

# Patterns Symbolic in Religious Place, Wat Pho Ratnasadsadaram (Wat Luang Pakse), Champasak, Lao PRD

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## **Abstract**

*This research focuses on the patterns and symbolic meanings in religious architecture in Champasak Province, Lao PDR. The objective is to study the patterns and their symbolic significance in the religious structures of the region. This study employs a qualitative research methodology, with data collected from Pakse, Champasak, and Khong Districts. The research instruments include surveys, observations, and interviews, with analysis conducted through a descriptive-analytical approach.*

*The findings indicate that religious architecture in Champasak exhibits diverse influences, reflecting a fusion of artistic and cultural elements from Lao, Khmer, Indochinese, and European styles. These features highlight the historical and cultural exchanges between southern Laos and neighboring regions. The decorative patterns in religious architecture within Champasak can be categorized into three primary structural components: the base, the main structure, and the upper elements.*

*Furthermore, the symbolic beliefs reflected in these patterns originate from three distinct artistic traditions: Isan, Vietnamese, and Lan Xang styles. Each of these traditions played a significant role in shaping the architectural heritage of both Isan (Northeastern Thailand) and Laos. Vietnamese artisans were predominantly influenced by Chinese art, while the Lan Xang and Isan traditions incorporated elements from Khmer and Lanna art. Despite all three traditions being rooted in Buddhist principles and nature-based beliefs, their specific motifs and symbolic interpretations differ due to various cultural influences. The Isan and Lan Xang styles emphasize depictions of the Naga serpent and ancestral reverence, whereas Vietnamese artisans integrate Chinese beliefs and multiple religious influences, expressed through a diverse range of patterns.*

**Keywords:** Patterns, Symbolism, Religious Architecture

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The Champasak Kingdom emerged following the decline of the Funan Kingdom. Lao people migrated and settled in this region, establishing a new city named Champanakhon Buri Si or Champanakhon. During the reign of King Fa Ngum, the various Lao territories were unified into a single kingdom known as the Lan Xang Kingdom, with its capital in Luang Prabang. In 1893, the territory on the left bank of the Mekong River came under French rule, and later, in 1904, the right bank was also annexed by France. Champasak Province has long been regarded as the economic center of southern Laos, attracting a diverse population from different ethnic backgrounds. Geographically, it shares its western border with Ubon Ratchathani, Thailand, and its southern border with Preah Vihear and Stung Treng, Cambodia. This proximity to neighboring countries has contributed to a rich cultural diversity within the region.

Pakse, the capital of Champasak Province, is a relatively new city situated along the Mekong River, at the confluence with the Sedon River. As a key economic hub of southern Laos, Pakse has attracted a multicultural population and continues to serve as an important trade and economic center for the region (Supachai Singhayabuth et al., 2001).

Wat Luang Pakse, also known as Wat Pho Rattanasadaram, is located in the historic district of Pakse and is surrounded by colonial-style buildings that remain from the French colonial period. It is the most significant temple in Pakse and one of the major religious sites in Champasak Province. Although it is not as old as the renowned temples in Luang Prabang or Vientiane, its ordination hall (ubosot), built less than a century ago, has earned the temple a reputation as a long-standing center for Buddhist education in southern Laos. One of the most notable structures within the temple complex is the monastic college, built in traditional Lao architectural style, adorned with intricate stucco decorations along the eaves, roof structures, and naga-embellished staircases. Over time, these features have weathered and eroded, yet they continue to contribute to the temple's historical aura. Observers will also notice that near the grand staircase stands a boundary stone inscribed in an ancient script resembling the Lao alphabet. However,

this script is in fact "Tham script," a writing system commonly found in temples along the Mekong River in both Laos and the Lanna region of Thailand.

Regrettably, the monastic college is no longer in use as an institution for Buddhist scripture studies. It now functions merely as a repository for old manuscripts and remains closed to the public due to its deteriorating condition, posing a risk of collapse. However, a new Champasak Buddhist College has been constructed adjacent to the original building, ensuring that Wat Luang Pakse continues to uphold its legacy as a center for Buddhist learning in southern Laos.

The significance of this temple, particularly its religious structures, lies not only in its historical and educational role but also in the intricate decorative motifs and symbolic patterns that embody cultural and spiritual meanings. Given the restricted access to the old buildings, there remains a gap in research concerning their architectural and artistic elements.

