese to be placed inside a statue's cavity, Nam Định province. Vũ Thị Thanh Tâm, VME archive.

to the Mother Goddesses but to their religious community, an act equivalent to “insulting one’s own mother.” “Would you put Hồ Chí Minh’s statue on the floor?” Bà Đồng Đức asked us.

The Đứcs had never intended for the statues to be kept in a storeroom and said that the Museum should return them if it did not intend to display them. The statues could be given to a Mother Goddess temple overseas, another means of making the religion known to a global community. Through this experience, the Museum realized that its staff needed a better understanding of the sacred life of these objects. Despite the Đứcs’ disappointment and frustration, they agreed to help us in this project, extending all of the generosity that they regularly show to researchers. In addition, we spoke with several other spirit mediums who maintained public and private temples, as well as gilders, carvers, bronze casters, ritual masters, and private collectors.

#### HOW THE STATUES WERE MADE

Ông Đồng Đức entrusted the carving of the museum’s statues to Mr. Nguyễn Bá Hạ from Sơn Đồng village, a third-generation carver who also practices as a spirit medium. Sơn Đồng, a statue-carving village in Hoài Đức district, Hà Tây province, near Hanoi, has basked in the revival of popular religion in recent years. During the resistance and subsidized period (1945–1986), religious statues were regarded as objects of superstition, and the practice of making them nearly disappeared as Sơn Đồng households turned to producing lacquered rattan furniture for

the Eastern European market. With the turn toward a market economy after 1986 and growing prosperity in the 1990s, village carvers met the accelerating demands of a religious revival, initially repairing damaged statues or replacing statues lost in the chaos of war or sometimes destroyed in anti-superstition campaigns. Today, carvers also furnish new private temples maintained by spirit mediums. Overseas Vietnamese contributed to this revival by commissioning statues for temples in their native villages. In addition, many Sơn Đồng workshops now produce small secular statuettes in traditional dress for the Hanoi tourist market.

Before 1986, the number of carvers in Sơn Đồng could be counted on the fingers of both hands; however, during the early 1980s, with a decline in the market for rattan furniture, the village authorities initiated a training course in statue carving for this small group including instruction in the modern principles of anatomy. Mr. Nguyễn Việt Thanh, chairman of the Sơn Đồng Wood Carvers Association and a graduate of this program, described the hand-to-mouth existence of these early revivalist carvers who risked harassment by the authorities when they went to work on rare commissions to refurbish temple statues and woodwork. Mr. Thanh observes that in those days, no one could have imagined present-day Sơn Đồng where four thousand residents and one thousand non-residents are employed in the workshops and more than sixty percent of the income generated in this village comes from carving.

It was Ông Đồng Đức's intention that the statues should replicate in wood the three gilded bronze statues representing the three Mother Goddesses that reside in the forbidden room of Tiên Hương Palace. He gave Mr. Hạ a photograph as many clients do, although some clients simply give the carver the name of the Buddha or deity, usually by telephone. Mr. Hạ assumes that his clients have some



FIGURE 3. Fastening protective amulets to the red cloth prior to a *hồ thần nhập tượng* ritual in Định Trạch palace, Nam Định province. Vũ Thị Thanh Tâm, VME archive.

wish or aspiration behind their commissioning of a statue. In the manner of traditional carvers and carpenters, Mr. Hạ tries to find a measurement on his Chinese carpenter's ruler that confers an auspicious meaning matching both the client's spiritual aspirations and their spatial requirements. For example, the Museum's Mother of Heaven and Mother of Mountains and Forests statues are seventy-six centimeters high (including the base), a measure equated with "the palace of talent," and the Mother of Water is seventy-eight centimeters high, a measure equated with the "palace of talent and good fortune."<sup>7</sup> In general, the posture, shape, and decoration of statues vary with the carver's interpretation of recognizable forms. Some carvers of religious statues (and bronze casters modeling a prototype) speak of a meditative discipline that enables the deity's image to take shape in their mind's eye before they begin their work.<sup>8</sup>

