

6-1-2018

Vietnamese Water Puppetry: The Practical Development of the Structure and Form

Amanda Vander Hyde

Western Oregon University, avanderhyde13@mail.wou.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.wou.edu/honors_theses



Part of the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hyde, Amanda Vander, "Vietnamese Water Puppetry: The Practical Development of the Structure and Form" (2018). *Honors Senior Theses/Projects*. 155.

https://digitalcommons.wou.edu/honors_theses/155

This Text is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at Digital Commons@WOU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Senior Theses/Projects by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@WOU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@wou.edu, kundas@mail.wou.edu, bakersc@mail.wou.edu.

Vietnamese Water Puppetry
The Practical Development of the Structure and Form

By

Amanda Vander Hyde

An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for Graduation from the
Western Oregon University Honors Program

Prof. Scott Grim,

Thesis Advisor

Dr. Gavin Keulks,

Honors Program Director

June 2018

Acknowledgements

Thanks to my family for always supporting me and all
my friends who have helped me get to this point.

Love you all!

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	5
Literature Review.....	6
Original Concept.....	22
Aims & Methods.....	26
Results.....	35
Summary and Conclusion.....	38
Appendix.....	40
Bibliography.....	42

Abstract

My senior honors project is building a water puppet myself using traditional methods. These methods refer to Vietnam's history — specifically how and why this form, particularly the structure, was created and has been preserved in such a way. I will need to examine the theatre practice of Water Puppetry in Vietnam, looking at the structure of these puppets and how that structure has been developed from the Vietnamese people's way of living — whether religious, political, or practical — and use that to inform my design. I will endeavor to relate this puppet's structure to the stories that are shared in the puppetry form -- seeing which stories remain from this history based on how the development of this form reflects the puppets' structure. I am using this puppet as a hands-on, symbolic approach for delving into Vietnam's society, albeit from a more historical standpoint, by creating something that has many parallels to the Vietnamese people's way of living. This distinction and examination is an important idea now during this modern era, where there is so much paranoia and fear between peoples and cultures, because this helps to build empathy rather than view a different culture as an inherent threat. This project will present each piece of a puppet structure as a historical preservation of the culture itself, developing the society by showing where they came from and making them more three-dimensional and concrete to a cultural outsider.

I. Literature Review

Vietnamese water puppetry was created in the rice fields of farm villages. Water, in Vietnamese culture, symbolizes rebirth and a connection to heritage. Rice is a primary component of the Vietnamese diet (Gaboriault). Rice is typically consumed jointly by family members and, also, food consumption is a vital part of ritual celebrations, as feasts after the conduct of rites are typically dedicated to guardian spirits. Alcohol in these villages is also typically rice spirits. These celebrations help people maintain good social relations, so there is a social quality to the use of rice in Vietnam (Hawn). This social quality carries over into water puppetry, where these stories help portray good deeds and moral behavior, along the way strengthening nationalism.

According to Nguyen Thi Thuy Linh, water puppetry performances used to be held in the pagoda pond. Pagodas and communal houses were the center for social and cultural activities. The pond was important as it was used to avoid flooding and provided food. The pagoda itself usually provided weather protection. The idea of a den (temple) predates the pagoda, with origins of Confucianism and Taoism in China — it was a place of worship for ancestors and various divinities and also a place to honor national heroes (Linh 59). In most places, the water pavilion is a temporary structure that is covered with thin bamboo blinds with the three remaining sides closed, leaving a narrow entrance (Pham 17). The traditional water puppet stage is

almost “without decoration” (Nguyễn 22). The only decoration is the roof with ornate designs and eight roof corners “overhanging arched curving upward” (Nguyễn 22). It requires a screen and a space behind said screen (called a “water pavilion”) in order to hide the puppeteers and their instruments. There are two doorways on either side of the screen: “the ‘door of life’ on the east from which track puppets enter and the ‘door of death’ on the west to which they will return” (Foley 130). These are erected during festivals, in order to celebrate Vietnamese nationalism and portray different scenarios of everyday Vietnamese life.

Also according to Linh, people who joined the puppetry guild could be granted a seat in the village temple or communal house which allowed them to develop techniques through practical observation and imitation. To be a puppeteer means creating the puppets through an arduous task of hand-carving, then holding a long pole during the performance while making a puppet move flexibly and smoothly while controlling different ropes to accurately move a puppet in harmony with the music (Pham 50). Because of this care and respect to puppets, especially since these puppeteers must make and control puppets along with doing their civic duty (including farming) like everyone else, they are typically regarded with respect in their community. The title of water puppetry artiste denote age as well as someone in the community who takes part in the affairs of the village, thus the guild title. A guild could be “considered a surrogate kinship system and major figures in a

troupe included the *song trum*, the troupe head, and the *truong tro*, the person in charge of puppet-making and mechanisms” (Foley 133). Women are not regarded as physically fit enough to stand in the water and manipulate puppets and were not regarded with any form of status or power (Nguyễn 80). The guilds are esteemed and are regarded as a seat of power, and typically founded by someone of “great prestige either thanks to age, profession or property” (Nguyễn 61). These guilds establish a community center of authority, along with integrating history and social values in a theater practice — stimulating arts and creativity. The guilds were esteemed as highly as administration organization, but given the tumultuous events of Vietnam, according to Mark McLeod, the village-based corporations have died out everywhere except the villages in the North.

A water puppetry show always starts with boisterous music to “attract attention and create a joyful atmosphere” (Pham 25). The orchestra consists of many traditional musical instruments including the monochord: an instrument with a “single string which can create wonderful tune found in Vietnam only” (25). The singers accompany the performing items but also converse with the puppets in an indispensable back-and-forth. Firecrackers are used to enhance the “aesthetic effect” (Nguyễn 25), which helps to effect changes in light and atmosphere to help tell the story, especially since most traditional water puppetry shows took place during the day in order to be convenient for viewing purposes. Firecrackers, together with the various

sound effects and traditional instruments, are the basic sound scape for the Vietnamese Water Puppetry shows (26).