Recognizing the historical and cultural importance of Wat Luang Pakse, this study aims to examine the architectural forms, patterns, and symbolic meanings present in the temple's religious structures. Through the systematic collection and documentation of these patterns and symbols, the research aspires to create a foundational database that will benefit scholars, cultural enthusiasts, and relevant stakeholders, ultimately contributing to the preservation of national heritage.

### **Objectives**

The objective of this study is to examine the patterns and symbolic meanings found in the religious architecture of Champasak Province, Lao PDR.

### **Definition of Terms**

- **Religious Architecture** refers to Wat Pho Rattanasadaram (Wat Luang) in Pakse.
- **Patterns** refer to the artistic designs used to decorate Buddhist structures at Wat Pho Rattanasadaram (Wat Luang) in Pakse, created primarily through stucco work.
- **Symbolic Meanings** refer to the patterns at Wat Pho Rattanasadaram (Wat Luang) in Pakse that convey specific meanings and serve as symbols within a shared cultural and religious context. These patterns are categorized into four groups:
  1. **Natural Patterns**
  2. **Animal-Inspired Patterns**
  3. **Belief-Based Patterns**
  4. **Abstract Decorative Patterns**

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study, titled "Patterns and Symbolic Meanings in the Religious Architecture of Wat Pho Rattanasadaram (Wat Luang Pakse), Champasak Province, Lao PDR, for Contemporary Artistic Creation," follows the research methodology outlined below:

1. **Population and Sample Selection**
2. **Research Instruments**
3. **Data Collection**
4. **Data Processing and Analysis**

### **1. Population and Sample Selection**

#### **Population**

The population in this study consists of the religious structures of Wat Pho Rattanasadaram (Wat Luang) in Pakse.

#### **Sample Group**

This research employs a purposive sampling method, selecting specific individuals and structures as follows:

1. **Key Informants:** Experts and scholars specializing in Lao cultural heritage and religious architecture.
2. **General Informants:** Monastic authorities, including abbots and resident monks, as well as individuals associated with artistic and architectural works.
3. **Practitioners (Casual Informants):** Skilled artisans, university faculty, and students in the field of fine arts and architectural conservation.

## 2. Research Instruments

The following research tools are used for data collection:

1. **Basic Survey** – To document the patterns and symbols found in Buddhist art in Champasak.
2. **Non-Participant Observation Form** – To systematically observe and record architectural elements without direct intervention.
3. **Unstructured Interviews** – Conducted with key informants, practitioners, and related individuals to gather insights into the symbolic meanings and artistic traditions associated with the patterns in Buddhist architecture.

## 3. Data Collection

1. **Documentary Research** – Gathering and reviewing existing literature, historical documents, academic studies, and electronic sources related to the patterns and symbolic meanings in religious architecture in Champasak. This process involves analyzing theoretical frameworks and scholarly interpretations to establish foundational knowledge for the study.
2. **Field Research** – On-site investigation using the following methods:
  - **Basic Survey** – Recording and documenting the forms, dimensions, and decorative patterns observed in temple structures.
  - **Unstructured Interviews** – Conducting interviews with abbots, monks, and experts in Buddhist art to compare findings and collect additional contextual data on symbolic meanings.

## 4. Data Processing and Analysis

### 4.1 Data Processing

The data collected from field research, interviews, and document analysis are systematically processed as follows:

1. Categorizing and organizing information obtained from documents and observations according to the research objectives.
2. Sorting and structuring interview data from key informants, practitioners, and general informants based on thematic relevance.
3. Analyzing and categorizing field data from the selected sample group in alignment with the study's objectives.
4. Verifying data accuracy through cross-referencing with primary sources, including historical records, on-site observations, and expert testimonies.

### 4.2 Data Analysis

The research employs a historical-artistic and cultural research approach, incorporating analytical reasoning to interpret findings.

1. **Classification and Organization of Data** – Sorting collected data into structured categories to facilitate analysis.
2. **Interpretation and Symbolic Analysis** – Applying semiotic and symbolic interpretation frameworks to explain observed phenomena and their cultural significance.

This methodological approach ensures that the research findings accurately reflect the artistic, religious, and cultural meanings embedded within the decorative patterns and architectural elements of Wat Pho Rattanasadaram (Wat Luang Pakse).