As orders for Sơn Đồng images proliferate, connoisseurs complain that the statues' quality has been compromised. In addition, the increased volume of production seems to have fostered a "rationalized" production style very different from the workshops of Mr. Hạ and other traditionalist carvers. Mr. Hạ describes his craft as a quasi-religious act, "doing God's things," whereby carvers must not only love their work but also have a strong "moral" sense of it. In his view, if skillful carvers are not honest with their products' quality and price, they will soon become jobless, either owing to dissatisfied customers or divine retribution; however, the Gods and Buddhas will reward a carver who performs well. Mr. Hạ sees himself as earning the trust of his customers through the honest production of high quality products and his careful observance of the rituals and taboos associated with his craft.

Before going to discuss the commission of the three statues with Ông Đồng Đức, Mr. Hạ<sup>9</sup> would have burned incense in his private temple, asking the Buddha and the Goddesses for a good carving. He would have petitioned the deities,

On behalf of my clients who have showed their kind hearts in intending to donate this statue, and on my own behalf I call on you to help me when I travel so that my own family temple and the people of this village may have a happy life. I call on you to allow (client's name) to donate money to make this statue. When I return home, I will burn incense to thank you.

A carver's integrity and experience comes into play when he selects wood for the statues.<sup>10</sup> Carvers use jackfruit (*mít*), said to repel insects with its bitter taste, for religious statues. The material must be core wood that is not infested with woodworm and does not have knots, and the base of the tree must form the base of the statue. Ông Đồng Đức recalled beautiful statues that were consumed by woodworms within a few years of their manufacture. Before carving, a conscientious carver also soaks the wood in white limewater as a further precaution against woodworms.

Mr. Hạ initiates the carving with a ritual called *lễ phật mộc* (ritual for cutting wood), choosing an auspicious day by consulting some of the divination books, written in Chinese ideographs, which his family protected during the anti-superstition campaigns by hiding them in a deep wardrobe cabinet.<sup>11</sup> He only



allows those who have good horoscopes to participate in the ritual; anyone whose age ends in one, two, six, or eight cannot take part. *Lễ phật mộc* expels any ghosts or forest spirits who may have taken up residence in the old tree and would impede the goddess, god, or Buddha who will be invited to enter the completed statue.<sup>12</sup> In his invocation, Mr. Hạ also asks the Buddhas and Mother Goddesses to support the carvers in their work so that they will make a beautiful statue and prevent accidents in the workshop.<sup>13</sup> When asked about the consequences of not doing *lễ phật mộc*, Mr. Hạ spoke of clients who were unable to pay on delivery or have trouble from the police when the statue was being transported, and one instance where the vehicle transporting the statue got into an accident and rolled over.

Because the completed statue will become an object of veneration for believers of all ages and statuses, Mr. Hạ feels that he must do his best to make it “as clean as possible.” During the carving itself, Mr. Hạ keeps his workshop tidy; there are no pieces of wood scattered on the ground. Out of respect for the images, he does not allow clothing to be hung above statues or over the woodpile. Carvers must be clean and tidy and wear appropriate clothing while working, no bare chests. In the workshop, his carvers cannot curse or even mention inauspicious things such as deaths and accidents. He encourages people to tell joyful stories to raise everyone’s spirits. Although women should not touch the images when they are menstruating, these days women sand and polish images in the workshop and there is some uncertainty about how strictly this taboo is observed.

Clients bring offerings when they come to the workshop to inspect the completed statue. They petition the Buddha, the Mother Goddesses, their own ancestors, and the Earth God, asking permission to bring the statues home on the first or the second day of the lunar month. When the carving for the Museum’s statues had been completed to Ông Đồng Đức’s satisfaction, Mr. Hạ brought the unpainted statues to the Tiên Hương Palace, allowing Ông Đồng Đức, as the client, to choose an auspicious day and hour to accept them. As is proper for statues in motion outside of temples, the three Mother Goddesses traveled to the Tiên Hương Palace under red cloths.

