

## Mobilizing Craft: diplomacy in the international turn of American Art History

### Artesanato mobilizador: diplomacia na virada internacional da História da Arte americana

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Imagem: "Oriental Lamps – Siamese Bronze head," *Retailing Daily* (August 13, 1956): 81a [detalhe]

## Mobilizing Craft: diplomacy in the international turn of American Art History

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Dra. Jennifer Way\*

#### Resumo

Há vinte e cinco anos, a acadêmica dos *American Studies* Amy Kaplan lembrou-nos que "o estudo da cultura estadunidense esteve tradicionalmente isolado do estudo das relações estrangeiras" (1993: 11). Desde então, os campos do *American Studies* e da História da Arte Estadunidense, respectivamente, levantaram questões sobre os Estados Unidos no mundo. Contudo, no estudo da arte americana, não exploramos integralmente como os encontros com aquilo que a nação considera estrangeiro mobilizaram o artesanato por meio das estruturas diplomáticas. Neste artigo, uma caixa preta de madeira, laqueada com nácar, ou madreperla, com flores e pássaros pintados por Thanh-Le alerta-nos para algumas maneiras pelas quais a diplomacia estadunidense estimulou o interesse pelo artesanato vietnamita entre *designers*, líderes de comércio e negócios, e a classe média dos Estados Unidos no final da década de 1950, anos imediatamente anteriores ao que os estadunidenses chamam de Guerra do Vietnã.

#### Palavras-chave:

História da arte americana; virada internacional; diplomacia; artesanato; Vietnã.

#### Abstract

Twenty-five years ago, American Studies scholar Amy Kaplan reminded us that "The study of American culture has traditionally been cut off from the study of foreign relations" (1993: 11). Since then, the fields of American Studies and the history of American art respectively have raised questions about the United States in the world. However, in studying American art, we have not fully explored how American encounters with what the nation considers foreign have mobilized craft through frameworks of diplomacy. In this paper, a black, lacquered wooden case with nacre, or mother or pearl, painted flowers and birds made by Thanh-Le alerts us to some of ways American diplomacy galvanized interest in Vietnamese craft among American designers, leaders in commerce and business, and the middle class during the late 1950s, the years immediately prior to what Americans call the Vietnam War.

#### Keywords

American art history; international turn; diplomacy; craft; Vietnam.

Twenty-five years ago, Amy Kaplan reminded us that “The study of American culture has traditionally been cut off from the study of foreign relations” (Kaplan, 1993: 11). Novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen would level a similar critique at American Studies, charging that it “does not usually study other peoples, places or events outside of the United States, even when the United States has had great interaction with and impact upon these peoples, places, or events, and vice versa” (Nguyen, 2005: 21). Until recently, the scholarship of American art history fared no better because it did not substantively explore the relationship of foreign relations and art, including people and situations outside the United States with which Americans engaged.

Previously, the history of American art emphasized national characteristics, style and social histories at home (Johns, 1984). Barbara Groseclose recounts that studying art was circumscribed by the nation of origin, thus, “the objects constituting historical American painting and sculpture have been confined almost entirely to the United States, limiting their exposure” (Groseclose, 2000: 2). According to Joy Sperling, not until late into the twentieth century did historians of American art shift from defining the Americanness of American Art to engaging American art internationally (Sperling, 2011: 30). Within this framework, Veerle Thielemans observes,

One of the most probing questions confronting American art history today relates to the terrain it is supposed to cover. With the recognition that American art has always been made up of encounters between cultures from different parts of the world comes the painful awareness that the writing of its history, even when embracing multiculturalism, has too often been geographically confined (Thielemans, 2008: 1).

The international turns in American Studies and the history of American art are changing both fields (Shu and Pease, 2015; Davis, 2013; Fluck et al, 2011; Fishkin, 2005). Regarding the latter, as Patricia Failing notes, “undercutting the nativism that used to be American art history’s reason to exist” along with taking more cosmopolitan approaches and “acknowledging a broader international context” distances us from the foundational struggles that once fueled concerns about the very legitimacy of American art as a field of scholarly inquiry (Failing, 2000: 192).