Water puppetry used to consist of acting without words, which means today the “gestures are perfected first, then the words of the characters are composed depending on the results of the characters’ actions and circumstances” (58). The words are typically in verse and the words remind the audience “of the stories behind the gesture” (58). The main element, still today, is folk poetry and folk songs, because that is what the water puppetry stories are based on and in. These texts “describe work and everyday activities in words that are usually simple, cheerful and full of strength” (59). Water puppetry used to be a form of mime, but now folk characters have conversations of songs, interacting with each other and with the singers working with the orchestra.

Each act is introduced by Uncle Teu, the puppet who is a “poor farmer” (Pham 26). As this character, he can use his “inferior status to mock bad habits in society and protect justice and the poor” (27). There are different scenarios that play out in vignettes in water puppetry shows, typically lasting “between one and seven minutes” (Nguyễn 53). Each of these scenarios works to portray real life: “Real life is re-created in all its simplicity so that familiar images of life will arouse emotions in the audience” (54). The puppeteers wanted to accurately portray the lives of their people so tended to

emphasize certain details in order for observation of the audience to be enough.

A Vietnamese water puppetry show is typically made up of seventeen scenarios that depict Vietnamese culture and history, and each show has the same seventeen scenarios, albeit with slight variations in interpretations of the story. The seventeen scenarios are as follows, and usually coincide with this order:

1. “The raising of the flag
2. The introduction of the show by the narrator water puppet Chu Teu
3. The dragon dance
4. On a buffalo with a flute
5. Agriculture
6. Catching frogs
7. Rearing ducks and catching foxes
8. Fishing
9. Triumphant return (stressing the importance of education and who got their doctorates)
10. The lion dance
11. The phoenix dance
12. Legend of the Restored Sword (where Jing Le Loi gained independence from China)
13. Children playing in the water

14. Boat racing
15. Unicorns competing for a prize
16. The fairy dance
17. The dance of the holy animals” (Ng)

The fairy dance represents the ancestors of Vietnam, being a reprise of the Dragon and Fairy theme, where Jing Lac Long Quan (the dragon) and Au Co (the fairy) married, had a “hundred children” (Grassi), and Lac Long Quan created the first Vietnamese Dynasty. This is the interpretation of their ancestors and how Vietnam came to be — a Creationism myth for their nation. According to Son, this story helps hold the nation together because they believe they are all from the same place.



Figure 1: This image is a painted sculpture of Au Co in Vietnam. (TripAdvisor)

The puppets are made from durable, light wood because the puppets are put in water. Because of the abundance of fig trees in Vietnam, they are usually made of fig wood. Puppets are “30-100 cm tall,” or 2-3 feet, “and weigh 1-5 kilograms” (Nguyen 27). The body and lower limbs of a water

puppet are usually made in one piece and part of the lower limbs stay in the water during the show. These limbs are usually covered in garments similar to those found on statues in communal houses or pagodas. The puppet makers most likely adapted the design from statues found in places of worship.

The fairy puppets are approximately two feet tall. The base of water puppets are submerged and fitted with a control mechanism which is a float that keeps the puppet balanced and in the vertical position. The size and shape of the base is made to “correspond with that of the puppet's body” (Nguyen 32), so the fairies have a large rectangular base with two fairies per base. The base, or wooden plate, can rotate around its horizontal axis with a rudder at the bottom, which is linked to a long pole which the puppeteer uses to move the puppet on the water. Poles and pulleys are placed under the water to connect the strings between the puppets and the manipulators, and this structure is called a “máy dây” (36). The size and shape of the base corresponds to the body to keep the precise level of submission so there is little resistance from the water as it moves forwards, backwards, or sideways. The puppets need to be able to move through the water to depict the scenes they are portraying accurately. Puppets also need to be water resistant, so are lacquered to keep them resistant to water as well as wood-borer, and then the clothes are painted on with different colors, which will be discussed more in depth later.

The string mechanism, or soft (or pulley) mechanism, is used for puppets that cannot be adequately controlled by a pole mechanism and it is used for items with many characters and much movement. The string mechanism has ropes stretched between “submerged stakes running from the manipulation room” (37), where the puppet manipulators are, to the stage along the pole connected to the base. A large sliding framework fitted with the puppets runs over systems of strings that are between the stakes.

The main line runs through the middle of the stage, and on either side are other lines for specific items. The main line, made of either “plaited bamboo or coconut fibre” (37), is used only to move the framework carrying the puppets. Every movement is achieved by using the fine string attaching the puppets to the framework. These strings, which are flexible but less elastic, are made of “plaited hair, coir, silk, jute, or other fibres” (38). They are also made water resistant by a “coating of wax” (38). They are so intricately built to be like real people. The fairy puppets in particular are designed to look like Ao Co (the original fairy from the Creation Myth) and also follow the ideal image of Buddha, smiling faces for happiness and round for happiness (Quotation Needed).