While Ông Đồng Đức believed that the carvers from Sơn Đồng in Hà Tây province made the most beautiful and youthful-looking statues, he felt that carvers from Nam Định province did the best lacquer work and selected Mr. Đỗ Đăng Toán to come to the Palace and paint the statues. Mr. Toán had filled many commissions for Ông Đồng Đức and like Mr. Hạ, he is the child of a family of statue makers in a community known for the craft. In the subsidized period, artisan households in his village produced lacquer boxes and trays for export, and eventually for the tourist market. As in Sơn Đồng, they had begun to receive sporadic orders for statue restoration in the early 1980s, a few years before the official proclamation of *Đổi Mới*, and were now accommodating a large demand. When he introduced us to Mr. Toán, Ông Đồng Đức spoke of the importance of trust in his relationship with an artisan (particularly when, as in the case of the three Mother Goddess statues, the artisan’s work includes the application of pure gold).

He had been disappointed in the past by a statue maker who was incapable of producing a beautiful statue because he lacked the “sincerity of heart” that Ông Đồng Đức considers essential to the task.<sup>14</sup> Although he did not describe the same range of rituals that Mr. Hạ performs, Mr. Toán and his entire family observe a prohibition on dog meat, and when he is applying the final layer of lacquer to a statue, he abstains from garlic and strong-smelling herbs. He describes himself as having an affinity (*duyên*) for this work and believes that without this quality, an artisan cannot produce successful statues.

#### THE JOURNEY TO THE MUSEUM

Here the story of the three Mother Goddess statues diverges from the standard biography of a temple statue. When the statues had been painted and gilded and were judged complete, Ông Đồng Đức performed a ceremony in front of his own altar, asked the Goddesses’ permission to send them on a journey to New York via the VME, and cast coins to verify the Goddesses’ assent. Although his intentions were unusual, Ông Đồng Đức described this presentation as calling on the Mother Goddesses to “witness” (*chứng, chứng giám*) his offering, actions similar in principle to the presentation of a statue in a temple by a devotee. Had the statues experienced a more typical destiny, a ritual master would have ritually “set them in place” (*yên vị*) on the altar and installed into the cavities in their backs the packets of amulets, fragments of precious materials, and five-colored threads to repel wandering ghosts that in Gell’s terms, constitute the “mind homunculus,” the material substance of an idol’s animation (GELL 1998). To protect the still-vulnerable core of the statue from invasion by malevolent entities, the ritual master would have covered the statues with red cloths pinned with protective amulets to await the deep midnight of an auspicious day when, in a state of extreme purity, he



FIGURE 4. Covered statue being carried from the carver’s workshop to Định Trạch Palace for the *hồ thần nhập tượng* ritual. Vũ Thị Thanh Tâm, VME archive.



FIGURE 5. *Hồ thần nhập tượng* ritual at Mr. Phạm Văn Tính's home palace, Gia Lâm district, Hanoi. Vũ Thị Thanh Tâm, VME archive.

would call the Mother Goddesses into the statues and awaken their five senses.<sup>15</sup> The Museum's statues were not ritually set in place and did not have amulets installed inside them. Instead, covered with their red cloths, they were carried in state to the museum, following the path of the statues that had been donated in 1997 and were now on permanent exhibition.