## RESULTS

Historical Background and Current Condition of Wat Luang Pakse (Wat Pho Rattanasadaram), Lao PDR



**Figure 1:** The Buddhist College at Wat Luang Pakse

Wat Luang Pakse, also known as **Wat Pho Rattanasadaram**, is located in the historic district of Pakse, surrounded by colonial-style buildings that date back to the French colonial period. It is the most significant temple in Pakse and one of the major religious sites in **Champasak Province, southern Laos**. Although it is not as ancient as the famous temples in **Luang Prabang or Vientiane**, its ordination hall (ubosot) was constructed less than a century ago. However, the temple has long been recognized as a **center for Buddhist education** in southern Laos, maintaining its spiritual and academic significance for over a hundred years.

One of the most important structures in the temple complex is the **monastic college**, designed in **traditional Lao architectural style**. The building features **intricate stucco decorations** along the **eaves, roof elements, and staircases adorned with naga (serpent) motifs**. Over time, these features have worn down due to exposure to the elements, yet they still retain a sense of historical depth and spiritual significance.

Near the **main staircase**, a stone boundary marker (sema) can be seen, inscribed with an **ancient script** that resembles the **modern Lao alphabet**. However, this is actually **Tham script**, a traditional script commonly found in temples along the Mekong River in both Laos and the Lanna region of Thailand.

### Current Condition of the Monastic College

Unfortunately, the **monastic college** is no longer in use for **Buddhist scripture studies**. It now functions merely as a **storage space for old manuscripts** and remains **closed to the public** due to its deteriorating condition. The structure has significantly weakened over time, posing a **risk of collapse**.

To ensure that **Wat Luang Pakse continues to serve as a Buddhist educational center**, a **new monastic college** has been constructed adjacent to the old building. This initiative allows the temple to maintain its role as a **spiritual and educational hub for Buddhist monks in southern Laos**.

### The Ordination Hall and Its Restoration

Adjacent to the old monastic college stands the **ordination hall (ubosot)**, which, at first glance, appears to be a newly constructed building in contrast to the aging structures nearby. However, the **ordination hall and the monastic college were originally built around the same period**. The **ordination hall**, however, has undergone **several restorations** over the years, supported by **devout laypeople**. These patrons are not only Laotian but also include a **significant number of Thai Buddhists** who frequently visit and make merit at the temple.

### Cultural and Religious Significance

As the most important **Buddhist temple in Champasak Province**, Wat Luang Pakse holds deep religious significance for the local community. It is not only a **popular site for merit-making** among the living but also serves as a **final resting place** for many prominent figures.

To be **entombed** at this temple—where remains are stored in **stupas (locally known as "That")**—one must have been a **person of high status, a wealthy individual, or a distinguished public figure**. Several members of the **Champasak royal lineage** have stupas at this temple. Notably, **Thao Katai Don Sasorith**, a former **Prime Minister of Laos** under the conservative government before the communist revolution, has **the most prominent and grand stupa** standing directly in front of the **ordination hall**. This **elaborate structure** serves as a testament to his importance in **Laotian history and politics** (Pattaya Chandakun, 2017).



**Figure 2:** The Buddhist College of Wat Luang Pakse, or Wat Pho Rattanasadaram Pakse, during its restoration.

### Current Condition and Architectural Details of Wat Luang Pakse

From the field survey, it was found that the current restoration of the monastic college is being undertaken because the building's structure can no longer support the weight of the roof. However, rather than preserving the original architectural features, the restoration has been directed towards a 'renewed modernization,' possibly due to various factors that influence the approach to restoration. These factors may not align with traditional conservation principles or international standards, which emphasize the preservation of a site's original identity. Interviews with resident monks further revealed that the restoration is being carried out independently by the temple community due to a lack of funding. Unfortunately, without the intervention or support from any responsible agencies, this significant cultural site may eventually be reduced to a deteriorating structure on the brink of collapse.



**Figure 3:** Post-Restoration Condition of the Monastic College at Wat Luang Pakse (Wat Pho Rattanasadaram, Pakse)

### Lao Decorative Art in Religious Architecture at Wat Luang Pakse

The decorative art found in the religious structures of Wat Luang Pakse (Wat Pho Rattanasadaram), Lao PDR, can be classified into four primary categories of patterns:

1. Nature-Inspired Patterns
2. Animal-Inspired Patterns
3. Belief-Based Patterns
4. Ornamental/Artificial Motifs

<b>Decorative Motifs in Religious Architecture</b>	Nature-Inspired Motifs	Floral and Botanical Motifs	Depictions of stems, flowers, leaves, and vine patterns.
	Animal-Inspired Motifs	Realistic Animal Motifs	Representations of elephants, fish, and crocodiles.
		Mythological Animal Motifs	Depictions of Nāga (serpent deity), Garuda, and Mom (mythical guardian creature).
	Belief-Based Motifs	Religious Motifs	Representations of Lord Vishnu (Phra Narai) and other sacred figures.
	Ornamental/Artificial Motifs	Imaginative Motifs: Stylized and decorative patterns created through artistic interpretation.	