Also, the strings attached to the puppets control different parts of the puppets based on their role in the water puppetry show. The top parts of the upper limbs of puppets are fitted with moveable joints to facilitate body movement, and the string mechanism attaches to this so the manipulators can

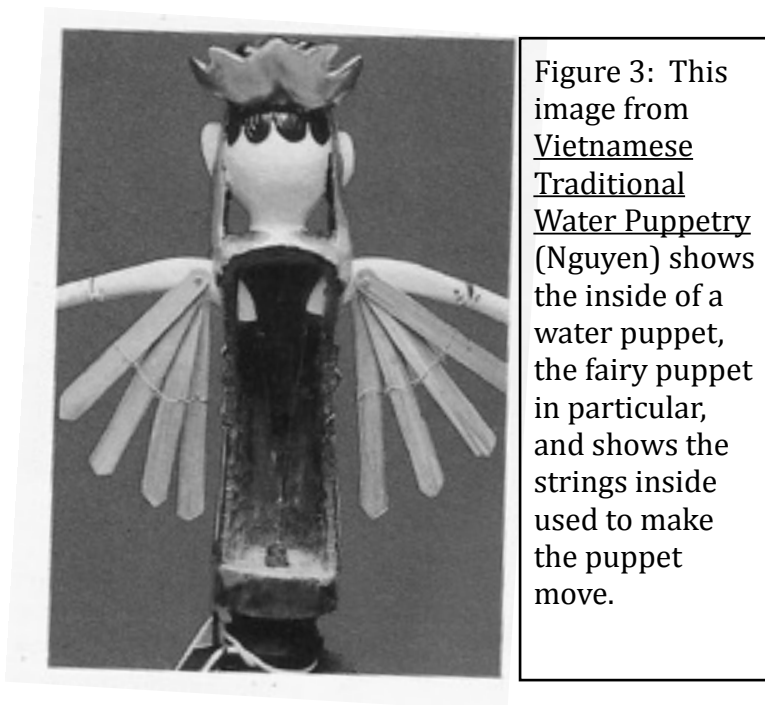
control it from behind the curtain. The fairies move their arms at their sides up and down on an axis perpendicular to the body. They have not just one joint on the shoulder, but also have ones on the “hands, wrists, elbows and shoulders” (54), so their arms flow and flap like a bird's. The strings go to the articulation on the shoulder, then come down to a circle at the base, or fulcrum, of the puppet, and go through the base to the manipulator at the back of the stage, and that is how the arms of the fairy are controlled.



Figure 2: This image from Traditional Vietnamese Water Puppetry (Nguyen) is an example of the sliding framework, which is done for the water fairies.

The puppets thus consist of the structure of the puppets themselves and then the string mechanism. The mechanisms come together at the base of the puppet, which serves the purpose of a fulcrum. The base should not emerge from the surface, but it should not be so deep that it weakens the manipulator when controlling the string mechanism. The main technical

principle governing the making of puppet mechanism is the importance of “concealing the control equipment under the water” (“The String Mechanism”), but this can only be perfected through experience, and there are no designs or “documents to help... understand this process” (“The String Mechanism”) of controlling the puppet. The only ones who do completely understand how to control the puppet are those in a water puppet artisanal who have had it taught to them by older members of the family or of the puppeteering group, as the “skill is passed down from generation to generation” (Revolinski).



The features of water puppets come from the Vietnamese people, because the puppet makers wanted them to resemble the Vietnamese in countenance and recreate their lives and work, emphasizing certain external characteristics while omitting some non-essential details. It is supposed to

observe the ordinary Vietnamese peasant living from back in the 11th century, and that can be seen in their “homogeneity in form and similar subject matter” (Nguyen 43). The way a puppet is carved is according to the artisan's own taste, so it is rarely governed by certain beliefs or religion.

The artistic inspiration comes from real life without influence of any religious concept or belief. However, though an artisan may have his or her own twist on that character that is portrayed in that scenario, they all have the same basic features, so they are recognized when they come out for their section. According to a Vietnamese Myth website, the current Vietnamese government does not approve of worshiping deities, but they will tolerate the cultural aspect of Vietnam’s rich mythological heritage, so calling the puppets fairies and spirits is less threatening (Belladeer). Many religious groups have resisted the current government control, and the government views the spreading of their ideals as a threat. The government wants the people of Vietnam to focus on providing stability for the nation. Religious differences or providing the people with a national identity outside of this government undermines their control (Hawn).

It must be noted that details of Vietnamese Water Puppetry, especially in terms of story and features of the puppets themselves, that the political sphere has altered and influenced this theatre form, even as stated above. According to Rumsby, the Au Co story went from a water-related comedy that talked of the origins of the Vietnamese people to a “strong sense of common

ancestry and mutual attachment...among the 54 ethnic groups who have inherited Viet Nam for thousands of years.” However, minority groups had no puppet tradition previously and it still is a fairly inaccurate representation of ethnic discrimination and conflict (Rumsby).

It has always been used as diplomacy to promote culture versus what the United States viewed Vietnam as; however, it is being used to get tourists to visit specific parts of Vietnam and the puppetry troupes receive support from government bodies (Foley 134). According to Hawn, socialist governments place strong emphasis on the arts because it is a prime vehicle for propagation of socialist values. This was seen when troupes would take the struggle against places like the United States as a theme: “figures in the army uniforms of the Western powers were stock villains that triumphant village heroes would slay in battles” (Foley 134).

In Vietnamese Water Puppetry, the show’s content usually promotes a facade of national unity, which includes the nationalistic tendencies of the Creationism Myth. Overall, the communist government that forced unification in 1975 suppressed history and heroes and wanted to use the arts to facilitate the spread of their own ideals, the genre “entered into interaction with new international and international forces” (134). The fairies and their story work to promote Vietnamese culture and trying to establish the dominance of the government party so are included in every Vietnamese Water Puppetry Show.

From then on, according to Foley, the international influence impacted the form in an irreversible way. International arts exchange between Vietnam and Eastern Europe were crucial to the development of puppetry as these influences helped in the migration of the art to the capital and “helped effect water puppetry’s redefinition as an art of the whole nation-state” (134). Government policy in the post-World War II period included the support of puppet troupes and their training. This advancement was important for also urbanizing the puppet form, which allowed propagandistic access in order to educate children.

Though traditionally women were viewed as too weak to be a part of the puppet troupe, in 1972, the first woman was “invited to the capital to join the professional troupe and soon other women were active as performers” (135). This allowed diversity to the form and also fell in line with the state’s ideal of gender equality, which needed to be visible in state-supported art forms, especially in the capital where visiting dignitaries would see it (135).