The journey of the Museum's statues required an act of improvisation on the part of Ông Đồng Đức; there was no precedent but his own for a temple keeper gifting statues to a museum. There are, however, many instances when temple keepers transport statues outside their temples, a matter undertaken with great seriousness and care. In Vietnam today, temples are being refurbished and statues repaired, repainted, gilded, and sometimes replaced with more impressive versions. In the latter instance, a temple keeper might give a statue that is still in good condition to another temple, as the Đứcs have done in the past. Statues also leave their temples when the temple keeper sends them to an artisans' workshop for

repair or gilding (although many mediums prefer to have this work done in their own temples where they can supervise and protect the statues from sorcery). We encountered a range of opinions about whether a temple keeper needed to sponsor a deanimation ritual when he or she temporarily removed statues from the altar during renovation work. One ritual master who was also a medium insisted that any divine image removed from the altar for more than three days must be deanimated. Others felt that if a divine image remained within the walls of their home or inside their private temple, it was not necessary to have a ritual master deanimate it. Everyone we talked with agreed, however, that divine images carried *outside* the temple should always be deanimated and covered with red cloths “to protect their sacred energy (*khi*).” In other words, a deanimated statue that no longer houses a god (or an unanimated statue that never housed a god) contains some vital force or energy in and of itself.



FIGURE 6. The three Mother Goddess statues as part of the exhibition, *Vietnam: Journeys of Body, Mind, and Spirit*, Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, Hanoi. Vũ Thị Thanh Tâm. VME archive.

In contrast with the animation ritual, the deanimation ritual is performed in daylight. A ritual master releases the deity from the statue and returns it to its pre-animation state in a ritual that is similar to but less elaborate than the animation ritual. The ritual master invokes the Buddhas and gods and reads incantations appropriate for the release of deities from statues. There is less concern with evil spirits since the statue is being evacuated, not inhabited. The ritual master removes the amulets and precious materials from the statue, and if they are in good condition they will be used in new statues. If they are damaged, the ritual master burns them and casts the remains in a river to cool them down.<sup>16</sup>

In Gell's terms, covering a statue with a red cloth when it leaves the temple is a part of the code of good conduct that obtains between temple keepers, their followers, and divine images (GELL 1998, 125–28). An old medium in Hanoi told us how, during the American war, the statues in her teacher's temple were hastily removed to the storeroom of a distant temple when the neighborhood was evacuated during the American bombing. In the haste of the moment, they could only ask the statues' permission to take them down and cover their palanquins with rush mats in the absence of red covers. We also heard stories of statues unceremoniously removed from altars at the height of an anti-superstition campaign and the divine punishment inflicted on those who cast them into the village well or otherwise abused them.

Ông Đồng and Bà Đồng Đức seem to have ritualized their presentation of statues to the Museum on an analogy of gifting statues to other temples, equating the Museum, at least metaphorically, with a smaller, less efficacious temple. In the reception room of the Tiên Hương Palace, the Đứcs displayed photographs of the procession that accompanied their first gift of statues—all covered with red cloths—to the VME. Although the statues now on permanent exhibition in the museum were never animated, the Đứcs seemed to consider the statues' presence in a glass exhibition case, on public display, in some sense similar to images displayed in a temple, often in glass cases, where they receive the adoration of worshippers. The Đứcs had no objection to the statues sitting uncovered in the public exhibition hall. What the Đứcs had not anticipated was that their second gift would inhabit the ambiguous space of a museum storeroom and that the VME would place them there without the red coverings that protect them from dust and less tangible danger. In other words, exhibiting statues to a broader public through the Museum was a new way of “doing the Mother's work,” whereas leaving them uncovered in a museum storeroom was a breach of the proper conduct between people and divine images. In our discussions, the Đứcs requested that the statues be stored high off the ground, covered with their original cloths, and if possible, displayed facing the door in an arrangement analogous to a temple floor plan (or palace throne room). In other words, the unanimated images were not, for the Đứcs, “just statues.”