However, shadowing this “broader international context” are questions about what causes “encounters between cultures from different parts of the world”. For example, can we explain a particular way of thinking about art in light of what was happening in the United States, or trace developments in the American art world to the way the nation perceives its interactions with the world? In reflecting on the international contexts in which nations define themselves, political theorist Andrew Heywood observes, “As state borders have become increasingly ‘porous’, the conventional domestic/international, or ‘inside/outside’, divide has become more difficult to sustain” (Heywood, 2013: 23). Heywood’s observation about the porosity between conventional borders of national and foreign, and domestic and international, can help us understand art in connection with foreign relations.

As an example, this discussion highlights craft and design intersecting with the American diplomacy of Southeast Asia. A black lacquered wooden case with nacre, or mother of pearl, painted flowers and birds on the front exemplifies an object “outside of the United States” in this context, since it was made

by an artisan active in Vietnam. The inside cover is stamped in what appears to be a gilt-lettered rendering of his name – Thanh-Le” [Fig. 1a, 1b].



Fig. 1. Thanh-Le, lacquered wooden case with nacre, painted flowers and birds, before 1960. Box 3, Papers of Olov Robert Thure Janse, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

Today the case resides in the papers of archeologist Olov Robert Thure Janse in the Smithsonian National Anthropological Archives. It features nowhere in American art history, and perhaps it should not. Its presence in the United States could be explained by recourse to export ware, in other words, artifacts made abroad for consumption in America (Wright, 1956: 96). To this point, maybe Janse purchased it overseas or sent for it. Still, the lacquered case warrants attention for the ways it references “other peoples, places or events” outside of the United States along with American “interaction with and impact upon” them (Nguyen, 2005: 21), and for its location in the Janse Papers.

Although the international turn in American art history has not yet addressed the lacquered case or studied connections between art and foreign relations in depth, its scholarship does discuss the movement of objects, their movement during the approximate time when the case was made, and features of their movement. Therefore, in attempting to understand how the lacquered case mattered to American foreign relations, it is to this material we turn first.

### **Movement**

That the case is associated with a Vietnamese lacquer artist based in Thủ Dầu Một, not far north from Ho Chi Minh City in the south of Vietnam, links Vietnam to the United States. Moreover, this link suggests movement on the part of the artist, his case, Janse, or all three. Art historians specializing in American art history and in some other areas address the movement of objects with creativity and rigor. How might their work illuminate the lacquered case?

Jennifer Roberts revisits the work of particular artists on questions of how and why objects circulate. Her work alerts us to bring material culture-inspired attention to biographies of objects on the move (Roberts, 2014). Art historians specializing in other fields also explore how objects move, and they have analyzed in what ways those movements are meaningful. For example, Clare Harris studied transnationalism to hone in on makers and artifacts, including images, moving across national boundaries. Harris even suggests that boundary crossing informed art history from its beginnings. Moreover, she points out that commercial trade can compel works of art to “circulate far beyond their originating context (Harris, 2006: 699).

In alerting us to makers and objects that are routed, historians of American art, such as Joy Sperling, theorize that networks of “imbricated transcultural transactions” index objects crossing national boundaries. The process involves them in “transcultural transactions” (Sperling, 2011: 26). Of additional interest is the notion that objects on the move carry traces of places. From Harris: “the cultural logic of one place is not erased on departure from it: it remains as a memory and an eminently transportable toolbox of art praxis which can be re-used over space and time” (Harris, 2006: 699).

Other aspects of transnationalism reveal relationships between the places to and from which objects journey. In reflecting on globalization and the historiography of early modern South Asian art history, Deepthi Murali cautions that “globalizing art history requires us to challenge notions of the local and global as separate entities” (Murali, 2015: 44). Additional scholarship inquires how institutions facilitate objects linking places. For her project with the Max Planck Research Group, Eve-Maria Troelenberg examines how museums, art histories, aesthetics, and canons facilitate “transculturation” – “the

interrelation between particular objects or groups of objects and their cross-cultural reception” – through “collections, publications or other visual or performative cultural practices in the colonial and postcolonial age” (Troelenberg).