It became an important tool for cultural diplomacy, as foreigners didn’t need to understand what was happening to enjoy it and the policies were put in place for more openness. “While such performances were a lightweight counterbalance to Hollywood’s image of Vietnam as a site of war and trauma, they could serve as a beginning point for helping the world understand significant aspects of the country’s rich culture” (135).

Today, while the form and scenes seem to be very simple, the “uber-narrative the performance projects is a representation of the Vietnamese past, which has implications for the country’s present and future” (136): “a reminder of the agrarian base of the country, a review of Vietnamese success in throwing out colonial aggressors, and an affirmation of current stability and prosperity” (136). Conflicts are always resolved in these dramas — “building national self-esteem while alerting a foreign audience that Vietnamese have continually defeated richer and more powerful foes” (137). Foley makes the case that they are ready to prosper in a peaceful time, stating this case for both citizens and foreign investors. “An obscure art [has]... come to represent the essence of the nation, the best of what was fought for and won” (138); this has come to represent and speak for the whole of Vietnam, so the tradition of building the puppets has continued in an almost ritualistic sense.

The basic details are carved from the wood, and then are painted to exemplify and define features and colors. According to the Vietnam Online Newspaper,

“Fig wood was considered useless because people couldn’t use it for cooking or furniture. It cannot be used for burning or making wooden equipment. Perhaps that was why Vietnamese people used it to practice carving things like puppets in their free time. People came to find out that the fig wood goes along well with

water. It is the most durable and suitable material for making water puppets.” (“Vietnamese Water Puppets’ Design and Manipulation”)

The puppets are hand carved and, according to the *Manual of Traditional Wood Carving*, something free-hand carved should be shaped roughly then gradually cut more defined. The worker cannot cut too often into the block or disturb the continuity of the surface. It can also be helpful when building to use clay to create a rough mold and then move to wood.

Before the water puppets are painted, they are lacquered with water-proof resin and then a “thin layer of silver” (Reimer 53) to create reflections when the puppet moves. Then the painting is done for the characters’ costumes or make up, and the ideas for this come from those statues found in places of worship. They are painted with materials locally available, such as black lacquer, gold, silver, vermilion, and so on, using traditional techniques for preparing paints from plant resins.

Traditional techniques usually involve boiling the plant resins with oil, and adding a solvent, such as “linseed oil which [was] the most commonly used solvent” (“How Products are Made”) until synthetics replaced it in the twentieth century. Linseed oil, along with being a solvent, is also a binder, and keeps the paint glued to the surface. Fillers, such as powdered chalk or talcum, are used to “add bulk to paint” (Armstrong). Then, once painted, the water puppets are painted with a last coat of the water-proof lacquer so that

they are not damaged in the water. This is similar, if not identical, to oil painting. In oil painting, pigment is mixed with oil and combined into a paste that can be painted onto surfaces.

The fairies have fabric coming from their arms connecting to their bodies, making their wings. The fairies are supposed to be serene as compared to the dragons, because they are opposites in terms of ancestors, and so have a serene face. They also wear a type of the traditional Vietnamese dress, called an “áo dài” (Loan), which has extremely bright and exuberant colors. This dress typically has silver or gold filigree to show rank and, commonly, the fairy puppets have gold trim on their áo dài to show their superior rank in the Creation Myth. Women typically wear áo dài for ceremonies and it has become the national dress of Vietnam — a national symbol that is tied with the nationalism of the creationism story (Thi).



Figure 5: This image from Vietnamese Water Puppetry (Pham) is to show the general depiction of a Vietnamese water fairy puppet, showing the features of this kind of puppet, and what colors it should be painted with.

II. Concept

I built a Vietnamese Water Puppet using the traditional methods that date from the original creation of this form (to the best of my ability and to the materials available to me).

I gathered research about the techniques used for this form and how the fairy puppet looks in order to be as true to the original puppet design as possible. This is based a lot in religious and cultural background (as seen above) because the puppeteers were influenced by what was around them to help them build the puppets and have it reflect their culture to show the everyday scenes to their utmost reality.

As stated before: “Real life is re-created in all its simplicity so that familiar images of life will arouse emotions in the audience” (54). The puppeteers wanted to accurately portray the lives of their people so tended to emphasize certain details so that they would be recognized on sight. Puppeteers worked to develop these puppets in a way that portrayed their history in an accurate way while still showcasing what it means to be Vietnamese, so each puppet had a strict form to adhere to as to be recognized by any Vietnamese person no matter which puppet troupe they were seeing perform.

The materials have a practical or a symbolic meaning — there were those that were just most frequently found or those that held some religious/cultural meaning, such as developing the puppet features in a way that

resembles those statues found in religious pagodas. The way the fairy puppet is created and built is in reference to the Creationism Myth that it is required to perform.

It must have moving arms in order to establish the fairy element, but requires little other motion because of the symbolic and god-like nature it is symbolically representing. It must also use certain colors and look a certain way as the puppet is portraying one of the creators of Vietnam, so there is a reverence and respect when creating this puppet since it is similar to God in the Western Christian religion. There is a lot of symbolic attachment to the garment the fairy puppet is put in, as well as the rich (royal) colors that it is painted with.

A lot of stories originally floated around, but the Creationism Myth has continued to stick in this culture, as with a lot of others. It has varying meanings to different people, whether as a window into a different culture and how they believed they came to be or as political propaganda in order to unite the nation under a communistic regime. No matter what, though, this puppet has ties to the culture as it has continued (with minor changes) since water puppetry's creation.

Thus, I will be creating this puppet to create something of key symbolic importance to Vietnam's people and learning along the way what key elements are required in the making of this puppet because of what they

stand for to the people building these puppets to showcase the origin of their culture.