The Lao decorative motifs in the religious architecture of Wat Luang Pakse can be classified into four primary forms:

## 1. Nature-Inspired Motifs

**Botanical Motifs:** Includes patterns depicting flowers, leaves, vines, and tree



## 2. Animal-Inspired Motifs

**Realistic Animal Motifs:** Includes representations of elephants, fish, and crocodiles.



**Mythical Animal Motifs:** Depictions of fantastical creatures, such as Nāga and Garuda.



## 3. Belief-Based Motifs

**Religious Motifs:** Includes representations of Lord Vishnu (Phra Narai).



## 4. Ornamental/Artificial Motifs

**Imaginative Motifs:** Stylized and decorative patterns created through artistic interpretation.



## Patterns in Religious Architecture

### 1. Nature-Inspired Patterns

Nature-inspired patterns in religious art serve as symbolic representations of **Buddhist teachings, beliefs, and spiritual principles**. These patterns frequently appear in **Buddhist architecture**, including temples, ordination halls, and monasteries. Nature is often used as a **symbol of purity, truth, and the interconnectedness between the natural world and spirituality**. These decorative elements come in a variety of forms, each carrying a **deep symbolic meaning** within religious contexts.

## 2. Animal-Inspired Patterns

Animal-inspired patterns hold **profound symbolic significance** in religious art and architecture. Various animals depicted in religious structures, whether in **architectural components or ornamental designs**, often reflect **spiritual beliefs, moral values, and cosmic balance**. Animals serve as **protective guardians, representations of virtues, or symbols of the universe's harmony**. These motifs include **both real and mythical creatures**, each contributing to the overall spiritual and artistic expression of Buddhist architecture.

## 3. Belief-Based Patterns

Belief-based patterns represent **religious and spiritual ideologies** that reflect societal beliefs about **sacred protection, auspiciousness, and the path to enlightenment**. These motifs are commonly found in Buddhist art and architecture and are deeply connected to **Buddhism, Hinduism, and indigenous folk beliefs**. Such patterns often depict **sacred symbols, deities, or mythological figures**, reinforcing their spiritual significance within religious sites.

## 4. Artificial Motifs

Artificial Motifs are **customized designs adapted to complement various architectural surfaces and materials**, such as **stucco work** and ornamental carvings. The process of creating these designs involves **adjusting the proportions, altering orientations, or modifying traditional patterns** to fit specific spaces or architectural elements.

These patterns are often found in **wall decorations, door and window frames**, and other architectural embellishments. Additionally, artistic influences from **India, China, the Khmer Empire, Persia, and Europe** have contributed to the evolution of these designs. Lao artisans have **skillfully adapted and blended these influences with local artistic traditions**, resulting in **unique and exquisite patterns**.

The fusion of **diverse artistic influences** has introduced new dimensions to religious art and architecture, enriching the **cultural and aesthetic diversity of temple structures** while maintaining their distinct Lao identity.

### Symbolic Beliefs in Traditional Craftsmanship

The researcher categorizes **symbolic beliefs in traditional craftsmanship** into **three artistic schools**:

1. **Isan (Northeastern Thai) craftsmanship**
2. **Vietnamese craftsmanship**
3. **Lan Xang (Lao) craftsmanship**

These three artistic traditions played a significant role in shaping the architectural heritage of **Isan and Laos**, engaging in a **continuous exchange, transmission, and fusion of artistic influences**.

#### 1. Isan Craftsmanship

The **symbolic beliefs in Isan religious art** are rooted in **Buddhism and indigenous spiritual traditions**. These influences are evident in the design of **religious structures** that emphasize **the worship of sacred entities and the protection of Buddhism**.

A key symbolic element in Isan temples is **the naga (serpent)**, which is believed to **guard religious sites and ward off evil spirits**. Additionally, structures such as **sim (ordination halls), chedis (stupas), and sacred relics (Phra That)** are associated with **ancestral worship and the preservation of sacred objects**, making them **spiritual centers for Isan communities**.