On top of this, scholars of American art study how the movement of objects blurs distinctions between local and global sites and contexts. For instance, they examine why objects cross national boundaries. Some reasons are, to participate in civilizations happening in other times and places – think of the ways Americans have used Greek and Roman art as a resource and imaginary (Bell, 2002). Or, there is intent to convey information about people and situations located elsewhere. Recall the sculptor Hiram Powers’s second marble version of *The Greek Slave*, 1846. Although commissioned by a British Earl, it toured the United States under the organization of an American artist renowned for his travels in the Middle East (Pohrt, 2016). There is also curator John Cotton Dana presenting the exhibition *Modern German Applied Arts* featuring work by the German Deutscher Werkbund at the Newark Museum in 1912 to promote modern design reformulated through craft and art (Maffei, 2000). Objects cross national boundaries also as part of the collecting practices of Americans, which mobilize them for personal or civic purposes, as occurred with a Maori pendant collected by the American explorer Charles Wilkes in the South Pacific and subsequently exhibited at the Smithsonian Institution (Kohlstedt, 2016). There is also art made by abroad that Americans obtained there through patronage, gift, sale or auction.

In the aggregate, this scholarship reveals the lacquered case as an object in motion. It crossed national borders in its travels from, or with, a Vietnamese maker, to reside, eventually, at the Smithsonian. The case seems to have “circulate[d] far beyond [its] originating context” (Harris, 2006: 699). Also, this scholarship invites us consider how the lacquered case remembers its circulations and may have been fashioned to facilitate them.

### **The movement of objects in mid-twentieth century America**

We can further frame the lacquered case by consulting scholarship about the mid twentieth-century, when the case likely was made and put into circulation. During this time, some types of transnational movements of objects flourished. Also, American foreign relations compelled and supported them, often through circumstances involving the American State Department, cultural institutions, and the governments of other nations.

For one thing, American artists were going abroad to represent the United States in major international exhibitions, such as the Venice Biennale. As one example, the Museum of Modern Art participated in the Biennale of 1956 by virtue of its involvement in foreign affairs, which developed through its Board of Trustees and their political connections along with the museum’s International Council and its ties to the State Department (Simpson, 2007: 33). An exhibition such as the Biennale required the museum to identify art to represent the United States and then support its travel financially and conceptually. These tasks engaged with politics or questions of authority and power concerning the domestic and international status of the museum. Also, these tasks reaffirmed ties between the museum’s board and its departments, and the American State Department and other nation’s governments. Sometimes these ties problematized the movement of art abroad, as occurred with the criticism and ensuing

cancellation of the State Department-curated exhibition, *Advancing American Art*, in 1947 (Harper, 2012).

Questions of authority and power impacted bringing art into the United States, too, and they shaped ideas about the appropriateness of curatorial choices and presentations. Examples include the American State Department facilitating the Promotion of Inter-American Cultural Relations for the Pan-American Conference and Maintenance of Peace in Buenos Aires in 1936 (Glade, 2009), and Asian art touring the United States during the mid and late 1950s (Lin, 2016). Unquestionably, for these projects, the movement of works of art across national boundaries reflected American foreign relations' policies, agendas and goals. Additionally, questions of authority and agency arose regarding what objects' style and subject matter conveyed about the United States or other nations participating in exhibitions of foreign art (Mathews, 1976). What also surfaced were expectations about how nations could and should represent themselves in an international context played out in national and international art festivals held in the United States (Wallis, 1994).

The theme of power in the transnational movements of objects at mid-century points to something about the lacquered case at the Smithsonian. Its maker, a well-known lacquer artisan and business owner, was active in Vietnam during the period when Americans began aiding South Vietnam, or The Republic of Vietnam. What connects Thanh-Le's case to art history scholarship about movement and art and to American foreign/domestic relations is American diplomacy in South Vietnam. The power-based relations of American diplomacy there mobilized Thanh-Le's lacquered case.

### **Mobilizing craft in economic diplomacy and trade**

The literature of early modern European art is quite rich in discussions about diplomacy and art. It looks at pre-contemporary forms of diplomacy, such as missionaries and ambassadorial visits to the highest level of religion and the state (Mansour, 2013). Also, it speaks to complexities in giving and receiving people and objects in relationships of power (Auwers, 2013). Of particular relevance is the work of Nancy Ulm and Leah Clark. They approach diplomacy by "privileging objects of exchange as crucial and active tools of cross-cultural mediation and communication" (Ulm and Clark, 2016: 4). In addition to homing in on the "cross-cultural diplomatic encounter" (Ulm and Clark, 2016: 4), Ulm and Clark model approach "objects as mediating agents within larger networks, a particularly relevant intervention when considering the formation, maintenance, and disintegration of diplomatic relations, which involved both people and things" (Ulm and Clark, 2016: 10).