Building the puppet will involve some trial and error, because they are built with a string mechanism that moves the arms and head of the Vietnamese Water Puppet. It also is supposed to float on water, with the base mostly submerged to hide the mechanism so it seems like the puppet just floats on the water. There are three main steps to the development of the puppet:

- 1) I will have to use woodcutting techniques that are mostly hand-carved in nature.
- 2) I will be constructing an inner-mechanism to move the puppet from a large distance away with only poles for larger movement.
- 3) I will be mixing paint and other forms of resin to do the water-proofing and coloring of the puppet.

The thing about the water puppet is that there are very few books about the subject. The building of water puppets is a tightly held secret by their troupes and the puppeteer artisan. It is passed down to apprentices because they do not want other troupes to get the secrets, or the general public to know how they are made. Therefore, me creating this puppet will require some thought on my part and putting different pieces together from different texts. It might also require some improvisation since some parts are not shown or detailed anywhere in different areas of research. Therefore, the

creation of this puppet on one hand is also a way to try and see how the puppets are made, since there isn't one text that completely details it or that gives a step-by-step breakdown of how to do it.

By actually building a puppet that holds all these tenets of Vietnam and the culture that has remained through the years by using the form as a foothold, I hope to start gaining a different way of seeing Vietnam. I want to look at one of their oldest theater forms which developed with their culture, and perhaps then not see these people as inherently different but as a people with a rich history that involves a complicated puppetry form that requires much skill and aplomb.

III. Aims & Methods

The process began by looking up some specifics about the fairy water puppet. The fairies are typically put two to one rectangular base, (see Figure 2) so they can continue out in a line as offspring of the initial fairy that helped to populate Vietnam. It is 20" tall. Therefore, I pulled a picture from a website offering to sell one, and split it up in Photoshop by one inch increments (see Figure 7).



Figure 7



Figure 8

As seen on the left, by splitting up the basic puppet by one inch increments, it is easy to see that the head — with the crown — is easily about half of the puppet (actually 8"). This illustration also helped in discovering the basic colors of a fairy puppet's ao dai. Figure 8 shows some of the more traditional ao dai garments, still worn in Vietnam on special occasions. This came in handy when painting the puppet, as color consistency is seen in fairy puppet creation no matter what guild makes the puppet. While height consistencies are important to accuracy, it is also difficult to gauge as a beginner puppet-maker, so this was helpful in gauging about where I should be in proportions.



Figure 9

After looking at general requirements for a puppet, I created a base mock-up out of clay (see Figure 9). This helped give me a better idea of how to render this puppet in three dimensions. Looking at something in a picture is a little different than seeing it in three dimensions and figuring out how things like clothes are rendered in the back and the sides. Also, while carving wood is different

from sculpting clay, in many factors including difficulty, having a clay mock-up was something to reference and also something to mimic the carving process. It developed a sculpting mindset that allowed the beginning of what needed to be carved once I began using wood.

The clay mock-up sculpture was only 9-10 inches, as shown with the ruler for scale. This is about half of what the fairy puppets typically are in size, but it was about a half-scale model to see how proportions would work in three dimensions and how I would need to divide up the body when carving it out of wood, considering I wouldn't necessarily have the correctly sized pieces.

Thus began the carving process. I got a simple set of six wood carving tools and a box of pre-cut blocks of basswood. Unfortunately, while it is light and traditional to Vietnam, fig wood is not readily available in the United

States. Fig trees grow in abundance in Vietnam and so the wood could be easily carved into blocks. However, I did not have the resources to try and find non-block fig wood, so instead used basswood. This already took out some of the traditional methodology, but it was a required compromise in order to carve the puppet at all. Basswood (or linwood) is a common carving wood for people carving puppets. It is durable and soft, which allows for easy carving, especially for someone who is a beginner. I got a box of a bunch of wood pieces, and the ones the correct thickness (width) were not the correct height, so it required putting two together.

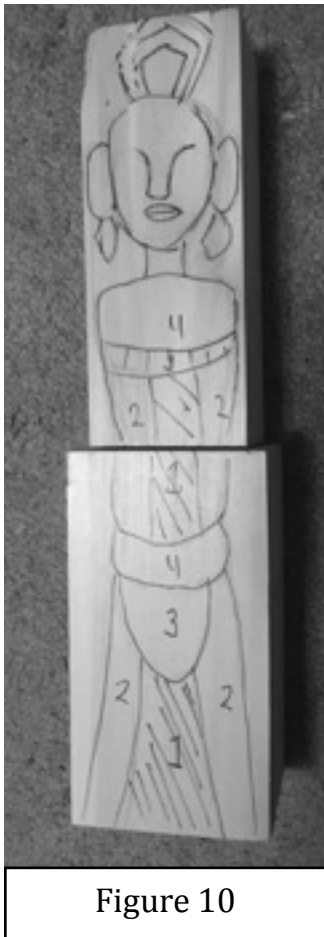


Figure 10

Figure 10 shows the two pieces I picked. They were basically the same size, so I stacked them to create one puppet that I could glue together since I would cover it with water-proof resin anyway at the end, which would potentially help seal the puppet.

I drew an outline to help with the sculpting element to look at it from all sides. I did a rotational outline, so did profile on both sides and also tried to encapsulate the back of the puppet. On the front, I numbered the different areas in order to figure out the levels of indentation that would be required to show the difference in carving levels in order for it to read as a different layer once painted.



Figure 11

I tried to hand-carve as much as possible, since that is what they would have done traditionally. There would have been no power tools or lithe to help with carving. Basswood is so easily carved, though, that it didn't require much leverage to carve the wood (as seen in Figure 11). However, there was internal carving that confused me on how it would be done. Where the ears attached to the head there was space

for the earrings, but the tools I had were not very effective in generating that space. Based on the clay mold, it seems that the ears might have been carved separately or different tools might have been used to add more depth. They probably have more specialized and varied tools than I did, which would make sense since it is a profession that has come from a long history.

In order to somewhat mimic that intricate depth, I used a drill to drill a hole in the area between the ears and the head since I didn't have any small tools or anything that could carve really deep. This would never have been done with traditional methods, but it was the only way I had to mimic this depth.