The decorative elements in Isan religious architecture often reflect themes of **nature and sanctity**, such as:

- **Floral patterns**, representing **fertility and sacred beauty**
- **Lotus motifs**, symbolizing **purity and spiritual enlightenment**
- **Kala (demon face) motifs**, used as protective symbols to **ward off negative forces**

Thus, **Isan religious architecture is a sacred space that integrates naga worship, ancestor reverence, and natural symbolism** through its artistic traditions, blending aesthetic beauty with **spiritual significance**.

#### 2. Vietnamese Craftsmanship

Vietnamese craftsmanship is characterized by **the use of symbolic animals** that reflect **Chinese cultural and religious influences**. These motifs are deeply associated with **auspicious beliefs and mystical traditions**.

Additionally, Vietnamese decorative art incorporates **natural patterns**, such as:

- **Chrysanthemum petal designs**, resembling the Thai "yak fang" (demon-tooth) motif, symbolizing longevity
- **Cloud motifs**, representing **auspicious blessings and harmony**
- **Hui script patterns**, signifying **continuity and eternity**
- **Swastika (wan) motifs**, symbolizing **good fortune and prosperity**

Vietnamese craftsmanship also features **sacred Chinese objects**, including:

- **Vases and censers**, used in religious ceremonies as symbols of **worship and reverence** (Wirot Srisuro, 1993)

From **1917 to 1957**, Vietnamese artistic influences became more prominent in **temple architecture**, gradually blending with **Central Thai styles**. During this period, Vietnamese decorative art incorporated elements such as:

- **Thep Phanom figures** (celestial beings in a respectful pose)
- **Indra riding Erawan** (the three-headed elephant)
- **Vietnamese Kanok** (flame-like scroll motifs)

In later periods, Vietnamese craftsmanship in **Isan and Laos** introduced **high-relief designs on temple gables**, featuring:

- **Garuda** (a mythological bird-like creature)
- **Dhamma Wheel** (Dharmachakra) symbols
- **Constitutional trays**, which carried political connotations relevant to the era

Although Vietnamese craftsmanship in **Isan and Laos** evolved over time, it retained its **distinctive artistic identity** while **adapting to local cultural and religious contexts** (Tik Saenboon, 2013).

### 3. Lan Xang (Lao) Craftsmanship

Lan Xang craftsmanship is deeply influenced by **Buddhism, Hinduism, and indigenous animist beliefs**. These influences are reflected in **religious structures** that serve to **honor sacred deities, generate merit, and protect holy sites**.

Key architectural features of **Lan Xang religious structures** include:

- **Central stupas (Phra That)**, serving as **spiritual focal points**
- **Naga motifs**, symbolizing **prosperity and divine protection**, commonly found on **staircases and temple roofs**
- **Floral and vine patterns**, such as **lotus and creeper motifs**, signifying **purity and spiritual growth**

Additionally, **ancestral and nature worship** play a significant role in Lan Xang religious traditions, often manifesting in:

- **Rituals conducted to strengthen temples and communities**
- **Mythological animal motifs**, including **Garuda, Singha (lion), and Hanuman (monkey warrior)**, representing **power and protection**

Thus, Lan Xang religious architecture is more than just **aesthetic design**—it serves as a **symbol of faith, spirituality, and communal identity**, integrating **Buddhist principles, animist traditions, and cultural heritage** into a unified artistic expression.

## CONCLUSION

### 1. Historical Background and Current Condition of Wat Pho Rattanasadaram (Wat Luang Pakse), Champasak Province, Lao PDR

Wat Luang Pakse, also known as **Wat Pho Rattanasadaram**, is located in the historic district of Pakse. It is the most significant temple in the city and one of the major religious landmarks in **Champasak Province**. The temple has long been recognized as a **center for Buddhist education in southern Laos** for over a hundred years.

One of the most important structures within the temple complex is **the monastic college**, which was built in a **traditional Lao architectural style**. However, the monastic college is no longer in use for **Buddhist scripture studies** and now serves only as a **repository for old manuscripts**. Due to its deteriorating condition, the building is closed to the public as it **poses a risk of collapse**. Nevertheless, a **new monastic**

college has been constructed adjacent to the old one, ensuring that **Wat Luang Pakse** continues to uphold its role as an educational hub for Buddhist monks in southern Laos.