Their scholarship invites us to consider the lacquered case as a mediator in "larger networks" of diplomacy and power and also within "networks" predicated on objects moving across national borders for purposes of exchanging cultural information. Furthermore, it points to the mobilization of the case. To mobilize is to put something in motion or to summon or activate it. Mobilization also refers to being put into action for military or national significance. In question is how American diplomacy of the mid twentieth century participated in a network of power that activated the lacquered case to cross borders and find significance at the intersection American foreign relations and domestic life.

However, before returning to the lacquered case, it is important to revisit some changes that were occupying American diplomacy of the mid to late 1950s, when Thanh-Le likely made the case. Diplomacy intersected national with international to contexts to form a “larger network” wherein “people and things” traversed. It was referred to as the Free World, and it comprised democratic, mostly capitalist nations interrelating “one state to another state” and in cohorts. According to the authors of *Diplomacy in a Changing World*, power structured this network.

The subject matter of diplomacy is the relations of one state to another state or to other states, and the relations among a number of states ranging from those in an alliance or regional organization to those in the United Nations, as well as the relations of states in such alliances to other power or groups of powers (Fitzsimons and Kertesz, 1959: 3).

At the same time, American diplomacy was expanding its purview to include “a staggering range of state interests” (Fitzsimons and Kertesz, 1959: 4). These developments reflected American efforts to strengthen the Free World against the encroachments of a “Communist Empire”. Americans feared that this empire was going

to capture new territories, to enslave additional millions of people, and to seize new farms, factories, mines, and laboratories, it would eventually be able to outstrip the United States in virtually every form of power, and might leave us no alternatives but surrender or total destruction (Merchant, 1954: 760).

In this dire situation, Livingston T. Merchant, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs in the State Department, urged Americans “to treat its international allies well” (Merchant, 1954, 761). In addition to getting along with other nations, Merchant said that seeking allies made it “increasingly difficult to draw a sharp distinction between national and international problems or to separate domestic policies from foreign policies” (Merchant, 1954: 762).

The United States was integrating its foreign affairs and domestic life along post-industrial lines of trade and consumption. According to Merchant, the state of the world demanded this approach (Merchant, 1954: 761). Writing in *Culture and Communication: The Problem of Penetrating National and Cultural Boundaries*, Robert T. Oliver, a scholar in communications and Asia, warned that domestic and foreign policies and problems impacted and facilitated one another. For this reason, he cautioned, on matters of foreign policies, governments must “seek to influence their own ‘home’ audience” (Oliver, 1962: 9. See also Falk, 2010: 53; Heywood, 2013, 7, 9). Merchant and Oliver alert us that themes of security and economy brought issues of national interest to bear upon American foreign relations, and vice versa. Merchant even mentions that domestic commerce should inform overseas relationships. “Our own trade and tariff policies were once regarded as a purely domestic concern; now they have far-reaching international implications” (Merchant, 1954: 761).

### **Mobilizing Vietnamese craft as economic diplomacy**

On these points the lacquered case intersects with American economic diplomacy in South Vietnam. It represents one of many types of Vietnamese craft, the native production of which the American State

Department aimed to revitalize through an economic diplomacy program based in its International Cooperation Administration (Way, 2012). The program would export Vietnamese craft to the American middle class as home furnishings and fashion accessories. Its overarching goal was to prevent South Vietnam from seeking economic and other types of support from communists and instead, align with the Free World. In 1955, the ICA contracted American industrial designer Russel Wright to tour South Vietnam and assess its readiness to produce craft for export. After reporting his findings, the ICA re-contracted Wright to guide Vietnamese artisans in tailoring the designs and forms of their craft for American consumption.