As we continued our discussions about proper museum practices relating to the statues, deities from the Four Palaces also made their feelings known in a

remarkable incident, shared with us by our colleague Vũ Hồng Thuật (personal communication, 15 December 2005):

In 2004, I was responsible for bringing two guardian statues to the Museum that were a gift of the Tenth Prince Temple in Nghệ An province. I made appropriate offerings and asked the temple keeper to cast coins for the spirit's permission to bring the statues to the Museum. The cast said it was possible (and I took the statues with me). Several months later, I came back to the temple to participate in a *lên đồng* performed by ritual master Trần Minh Thủy who was familiar with the goals of our project. When the Tenth Prince appeared he addressed me, speaking through the medium but in the accent of Nghệ An province, "Why did you bring the god's statues to the Museum and let them lie down without a red cloth?" I answered, "Prince, we apologize for our ignorance. Please forgive us." The medium continued, "Although the statues were deanimated at the temple before you transported them to the museum, they are still sacred, so you have to stand them upright and cover them with a red cloth." As soon as I returned to the Museum, I went into the storeroom and saw that the two statues were lying on the shelves without a red cloth. I then asked my colleagues in the conservation department to follow the words of the medium.

#### DISCUSSION: STATUES, ARTISANS, AND MARKETS

The story of the three gold Mother Goddess statues turns on the ambiguity of an unanimated image produced with careful attention to both ritual and craft, and the unstable notion of a "religious commodity." Anthropologists familiar with Malinowski's classic study of Trobriand gardening and canoe making will not be surprised by the combination of magic and skill implied in Mr. Hà's production of the three Mother Goddess statues, efforts intended both to protect the carver and his workshop from accidents and other mishaps and to produce a statue sufficiently exquisite and "clean" to be efficaciously inhabited by a god (cf. MALINOWSKI 1954).

In contrast to the professional and ritual care that Mr. Hà brings to his carving, some Sơn Đồng carving families have adapted to the swelling market by turning out ready-made statues of dubious quality for sale off the shelves of their own workshops or in the shops on Hanoi's Hàng Quạt Street. These workshops are less likely to choose an auspicious day for the first carving and to perform *lễ phật mội*. Cheap and accessible, the statues produced in these workshops are purchased by mediums who know little about the complexities of statue production. The statues they buy are likely made of less durable branches rather than the core wood of the tree trunk, and mediums who buy off the shelf will probably not ask whether the carvers observed taboos and performed appropriate rituals when making the statues. These mediums describe the statue before the animation that will transform it into a god as "just a piece of wood and nothing more." Careful mediums and temple keepers, like Ông Đồng Đức, on the other hand, never buy ready-made statues, because they think that statues not made according to tradi-

tional methods will be damaged quickly and, in the words of Ông Đồng Thịnh of Linh Tiêu Bảo Điện temple, “Ready-made statues often bring bad luck.”

Several of the mediums we spoke with described the care they had taken to choose a good master carver, in one temple-keeper’s words “the man whose hand touches the wood in the *lễ phật mộc* ritual,” and described their own careful supervision of the carving process. In other words, they would share with BENJAMIN (1969) the notion that objects produced through a mingling of ritual and craft for a religious purpose carry an aura, in Vietnamese *linh*, (“sacred,” “empowered,” “efficacious”). Several of our conversations with the mediums turned on the qualities that make a statue relatively more or less *linh*; the work of a careful artisan like Mr. Hạ makes a statue more *linh*; higher elements like wood, and especially bronze, are more *linh* than clay. The mechanical process of molding and firing at high heat destroys the energy (*khí*) of a porcelain statue so that it is not *linh*.

Dealers, carvers, and some spirit mediums recognize a clear distinction between statues mass produced for the market (*hàng chợ*) with little attention to quality or tradition, statues made to order (*hàng đặt*) which can be commissioned through the shops but are better quality than the mass-produced statues on the shelves, and statues made according to old and authentic processes (*hàng thật*), which are the most *linh* of all and far and away the most expensive. This hierarchy of value carries an echo of Walter Benjamin’s notion that an “aura” adheres to an authentic work of art produced in and for a ritual setting while mechanically reproduced commodities are bereft of auras (BENJAMIN 1969). Benjamin, however, could not have anticipated the marketplace of contemporary Vietnam where aura enhances commodity value and mechanical reproduction is a matter of type, degree, and price—for religious goods as well as quotidian objects—any more than Malinowski, who attributed magic to the uncertainties of life under primitive conditions of horticulture and seafaring, would have imagined its flourishing in advanced market economies. While believers in the Mother Goddess tradition express differences of opinion about the importance of these distinctions, questions of “relative aura” affect commodity pricing not as a matter of detached connoisseurship that drives the market in ethnographic curios and antiquities but as a concern of primary consumers inside a living tradition. Many of these practitioners have very deep connections to the market—some, like the carver/spirit medium Mr. Hạ, to the production of the ritual goods themselves.