## 2. Patterns and Symbolic Meanings in Wat Pho Rattanasadaram (Wat Luang Pakse), Champasak Province, Lao PDR

The decorative patterns and symbolic motifs in **Wat Luang Pakse** can be classified into **four main categories**:

1. **Nature-Inspired Patterns**
2. **Animal-Inspired Patterns**
3. **Belief-Based Patterns**
4. **Abstract Decorative Patterns**

### 2.1 Nature-Inspired

Patterns These patterns are derived from **botanical elements**, such as **flowers, leaves, vines, and tree trunks**. Natural motifs are often associated with **auspicious meanings**, symbolizing **longevity, tranquility, and prosperity**. Specific examples include:

- **Bamboo and pine trees**, which represent **endurance and longevity** in Buddhist and Lao traditions (Thawatchai Pandamrong, 2010).

### 2.2 Animal-Inspired Patterns

Animal motifs can be divided into **two subcategories**:

1. **Real-life animals** (e.g., elephants, fish, crocodiles)
2. **Mythological creatures** (e.g., naga, Garuda)

Each animal carries **symbolic significance** based on religious beliefs:

- **Elephant** – A symbol of **greatness and prosperity**, often linked to **Naga mythology**. In ancient Lao and Isan folklore, the **great serpent (naga) could transform into a white elephant**, serving as a sacred mount for divine rulers such as **King Brahma and King Khun Cheuang** (Tik Saenboon, 2013).
- **Fish** – Represents **abundance and prosperity**. Artistic depictions of fish swimming in water symbolize **wealth and financial stability** (Thawatchai Pandamrong, 2010).
- **Crocodile (Makar)** – Often associated with **water deities and fertility** in Southeast Asian beliefs. The **crocodile or makara** is considered a **sacred creature**, commonly depicted in Buddhist and Hindu temple art (Tik Saenboon, 2013).

### Imaginary Creatures:

- **Naga (Serpent)** – A revered symbol of **greatness, divine protection, and abundance**.
- **Garuda** – A **semi-divine creature**, the mount of **Lord Vishnu**, depicted as **half-bird, half human**. Garuda plays a significant role in **Hindu and Buddhist mythology**. In Thai and Lao traditions, **Garuda represents the king** as the earthly manifestation of **Vishnu**, reinforcing its status as a **royal emblem**.

### 2.3 Belief-Based Patterns

Religious motifs, particularly those inspired by **Hindu and Buddhist traditions**, are widely present in temple art. One significant figure is:

- **Lord Vishnu (Narayana)** – Also known as "**Phra Narai**", Vishnu is one of the **three supreme deities (Trimurti) in Hinduism**. He is depicted with **one head and four arms**, holding sacred objects: a **discus (Chakra)**, a **conch shell (Shankha)**, a **mace (Gada)**, and a **lotus flower (Padma)**.

### 2.4 Abstract Decorative Patterns

Abstract patterns are created through **artistic imagination**, adapted to complement specific architectural elements. These patterns include:

- **Stucco work**, designed to harmonize with temple structures
- **Decorative patterns on doors, windows, and temple gables**

Many of these patterns incorporate foreign artistic influences, particularly from:

- **India, China, the Khmer Empire, Persia, and Europe**

Lao artisans **skillfully blended these external influences** with local traditions, resulting in **unique, intricate, and culturally distinctive patterns**. The fusion of artistic styles **enriched Lao Buddhist architecture**, contributing to its **diversity and aesthetic appeal**.

### 3. Symbolic Beliefs in the Craftsmanship of Wat Pho Rattanasadaram (Wat Luang Pakse), Champasak Province, Lao PDR

The decorative elements in **Wat Luang Pakse** reflect a **fusion of artistic influences** from **Vietnamese and Lan Xang traditions**:

- **Vietnamese Craftsmanship** – Characterized by symbolic animal motifs, influenced by Chinese cultural beliefs that emphasize auspicious meanings. Popular elements include:
  - **Chrysanthemum petal patterns**, similar to the Thai "yak fang" (demon-tooth) motif
  - **Cloud motifs**, symbolizing **prosperity and divine blessings**
  - **Swastika motifs**, representing **good fortune**
  - **Chinese ceremonial objects**, such as **vases and censers**
- **Lan Xang Craftsmanship** – Focused on **simplicity and natural inspiration**, often incorporating motifs such as:
  - **Lotus flowers**, representing **purity and enlightenment**
  - **Vine patterns**, symbolizing **growth and prosperity**
  - **Naga motifs**, serving as **guardians of Buddhist sites**

These artistic traditions demonstrate a **harmonious blend of cultural and religious symbolism**, reinforcing the **spiritual significance of temple architecture** and its role in the **preservation of Buddhist heritage**.