Wright's program would embed a foreign art form within the domestic United States. To succeed, Wright would have to foster "relationships with people", and in doing so, he would be practicing a new turn in American diplomacy. As Merchant explained: "Diplomacy is becoming less concerned with relationships among governments and more concerned with relationships among peoples. Fundamentally, our most valuable and dependable alliances are rooted in this people-to-people relationship" (Merchant, 1954: 763). In contrast to coercion or aggression associated with military action and other types of overt acts of power, economic diplomacy aimed to generate appreciation and empathy "among peoples" and "the understanding we can achieve among whole populations" (Merchant, 1954: 763). To generate this type of affect, Wright asked American business and commerce to commission orders to import Vietnamese craft for the middle class to purchase for their homes. To this end, after having toured South Vietnam, during June 1956, Wright staged an exhibition of craft for representatives of American business and commerce at the Southeast Asia Rehabilitation Handicraft and Trade Development Exhibit held in the New York Coliseum (Way, 2013). He surveyed attendees on whether they would import Vietnamese craft and in what ways they might market it. Following positive feedback, in Saigon, Wright went on to establish a Handicraft Center. As part of his work, Wright interfaced with American and Vietnamese government officials, leaders of business and industry, technical specialists, and support staff.

Wright included lacquerware by Thanh-Le in his Vietnam exhibition for the United States World Trade Fair held in the New York Coliseum during May 1958 (Emerson, 1958: 33). Later that year, Wright included a six-panel lacquer screen with birds and leaves by Thanh-Le in a traveling exhibition of Vietnamese art and craft that he organized and toured in the United States under the sponsorship of the Government of the Republic of Vietnam. From September 1958 to May 1960, the exhibition circulated among major urban, upscale, home furnishings and department stores. In these venues, the Vietnamese objects expressed diplomatic "relations of one state to another state or to other states" (Fitzsimons and Kertesz, 1959: 3) along with the "formation...of diplomatic relations, which involved both people and things" (Ulm and Clark, 2016:10). Interestingly, they reveal Thanh-Le participating as well as aiming to move beyond the "cross-cultural diplomatic encounter" (Ulm and Clark, 2016: 4).

Early in the traveling department store exhibition, Thanh-Le visited its installation at Wanamaker's in Philadelphia. In addition to showing films about Vietnamese arts and crafts, Wanamaker's held a luncheon honoring the artisan and the exhibition (Wetherill, 1958). However, Thanh-Le also used the occasion to research American tastes so he could make work that Americans would feel belonged in their homes. That is to say, in addition to the craft aid program publicizing Thanh-Le's lacquered

objects as part of its economic aid mission, Thanh-Le facilitated the American domestication of his work by exploring questions of market and price.