What we found was a continuum, from statues made to be particularly *linh* to statues produced quickly as inexpensive commodities—“just statues” until the moment of their animation. This continuum reveals the three gilt Mother Goddess statues at the center of our story as having a history of production and intention that renders them as more than “just statues.” In their exquisite potential as receptacles for the Mother Goddesses, the statues were also commissioned as fitting vehicles of “the Mothers’ work,” objects for an international exhibition. To do this work, the Đúcs improvised upon their understanding of a code of relationship between temple keepers, devotees, and statues, a code that made gifting



statues to temples a devotional act. What the Đứcs had not anticipated was an area of ambiguity between this understanding and a professional code of museum practice that maintains storerooms of surplus objects, keeps textiles separate from objects in order to better preserve them, and sometimes makes difficult decisions about the objects it can accommodate in an exhibition. Sometimes the choice to exclude an object from an exhibition has little to do with its merit or beauty. The forgoing discussion emerged from a space of ambiguity where the staff of the VME realized that they needed to know a great deal more about the statues that had come into their care.

#### CODA

In December 2005, the exhibit *Vietnam: Journeys of Body, Mind, and Spirit* came home to Hanoi. The three gilt Mother Goddess statues appeared in the appropriate section on an improvised altar table that had been specially prepared for the Hanoi venue. At the opening, a crowd of journalists interviewed a beaming Bà Đồng Đức as she stood in front of the statues. The improvisation initiated by her late husband had its intended consequence; she was gaining a respectful audience for her religion. That same day, American and Vietnamese curators and the Vietnamese collections manager had bent the rules of acceptable museum practice, allowing a devotee to present an offering of fresh fruit and flowers to the images of the Mother Goddesses in the exhibit. We understood them now as something more than beautifully carved wood.

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#### NOTES

1. Also known as “First Mother Goddess Princess Liễu Hạnh,” her full title is Đệ nhất Thánh Mẫu Liễu Hạnh công chúa, sắc phong Chê thắng Hòa diêu đại vương Da ban Mạ vàng Bồ tát.

2. The Mother of Mountains and Forests’ full title is Đệ nhị Thánh Mẫu Thượng ngàn Sơn tinh công chúa, sắc phong Lê Mạ đại vương.

3. The Mother of Water’s full title is Đệ tam Thánh Mẫu Động Đình Bạch hoa Thủy cung công chúa.

4. The Mother of Heaven’s eyes are gently open with long-lid folds, and large heart-shaped lips surround her tiny mouth. The long side strands of her hair are tied at the back and her ear lobes reach nearly to her shoulders. The eyes of the Mother of Mountains and Forests are cast down and she has a small mouth and delicate lips. The Mother of Water has a joyful smile and her lid folds are horizontal. According to Mr. Nguyễn Việt Thanh, an experienced statue carver, because the Mother of Heaven was incarnated as a young girl, her smile should be sensuous and joyful, the smile of the Mother of Mountains and Forests should suggest wit or intellect, and the Mother of Water’s smile has a touch of sorrow like a Mona Lisa smile.

5. Although the Mother Goddess Religion developed after the introduction of Buddhism, the two traditions have complemented each other. Buddhist followers can easily be Mother Goddess followers—today some monks and nuns are also spirit mediums—and similarly, Mother Goddess followers go to pagodas to burn incense and venerate Buddha. In private temples, a Bodhisattva is sometimes placed at the pinnacle of the Four Palace pantheon.