## DISCUSSION

### 1. Historical Background and Current Condition of Wat Pho Rattanasadaram (Wat Luang Pakse), Champasak Province, Lao PDR

Wat Luang Pakse, one of the most significant and historic temples in **southern Laos**, is situated along the Sedone River, north of the old market in Pakse. Built in 1935 (B.E. 2478), the temple has a strong historical connection to **the French colonial era and the wars of that time**. It is a significant cultural and architectural landmark showcasing **traditional Lao art and religious heritage**.

This temple is particularly important because it serves as the **final resting place for members of the Champasak royal lineage**, including **Thao Katai Don Sasorith**, a former **Prime Minister of the conservative Lao government**. The temple complex features **numerous stupas**, arranged throughout the grounds, which house the ashes of **distinguished figures and noble families**.

A notable feature of **Wat Luang Pakse** is its **historical library and old administrative buildings**, which exhibit **intricate stucco designs**. Unfortunately, these buildings are currently **in a state of disrepair and no longer in use**. At the rear of the temple, near the **Sedone River**, stands a **two-story wooden building** that previously served as a **Buddhist school for monks**. However, due to severe structural deterioration, the **monastic college is no longer used for scripture studies** and is now merely a **storage space for old manuscripts**. The public is **no longer allowed access**, as the building is **at risk of collapse**.

### 2. Patterns and Symbolic Meanings in Wat Pho Rattanasadaram (Wat Luang Pakse), Champasak Province, Lao PDR

This study on **patterns and symbolic meanings in religious architecture** at Wat Luang Pakse highlights that **Lao artistic motifs** are derived from **ancient imagination and cultural traditions**. These motifs are integrated into the **architectural elements of religious structures** and can be categorized into **four main types**:

1. **Nature-Inspired Patterns**
2. **Animal-Inspired Patterns**
3. **Belief-Based Patterns**
4. **Abstract Decorative Patterns**

#### Architectural Forms

Based on the study, the **architectural elements of Wat Luang Pakse** primarily feature **three dimensional relief work**, which can be classified into:

- **Low-relief patterns**
- **High-relief patterns**

- **Freestanding sculptures**

The temple's structure consists of three main components:

1. **Base**
2. **Main Structure (Body)**
3. **Roof and Decorative Finials**

### 2.1 Base Structures

The base of the temple can be divided into two sections:

#### 1. Main structural base

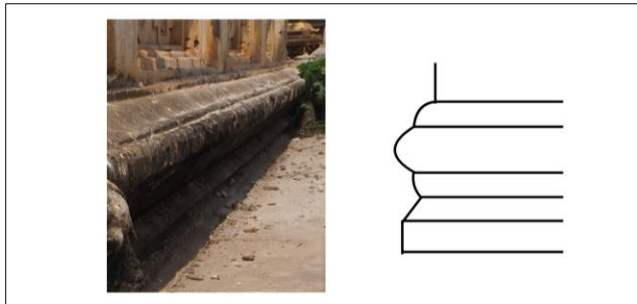


Figure 4: Lotus Bead Base (Bua Luk Kaew Base)

- **Main Structural Base:** The lower foundation of Wat Luang Pakse follows Khmer architectural traditions, incorporating "Bua Look Kaew" (lotus-shaped moldings), a style characterized by convex curves resembling split rattan strips. This base design is commonly found in Khmer temple architecture.

#### 2. Staircase base



Figure 5: Makara discharging naga (serpent-eating dragon)

- **Staircase Base:** The staircase base features Makara discharging naga (serpent-eating dragon) motifs. These mythical creatures are frequently found at the base of temples, stairways, and terraces, symbolizing protection and cosmic balance. The Makara-Naga motif serves not only as an ornamental aesthetic but also represents spiritual protection and prosperity for the community and Buddhism.

### 2.2 Main Structure (Body)

The main structure includes doorways, window frames, and support beams:

- Doorway arches are stucco-carved with scroll motifs, vine patterns, and fern-like designs.
- Doors are made of wood, while support beams are sculpted from stucco, often featuring naga-head designs.

### 2.3 Roof and Decorative Finials

- Gable decorations incorporate natural elements, scroll motifs, and mythological themes, such as Vishnu riding Garuda, drawn from Buddhist and Hindu religious texts.
- Naga-shaped ridge decorations (Nak Sadung) extend along the roof edges, reinforcing protective symbolism.
- "Chofa" (roof spire) symbolizes the cosmic center of the universe, serving as the temple's spiritual focal point.