These puppets are more intricately carved in Vietnam, mine is more simplistic since I am a beginner and have limited time. However, though mine

is simplistic and rustic, it still had the general details of the puppet, including the ao daj clothing.

The arms were a little more intricate to put together once the main body of the puppet was carved. I examined the photographic evidence I had acquired to look at how the arms were pieced together in order to stay flat and horizontal when the string mechanism was pulled to extend the arms. If the top arm pieces are at a diagonal, where the bottom of the piece is at a longer diagonal, the bottom hits the next piece to straighten out when top piece is pulled up by the wire to extend the arms outward. The fairy puppet arms have one or two joints, one at the elbow and sometimes one at the wrist for the hand.

By examining photographic evidence, it seems that only the top piece (the one connected at the shoulder) is attached to the inner string mechanism that runs through the body of the puppet, while the rest of the arms are jointed with wires to keep the pieces together even as the arms are raised through the string mechanism. They would have to have really small tools to bore those holes that join the arm pieces, but instead I used a small drill bit to bore a hole through the puppet arms. This way I could easily string the wire through and around with little hassle. Even in the modern era, if the puppeteers stuck with traditional methods, it is a trade secret about how they create those little holes in the wood.



Figure 12

When I started working on the arms, I did not think I needed those little joints between the arms and could just have a wire running through the middle of the arm pieces, but when I strung the pieces on the wire, I realized my mistake. The pieces would move around and flip and the pieces further down wouldn't have enough force to extend with the arm. Therefore, I had to drill smaller diagonal holes through the sides of the arm pieces and loop the wire through (see Figure 12). This was a valuable lesson, as I realized that what may have seemed superfluous was actually something tailored and passed down in order for the integrity of the puppet to remain.

For the main string mechanism that runs through the center of the puppet, I decided to drill a large hole through the center of the two pieces and across the shoulders of the upper piece in order to run two wires through that I could loop around the bottom to control the arms, eventually gluing the two pieces together on the seam. Typically, it would seem that traditional puppetry artisans split the puppet in half to put the string mechanism in as seen in the Appendix (Figure 18) but I did not have the traditional tools to do that. Therefore, I just drilled up through the puppet and gave it a space that I

could feed the wire through. Carving out the center of the puppet probably adds buoyancy since it would be lighter the more wood is taken out of it, but I was not testing my puppet out on water.



Figure 13

After attaching the two pieces of the mainframe of the puppet together, I sanded it down to provide a sleeker form for the puppet and then painted it with a base coat of waterproof white paint (see Figure 13). They would instead use waterproof resin and silver to provide it with a shimmery quality.

However, I did not have the resources for that, but I at least wanted to give it a base color that

I could paint over to provide more opacity for the paint.



Figure 14

For the paint itself, they would typically boil local ingredients as pigments with plant resins to make vibrant paint. This allowed for them to use materials that are found in their homeland to create a puppet that tells stories of their history. For lack of resources, I instead bought a natural paint that was separated into pigment and oil (see Appendix Figure 20) that I mixed together to paint on the surface. While

the paint was nice and had some rich colors, the oil made it hard for the paint to try and also to stick nicely to the surface with a rich opacity. Therefore, the colors on my puppet were a little duller and not as intricate with layering as those puppets in Vietnam (see Figure 14).

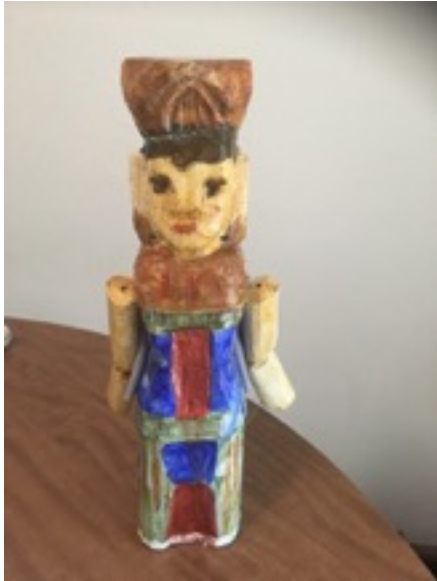


Figure 15



Figure 16

The final step, once it was all put together, was to coat the puppet in water-proof resin. This was mixed and poured over the puppet, which actually moved some of the paint because it wasn't completely dried due to it being mostly oil-based (see Appendix Figure 21). This was a setback that experienced Vietnamese puppet artisans would not make, but since they also use slightly different paint, their water-proof resin probably sits differently on the puppet. While disappointing, it was understandable since I had never used this kind of water-proof resin or the paints before. I allowed the resin to dry and then attached fabric for the wings to showcase the idea of a fairy for the Vietnamese puppet (Figure 15 and 16).

The puppet would then be mounted to a square base that the wire could be fed through, attached to a bamboo pole that was very long in order to float the puppet on the water. This seemed like a superfluous item since I would have no way to test this puppet out on water and considering I had to alter the way I did the puppet based on the resources I had on hand, there is no guarantee that it would work on water anyway. However, this would be the final step.

IV. Results

Overall, the puppet-making process was fairly successful. I had a three-step process that I hoped to achieve:

- 1) Use woodcutting techniques that are mostly hand-carved in nature.
- 2) Construct an inner-mechanism to move the puppet from a large distance away with only poles for larger movement.
- 3) Mix paint and other forms of resin to do the water-proofing and coloring of the puppet.

All of these things were achieved with a fair amount of success. The wood-carving techniques are fairly intricate in detail. The fact that puppetry artisans have an abundance of tools and the technique to intricately carve these puppets is astounding. I have a greater respect for the patience and talent that goes into carving the puppets with such detail and to get them so smooth. My puppet is fairly rudimentary and I spend maybe 30-40 hours carving it. The fact that artisans generate multiple puppets and use a variety of tools and techniques in order to have them look a specific way to mimic figures in historical and religious stories is a true commitment to the art.