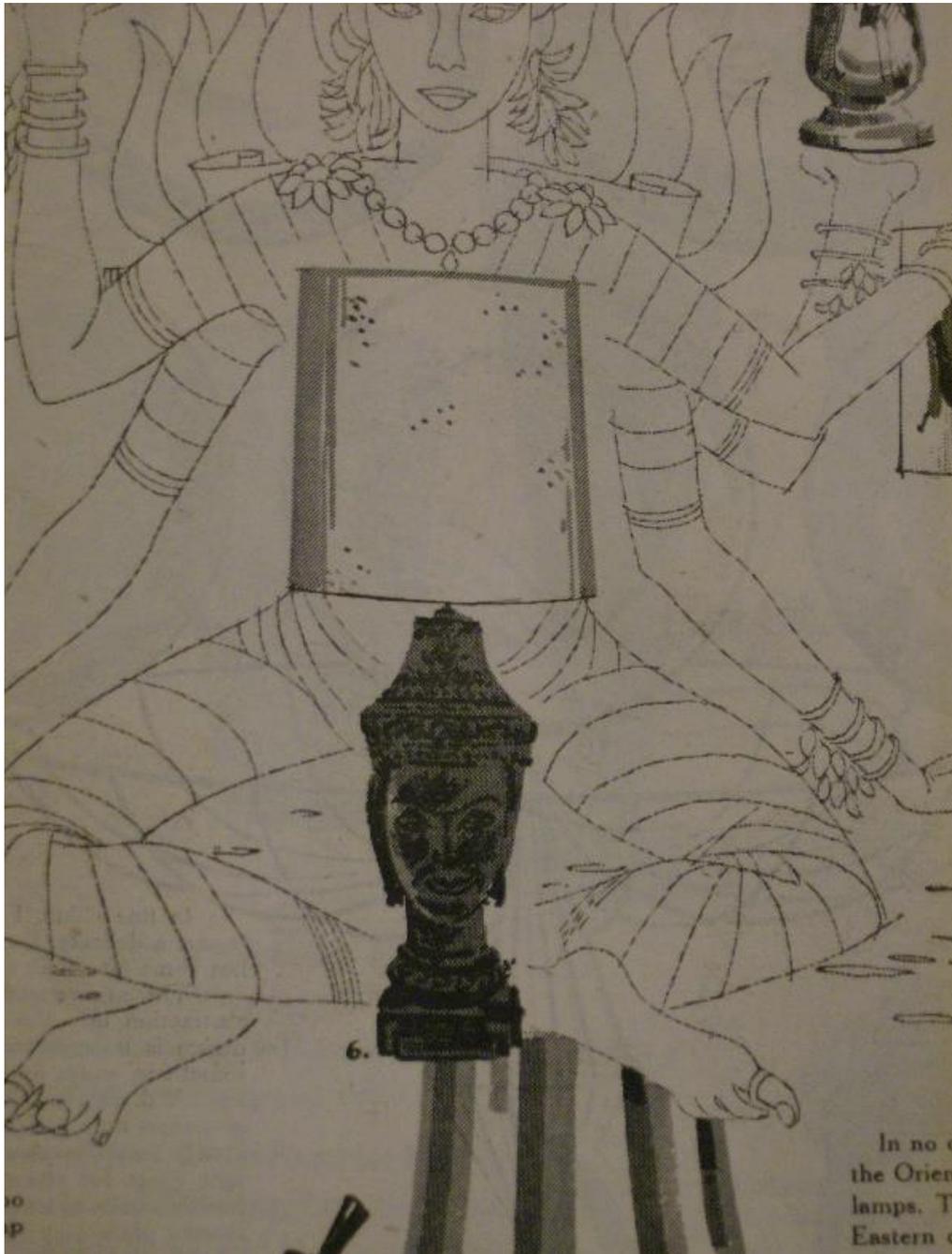


Fig. 2. "Oriental Lamps – Siamese Bronze head," *Retailing Daily* (August 13, 1956): 81a.

To this point, during October and November 1958, Thanh-Le travelled throughout the United States and Europe with Au Ngoc Ho, who represented the export company Videco, Vietnam Development Company based in Saigon. Thanh-Le and Ho explored marketing Vietnamese craft beyond government assistance. Although he acknowledged the importance of producers and exporters working “in cooperation with the assistance of the government”, Thanh-Le stated, “private producers, exporters and retailers must carry the initiative” in fostering transnational trade (*The Times of Viet Nam*, 1958b). Nevertheless, in pro-actively searching for American markets and refining his ideas about American taste, Thanh-Le followed a pathway encouraged by the State Department: link American foreign relation interests in South Vietnam with American domestic consumption.

One of the topics Thanh-Le explored in the United States involved an Asian-turn in home decoration. American home furnishings and design magazines were referencing “Asian” broadly, even vaguely, to signify style, features and images without pinning them down to a specific region or nation. A good example is a reproduction “Siamese head” that served as the base for a traditional lamp, which *Retailing Daily* described as part of a “Far Eastern design movement” having “Oriental influence.” [Fig. 2].

However, rather produce a replica of a Southeast Asian sculpture, in making lacquerware for American consumption, Thanh-Le integrated what Americans considered traditional features of lacquerware—its material, sheen and depth, and some types of ornamentation—with the styling and silhouettes of mid-century modern America home furnishings. Less figuration, simpler abstract shapes, more truth to materials, and the intensification of these features to serve utilitarian ends characterized what he promoted. Whether or not Wright included Thanh-Le’s lacquered case in the trade exposition or the traveling department store exhibition, it would have made a good fit. The lacquered case combined American artistic and luxury-oriented associations with lacquerware, with a portable, everyday object. At the Smithsonian, the case serves as a photo album. Americans desired photo albums to organize their hobby of commissioning, making, and collecting photographs. Albums offered a pleasing way to archive and present photographs, and Americans liked to display them. Placed on a coffee table, a lacquered photo album served as a beautiful object that doubled as storage for upwardly mobile Americans who defined themselves by the things and images they accumulated for their homes.