### 3. Symbolic Beliefs in Traditional Craftsmanship at Wat Pho Rattanasadaram (Wat Luang Pakse), Champasak Province, Lao PDR

The decorative elements of Wat Luang Pakse reflect a fusion of artistic traditions, particularly between Vietnamese and Lan Xang craftsmanship:

- **Vietnamese Influence** – Characterized by symbolic animal motifs, primarily influenced by Chinese art. These elements emphasize auspicious meanings and mystical symbolism, such as:
  - Chrysanthemum petal designs, similar to Thai yak fang (demon-tooth) motifs, symbolizing longevity.
  - Cloud motifs, signifying prosperity and divine blessings.
  - Swastika patterns, representing good fortune.
  - Traditional Chinese ceremonial objects, such as vases and censers.
- **Lan Xang Influence** – Focused on simplicity and nature-inspired patterns, which include:
  - Lotus flowers, symbolizing purity and enlightenment.
  - Vine patterns, representing growth and prosperity.
  - Naga motifs, serving as guardians of sacred Buddhist sites.

#### Lao Artistic Heritage and Cultural Influences

The Lao decorative style has evolved from a blend of Chinese and Khmer artistic traditions, which were transmitted, adapted, and refined over generations.

One of the most culturally significant motifs in Lao religious art is the Dok Montha (Mandarava flower). In Buddhist beliefs, this is a celestial flower from the heavens, believed to bloom only on three sacred occasions:

1. The birth of the Buddha
2. The enlightenment of the Buddha
3. The passing (Parinirvana) of the Buddha

This motif is deeply rooted in Buddhist religious symbolism, representing purity, divine blessings, and auspiciousness. It has been widely incorporated into Lao religious art and temple decorations, illustrating the interconnection between art, culture, and Buddhist faith.

#### Conclusion: The Relationship Between Art, Religion, and Cultural Identity

Lao artistic traditions are strongly influenced by nature, religious beliefs, and spiritual symbolism. The vine-like patterns (Panna Phueksa motifs) are among the most distinctive Lao designs, symbolizing the interconnectedness between humanity and nature.

These patterns often feature creeping vines that extend and branch out, adorned with leaf and floral elements. The naturalistic representation of plants in Lao decorative art mirrors real botanical forms, reflecting a deep appreciation for nature.

Over time, these motifs have been preserved and developed, becoming an integral part of Lao artistic and cultural heritage. They exemplify the blending of religious beliefs, artistic creativity, and socio-cultural influences, particularly in the architectural traditions of Champasak Province.

The study confirms that Lao decorative art serves as a symbol of cultural identity and artistic wisdom, linking spiritual traditions with visual storytelling. Through continuous adaptation, these artistic expressions remain an enduring representation of Laos' religious and artistic legacy.

#### Recommendations

Based on the research findings on patterns and symbolic meanings in the religious architecture of Wat Pho Rattanasadaram (Wat Luang Pakse), Champasak Province, Lao PDR, the researcher identified several observations and unexpected findings during the field study. Some hypotheses were challenged by new discoveries, highlighting the need for further investigation.

To maximize the benefits of this research, the following recommendations are proposed for future studies and preservation efforts:

1. **Knowledge Transmission:**

- There should be **structured knowledge dissemination** regarding patterns and symbolic meanings in **religious architecture to monks, novices, students, scholars, and the general public.**
- This will ensure the **continuation and preservation of Laos' cultural heritage**, bridging past traditions with contemporary awareness.
- 2. Cultural and Artistic Conservation Awareness:**
  - Initiatives should be developed to **instill a sense of responsibility for preserving Lao Buddhist art and architecture among monks, novices, students, and interested individuals.**
  - Raising awareness will help **reduce the risk of deterioration** and promote **sustainable conservation practices.**
- 3. Restoration Techniques and Government Support:**
  - Further research should explore **restoration methods that do not damage or alter the original patterns and designs.**
  - Government agencies should be encouraged to **support and implement sustainable conservation and restoration projects to protect religious structures for future generations.**
- 4. Comparative Study of Regional Patterns in Laos:**
  - A deeper study should be conducted on **the regional variations of decorative patterns across different parts of Laos.**
  - This will help in identifying **authentic and distinctive artistic styles**, contributing to a **comprehensive understanding of Lao architectural heritage.**

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