With the growing popularity of the Mother Goddess Religion, many Buddhist temples now include Palaces of the Mother Goddess on their grounds.

6. For more information in Western languages on the Mother Goddess Religion and the practices of spirit mediums, particularly in and around Hanoi, see DURAND 1959; FJELSTAD 1995; FJELSTAD and NGUYEN 2006; NGO 2003; NGUYEN 2002; NORTON 2000 and 2002; *Vietnamese Studies* 1999.

7. Carpenters who make ancestral altars described a similar use of auspicious measurements.

8. There is one small difference. The three statues in the Museum are all nearly the same size, while those in the Tiên Hương Palace are different sizes: the Mother of Heaven is the smallest and the Mother of Mountains and Forests the biggest. People in the Tiên Hương Palace have different explanations concerning this. Ông Đồng Đức quoted Professor Trần Lâm Biền's theory that the three Mother Goddesses are actually different manifestations of one ultimate Goddess. At the time of the Mother's first descent, people were living in hunger and hardship and thus the carver made the statue small. At the time of her second descent, people's lives had improved and the carver made a larger statue for the Mother of Water. When she descended for the third time, people's lives were even better, and the statue of the Mother of Mountains and Forests was larger yet. A ritual master posed an alternative theory: the Mother of Heaven was a fairy and that was why her size was small; the Mother of Mountains and Forests, as a member of a mountain-dwelling ethnicity, is large. These Mother Goddess statues are simply decorated but still convey the mercy and nobility of the Mothers.

9. Although Mr. Hạ had few specific memories of this particular commission for the Tiên Hương Palace, he described in great detail his procedures for carving a religious statue.

10. In the past, carvers had to go to Thanh Hóa, Nghệ An, or Hòa Bình to get wood. Now, with the proliferation of carving and the increased demand for wood, the carvers can call their suppliers and get the lumber they need or buy it from lumber shops in the village. When they have money, carvers usually buy a truckload of wood (a volume of five to ten cubic meters). If a family cannot afford to buy the whole shipment, two to four families will buy a shipment of lumber together.

11. He suggested that families without detailed ritual knowledge might burn incense on their ancestral altars and pray with a sincere heart.

12. When carving ancestral altars, tablets, and couplet boards, Mr. Hạ said that it was only necessary to choose a lucky day.

13. The offerings include incense, flowers, betel, water, and seasonal fruits. If the ritual takes place on the first or the fifteenth day of the lunar month, days when offerings are made to the ancestors, a chicken and a dish of sticky rice will be included. If the clients live nearby, they attend, bringing betel, wine, incense, and sometimes cash as offerings. Some clients bring packaged cookies, candy, and beer. If they live far away, clients give money to the carvers to purchase offerings. A client who is a cake maker might bring cakes, beer, and candy as offerings. The carver also prepares one or two trays of food to treat the clients.

14. Ông Đồng and Bà Đồng choose statue carvers for a variety of reasons. Some will ask senior mediums for recommendations or seek out the carvers of beautiful statues that they have seen in other temples. Sometimes they will ask a master medium or a fellow medium for a recommendation. When mediums order through a master medium—the medium who initiated them or the medium whose temple they use for *lên đồng*—they do not involve themselves in the process until they are ready to receive the final products from the master medium. By contrast, some people invest a great deal of effort in finding carvers who will meet their requirements. For example, Mr. T. from Gia Lâm district (Hanoi) wanted to offer statues to the village pagoda. The pagoda is situated near the riverbank and it is flooded every year. For this reason, he ordered cement statues that can withstand periodic flooding. Ông Đồng Thịnh of Linh Tiêu temple chose carvers who not only made beautiful statues but

were either mediums themselves or had relatives who were mediums. Ông Đồng Thủy in Bắc Giang province chose a carver who had a harmonious family life and at least one son.

15. For a description of the animation ritual, see NGUYỄN and PHẠM (in this issue).
16. For a detailed description of deanimation, see NGUYỄN and PHẠM (in this issue).

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