The puppet works successfully in raising and lowering its arms, which was the main concern considering it is the moving part of the puppet and mechanisms are the hardest part to have succeed. The painting could have been more successful and, if redone, it might have been best to go with synthetic paint or find something that used less oil in order to have it dry with

more opacity and a richer color (and also to dry more successfully). It is interesting that the puppetry artisans use local materials to create paints and yet get something that binds well to the puppets and has a rich color. It would have perhaps been more conducive to research different kinds of natural paint that I could get ahold of and try out different kinds of paint and see what was most successful. However, that would require a larger budget that I did not necessarily have the funds for.

The puppet I created carries the basic tenets of what makes a Fairy Vietnamese Water Puppet. It is made out of a lightweight wood that is typically used in carving (basswood), unlike the fig wood that those in Vietnam use because of availability. I used mostly hand-carving to see what kind of techniques and skill it takes to create a puppet from a block of wood, and based on my modicum of success, I now have a greater appreciation for puppet carving and the skills of those in Vietnam. It makes sense that these people were revered and were typically leaders in their communities — especially if they took the time to make puppets on top of their other duties. It was important enough to them that they would do so, in order to pass along the stories of their past and culture in such a symbolic and time-consuming way.

Women typically were not allowed in these puppetry guilds, not allowed to build or command a puppet. As a woman making one of these puppets, it seems slightly blasphemous, considering it is a male-centered art

form. However, in the changing gender roles of society, even in places like Vietnam, that now is starting to allow women into puppetry guilds — it goes to show that tradition can mix with a more modern sensibility to allow growth and change. This is especially true considering the Fairy puppet is part of their Creationism myth, is revered and showcased, and is a woman that helped to bring the Vietnamese people into the world.

The fact that this puppet shows the Creationism myth and has such a specific outfit and look because of the religious significance means that even my effort probably did not do the figure justice. It is a revered figure considering that it is part of how the Vietnamese people came to be, and the fact that such reverence is shown to creating this puppet in the puppetry guilds, no matter which one it is, is quite astounding.

V. Summary and Conclusion

As it states in *Hamilton: The Revolution*, “stories can be an engine for empathy, and a way to show people what they share” (McCarter). Tourists go to a lot of these water puppet shows in Vietnam and see these stories portraying their history and myths, and the idea that they do this to showcase their talent and their rich history reflects the care put into these puppets. They are used as a propaganda tool (in both a positive and negative sense) to show how these people are, in fact, people and not necessarily different. Making one of these puppets shows how hard it is and the care that is put into it to reflect the tradition of building one so that it symbolically represents Vietnam from the materials it is made out of to the stories it portrays.

These puppets are fairly difficult and technically complicated to make, and to make it so consistently so that they visually represent something that tourists can even recognize without understanding the words is a talent. Even just making a rudimentary version of these puppets, I can see how much work goes into these and how much care. On the most basic level, creating this puppet myself was kind of like experimental archaeology, in order to build something that has a lot of secrets surrounding it to see how they could possibly create these puppets in this way.

In a larger, metaphorical sense, this puppet creation helped show me how much work goes into making these puppets and how much these artisans care about their past and their culture in order to generate

something so tediously because of how much tradition the puppet creation holds. If they were to lose that tradition in technique, it wouldn't hold the same weight as an old puppetry form.

Appendix



Figure 17: This picture from *Vietnamese Traditional Water Puppetry* (Nguyen) which shows one of the places where water puppetry started, in the rice paddies.



Figure 18: From *Vietnamese Water Puppetry* (Pham) showing someone carving, painting, and putting the strings inside a water fairy.



Figure 19: This picture from an online source (Weibel) showing a traditional water puppetry



Figure 20: This pictures shows the various pieces used to mix the paint for the puppet.



Figure 21: Some of the paint running once the resin was added.

Bibliography

Armstrong, W. P. "Plant Resin & Wax Photos." Plant Resin & Wax Photos. Web. 09 Feb. 2013.

Balladeer. "VIETNAMESE MYTH." *Balladeer's Blog*. 08 Jan. 2016. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

"Dress Code in Vietnam." *Vietnam Online*. Web. 16 June 2017.

Gaboriault, David. "Vietnam Water Puppet Theatre: A Look Through the Ages." Diss. Western Kentucky U, 2009. Web. 6 Mar. 2017.

Grassi, Alessandra. "Vietnam, Water and Puppets." *Vietnam Water and Puppets*. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 Dec. 2012.

Hawn. "Vietnam." *Countries and Their Cultures*. Web. 16 May 2017.

"How Products Are Made." How Paint Is Made. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 Feb. 2013.

Linh, Nguyen. "WATER PUPPETRY AND PEASANTS LIFE IN VIETNAM." *Journal of Mekong Societies*. Web. 12 Mar. 2017.

Luong, Lindy. *Lac Long Quan & Au Co Legend*. *Truong Son*. Web. 12 Apr. 2017.

This online scholarly article is an introduction to the myth of Au Co and Lac Long Quan. It holds importance because it is the creation myth of the Vietnamese people. It deals with the differences between North and South Vietnam, but also holds a sense of nationalism because they are called to not forget each other. The dichotomy here is pulled out of the idea of opposites: Au Co is a fairy and Lac Long Quan is an underwater dragon, pulled from high and low — it holds the idea of yin and yang, fire and water. However, this

adversity and difference is reconciled in the fact that they have children together and reach a compromise to split up the children for them to rule the land and sea. The myth definitely creates this nation out of strife because an army tries to keep them from founding the nation, but they are still able to out of differences.

This is, however, a myth, and does not hold a lot of factual credence and in-depth analysis. It is the development of a myth that is believed to be the creation of Vietnam and holds value in the cultural and religious background of Vietnam, based on how they believed they were created.