Wright’s circulating department store exhibition promoted objects selected “because of their adaptability to the American home”: including “lacquer accessories” (*The Times of Viet Nam*, 1958a). The blur between the status of the objects as art versus craft that some of Wright’s publicity advanced had less to do with the demotion of craft in the face of art, than it spoke to the growing cultural interest in the arts of Asia that. For many Americans, the arts of Asia corresponded to their ideas of craft and to the proximity of craft and art they were witnessing in urban American museums and galleries.

Increasingly, these museums were presenting proto-blockbuster exhibitions highlighting regions of Asia with which the United States sought good foreign relations, such as Japan – *Japanese Household Objects*, held at the Museum of Modern Art during 1951, India – *Textiles and Ornamental Arts in India* at the Museum of Modern Art, 1955, Asia in general – *Asian Artists in Crystal*, 1956, at the National Gallery of Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Korea – *Masterpieces of Korean Art* held at the

National Gallery in Washington, D.C., 1958 and traveling thereafter. The State Department underwrote some of the exhibitions, and all shed light on American foreign relations with their respective nations. Also, from these exhibitions craft achieved greater visibility because Americans tended to categorize objects of wood, metal, bone, clay, paper and textiles intended for utilitarian and decorative uses as craft.

At the same time, interest in relationships between foreign and American craft, design and contemporary art intensified through efforts in the field of craft. In New York City, nearby the Museum of Modern Art, the Museum of Contemporary Craft opened in 1956 – the same year Wright and his team first visited Vietnam to assess the state of native craft production. While American designers and craftsmen explored hybrid modes of makers such as “designer-craftsmen”, in South Vietnam, Wright mobilized craft to intersect continents, historical periods with the present day, tradition with modernism, and especially makers and markets, as American foreign relations imbricated domestic interests into their “far-reaching international implications”.

### **Mobilizing Vietnamese craft as cultural diplomacy**

Cultural diplomacy arose as another feature of foreign relations that was changing at the American State Department. Assistant Secretary for Educational and Cultural Affairs Robert Thayer wrote that culture is “the things they make, the things they do – the culture of a people is the life of a people, and cultural diplomacy is the act of successfully communicating to others a complete comprehension of the life and culture of a people” (Thayer, 1959: 740). Through cultural diplomacy, American foreign relations emphasized “things” and put them in motion.

Two years after Thanh-Le’s work toured in Wright’s traveling department store, the Smithsonian brought additional types of objects from South Vietnam to the United States for the exhibition, *Art and Archaeology of Viet Nam, Asian Crossroad of Culture*. On October 26, 1960, *Crossroad* opened in Washington, D.C. where, throughout ten alcoves, works of ancient archeology, fine art and contemporary craft narrated the history of Vietnamese civilization for Americans. The exhibition remained on view until December 8, 1960.

According to the catalog, several items originated at the Handicraft Center in Saigon, which Wright helped to establish. Moreover, the catalog shows confirms that Thanh-Le contributed significantly to the section on “Contemporary Craft”. It credits him for at least fifteen percent of the works, including ceramics – a dish, water bottle, bowl with a hunting scene, flora and fauna decorated candy jar and lid, plaque with a Moon Festival design in relief, vase with floral pattern and a Vietnamese girl, and several flower pots, including decoration as “going to market” theme, the Sisters Trung, and “triumphant return”; several lacquer saucers with stands; and a wine table with ceramic tiles depicting a Vietnamese rural scene. Furthermore, Thanh-Le contributed a lacquer photograph album. The exhibition’s registration lists and catalog both refer to the case as an album (The Republic of Vietnam, 1960; *Art and Archeology of Vietnam*, 1960). Could the album associated with the exhibition be the lacquered case the Smithsonian owns today?

Even if the album in the exhibition and the lacquered case the Smithsonian owns are not the same, the latter case points to something else about American diplomacy that was changing. It was developing new ideas about who was a diplomat. Americans active abroad could serve as unofficial diplomats along the expanded lines sketched by Thayer. In 1959, he wrote that Americans must promote a “world outlook” of

tolerance and understanding of the ideals, beliefs, and desires of other peoples; it means the cultivation of citizens who realize that internal affairs are also world affairs; it means the development of a nation of individual ambassadors of goodwill who will be able to understand and transmit the messages of foreign cultures while carrying the message of America abroad (Thayer, 1959: 743).