This source is a framework in which to build on the fact that the puppet I will be creating is a fairy puppet, based on Au Co, and this puppet is used to tell the story of the creation of Vietnam in almost all Vietnamese Water Puppet shows. Different scenarios are chosen, but this one typically makes an appearance. This will help me to understand the story of the Au Co Creation Myth and why the puppet must be built a certain way as to not desecrate the myth that Vietnam has built its nationalism upon.

McCarter, Jeremy, and Lin-Manuel Miranda. Hamilton: The Revolution.

London: Little, Brown, 2016. Print.

Ng, Amoy. "Vietnamese Water Puppet Show 2008." Online video clip.

YouTube. YouTube, 15 July 2008. Web. 9 February. 2013.

Nguyễn, Huy Hồng., and Trung Chinh. Tran. *Vietnamese Traditional Water Puppetry*. Hanoi: Gioi, 1992.

This textual source is an overlook on all aspects of water puppetry. It examines the history of water puppetry and how it developed in Vietnam. It describes each scenario that is played out in the water puppetry practice and what each of them means to the history of the culture. This book gives valuable information on the creation of puppets — it looks at the base and the pulley system, describing how the bases rotate and float in great detail. It also gives information on how the puppets look — providing pictures of clothing and puppets, descriptions of the different colors of paint used, and the types of garb that are placed on each puppet.

This source really delves into the creation of different water puppets, but still in somewhat general terms. It describes how the overall puppets would be created, but not how the differences between puppets is delineated, such as what base would work best for what puppet. However, it has a lot of photographic evidence, which can help determine specifics for each puppet that would not necessarily be apparent just from reading the details that were included to encapsulate all the different puppets.

This source will help me really piece together and develop a method to create the tangible puppet that is my goal. It also explains the importance of step and each element of the puppet, explaining why certain resources would be used or why something would be put together that way (in aesthetic or practical terms). I can then use this source to put together a workable puppet that reflects the ones made in Vietnam. It gives the historical or cultural

background of the different aspects of the puppet, which also helps me understand why parts of the puppet have been developed the way they were and enhances my connection to the puppet and Vietnam.

Panoramic Images. "Low Angle View of Statues in a Communal House, Dinh Bang, Vietnam." All Posters. Web. 11 Aug. 2013.

Phạm, Hoàng Hải. Vietnamese Water Puppetry. Hanoi: VNA House, 2007. Print.

This literary source is an examination of Vietnamese Water Puppetry, especially in-depth on the history of water puppetry and the purposes of certain puppets. It also delves into what the puppets wear and why, drawing on the history of Vietnam and why these puppets would be placed in this clothing. It makes up for the previous source in where that source was lacking, because it delves more in-depth on specifics of bases and clothing choices of specific puppets, rather than just giving generalizations about these puppets. However, it does not really reflect on the practical building of these puppets, rather just the reasoning behind developing and showcasing the puppets.

The important thing here is that this book looks at more specifics in the practical building of a specific puppet, rather than generally explaining processes. That explanation is still helpful, but when trying to practically apply it, sometimes it becomes hard based on what one specific puppet would

need. If there are a lot of options, it is sometimes hard to pick what could be best for that specific puppet type.

This source looks at some more specifics and will help me explain why I chose to create or build a puppet a certain way, such as what historical or cultural significance certain aspects of the puppet have, or even just in a practical way why it needs to be built a certain way. For example, this source looks at arm joints and describes the different joint configurations for the different puppets, and why those arm joints are different for different puppets — which is highly practical, but also extremely important. This source will help me to defend my choices, especially in the aesthetic choices of the puppet.

Reimer, Treva. Mua Roi Nuoc. Syracuse: United States Institute for Theatre Technology, 2008. United States Institute for Theatre

Technology. Theatre Design & Technology, 2008. Web. 01 Mar. 2013.

Revolinski, Kevin. "Vietnamese Puppetry: Just Add Water." The Mad Traveler Online. Oct. 2011. Web. 08 Apr. 2013.

Son, Lienhuong. "Lac Long Quan & Au Co Legend." *DacSanTS-Final_060505A*. Web. 22 Mar. 2017.

"The String Mechanism." VIETNAM VACATION. Web. 09 Mar. 2013.

Thi, Le. Vietnamese Styles Past and Present. Kitakyushu Forum on Asian Women. Web. 12 Apr. 2017.

This online scholarly article examines the history of the ao dai. This source examines the history of this tunic-like dress that dates back to the 19th century and has become the national costume for women. The length of the dress varies with styles and fashion trends, and the author summarizes these changes, specifically the fact that it has changed lengths and used to have slits down the side. The impact of this garment is examined by the author as they examine the change from women having to wear it to it now being worn just for formal occasions. It also has some change that is reflected because of the changing political climate and how who was ruling Vietnam at the time modified and codified clothing, drawing from different influences and modesty protocols.

This source will help me to develop the clothing that my puppet (the fairy puppet) will be wearing, as they are typically placed in an ao dai. This source will help me trace the history of the garment and why it has been used the way it was used, or why the fairy was placed in this garment. It will also give me a practical source for developing the ao dai based on how it actually looks, so this traditional garment is preserved on my puppet. It also is important to note that this will pull in the fact that puppetry in Vietnam is used for nationalism and political reasons and how it has been preserved to reflect that, or even possibly how it has changed to reflect the agenda of political camps.

Tran, Dzung. "Thang Long Water Puppet Theatre." VNTEGCOM. Web. 11 Aug. 2013.

TripAdvisor. "Vietnamese Water Puppetry at Thang Long - Review of Hue Water Puppet Theatre, Hue, Vietnam." *TripAdvisor*, 2018.

"Vietnamese Water Puppet's Design and Manipulation - News VietNamNet." *Vietnamnet NEW*. 22 Sept. 2016. Web. 16 May 2017.