In his efforts to develop a working relationship with the Embassy of Viet Nam, Thomas M. Beggs, Director of the Smithsonian’s National Collection of Fine Arts, largely organized the *Crossroads* exhibition. In this role, he served as an “individual ambassador of goodwill”. Wright fit this profile as an economic diplomat. Janse, in whose papers Thanh-Le’s lacquered case resides, functioned as a goodwill ambassador.

Beggs contracted Janse to travel in Europe and Southeast Asia during 1958, supported by a grant from the Smith-Mundt Act. This Act of Congress asked citizens to serve as unofficial ambassadors in promoting a better understanding of America abroad by sharing knowledge, skills, the arts and science. As Thayer wrote, “The objective of American cultural diplomacy is to create in the peoples of the world a perfect understanding of the life and culture of America” (Thayer, 1959: 740). Beggs charged Janse with selecting works of ancient Vietnamese archaeology and fine art for *Crossroad*, and Janse traveled abroad to facilitate these loans, emphasizing items from the archeological expeditions he directed in Vietnam for the École Française d’Extrême-Orient and the Harvard-Yenching Institute during the 1930s and 1940s. Janse likely had a hand in selecting craft, too. Exhibition archives point to a Saigon Organizing Committee that purchased contemporary craft for *Crossroad* on behalf of the Government of Viet Nam, and to Janse and Beggs for providing input in selecting craft items (Carmichael, 1957; Beggs, 1959).

After *Crossroad* closed at the Smithsonian, it divided into an art exhibition and a craft exhibition, and they traveled throughout the United States separately. Then, the Government of Viet Nam gifted a major collection of craft from the exhibition to the Smithsonian (Way, 2015). It is not clear if the lacquered case was listed as part of the gift. However, its resemblance to descriptions in the *Crossroad* records, and the fact that the gift came from items in *Crossroads*, makes this likely.

Arguably, together with Beggs and Janse, the lacquered case served as a cultural diplomat, too. It came to the United States because Vietnam diplomatically had importance to “the life and culture of America” for security, economy, and a way of life (Thayer, 1959: 740). Especially themes of mutual trust and friendship surfaced in communication about *Crossroad*. In the same year that President Eisenhower pursued his Mutual Security Program, Thomas P. Mack of the United States Special Operations Missions to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam advised Beggs at the Smithsonian, “since we are endeavouring to win their [sic] friendship and [the] trust of the Vietnamese people a request to exhibit

their art in America would certainly serve as an indication of our sincerity” (Mack, 1955). *Crossroad* aimed to cement friendship with Vietnam and edify the American middle class and pique its interest in welcoming a new nation to the Free World.

### Conclusion

Revisiting these developments in American diplomacy of the mid-twentieth century illuminates the mobilization of Thanh-Le’s lacquered case involving “other peoples, places or events outside of the United States” that “the United States has had great interaction with and impact upon” (Nguyen, 2005: 21). Interestingly, revisiting the lacquered case also reveals Thanh-Le as an American diplomat. In the words of Thayer, he “transmit[ted] the messages of foreign cultures while carrying the message of America abroad” (Thayer, 1959: 743), specifically, to his workshops in South Vietnam. From there, he aspired to engage with Americans through the lacquerware he made.

Significantly, in discussing the case, craft – a cultural form that the history of art too often marginalizes – emerges in the role of fostering American foreign relations. In this context, Vietnamese craft engaged with “workings of power” (MacDonald, 1998:3) that supported American diplomacy. At the same time, part of what made mobilizations of the lacquered case political is they did not reveal Americans “try[ing] to grasp what things *meant* to [Vietnam’s] inhabitants and then attempt to understand how they perceived their own encounters with [its] foreignness” (Rozbicki and Ndege, 2012: 2). Working with Vietnamese craft did not prompt Americans to promote the diversity of culture in Saigon or inquire about conflict between South Vietnamese and Montagnard ethnic minorities, or query artisans’ own issues. Instead, as indicated by Thanh-Le’s lacquered photo album, the circulation of objects, people and their agendas and needs, on the whole, privileged American agency.

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## Nota

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