KIẾN VIỆT · PROJECTS · 12 NOVEMBER 2026 · ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Birds House: where European classical architecture meets the heritage of Huế

Original (Vietnamese): https://kienviet.net/2026/11/12/nha-chim-giao-thoa-giua-kien-truc-co-dien-chau-au-va-di-san-hue

English translation of the article published in Vietnamese by Kiến Việt, the architecture platform of the Vietnam Association of Architects, on 12 November 2026. Translated by Thiên Ý for readers who do not read Vietnamese; with the illustrations as published.

Set within the grounds of Thiên Ý Villas in Huế, Birds House is one of three villas, each developed around its own theme and architectural language. Inspired by the Empire style and by Indochinese architecture, the building combines the formal principles of European classicism with the structure, ornament and spirit of Huế's traditional architecture, giving its own interpretation of cultural exchange in architectural space.

Neo-classicism is recognised by its pure, simple lines. For that very reason it can become a framework in which local styles develop. Huế has shown this: in the Imperial City, the pavilions built under the last Nguyễn emperors combined neo-classical lines with timber, ceramics and local decorative art, creating a language of their own, of Huế and of their time.

Birds House, a villa inside Huế's Citadel, carries that experiment on today. Its designers call the style Empire–Indochina.



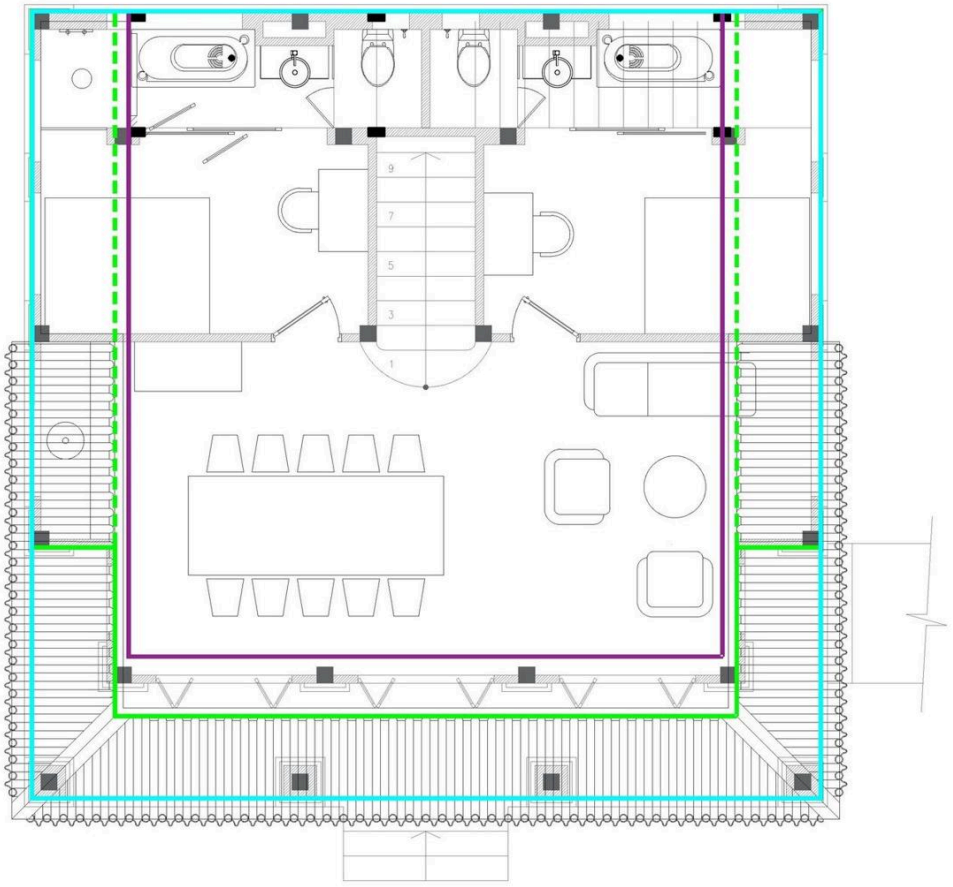


From top: Birds House, main façade; SketchUp perspective.

The house pursues two aims that seem hard to reconcile: first, to express the neo-classical spirit in full, as if drawn from the very idea of the style; and at the same time, to carry on the architecture of Nguyễn-era Huế without copying it or imitating the old, in kinship with the pavilions of the nearby Imperial City.

Anatomy of Birds House

Birds House distils the core of these principles and adds as little as possible. At first sight the plan is three concentric squares: the terrace and outer columns; the walls with their engaged pilasters; and the upper floor. In the manner usual in Vietnamese architecture, the upper walls are set back from those below, rather than directly above them as in a European building. The elevation therefore tapers slightly as it rises, a little like a pyramid.



The plan: three concentric squares.

The upper floor is an old timber nhà rường, dismantled and rebuilt. The size of the masonry ground floor was set from that house, and not the other way round, to obtain this gently stepped outline.

A timber floor on a masonry base is an unusual combination, perhaps a rare one, yet the form sits well with the eye and the contrast sets off both materials. The combination is familiar in Huế; the Ngọ Môn, with its timber pavilion on a massive masonry base, is only the most famous example. The nhà rường and the neo-classical house also share important features: simple volumes, strict symmetry, restrained ornament and openings repeated on the same pattern. Perhaps for this reason, when local architecture moved to brick and stone under European influence, it often turned to neo-classical forms, in private houses and in court pavilions alike.



During construction, the nhà rường is set on the masonry ground floor.



The tomb of Minh Mạng, where timber and masonry are combined, as everywhere in Huế.

Beyond symmetry, neo-classicism – with its reinterpretation of the architecture of Antiquity – values the strict repetition of a single, simple, clear opening. Other styles look for variety within a common framework; neo-classicism is not afraid of repetition.



The Empire style, rue de Rivoli, Paris: identical semicircular arches repeated; note the lanterns.

On the ground floor, three identical arches stand on broad square piers carrying the covered terrace. Behind them, the façade repeats the pattern: the piers return as engaged pilasters with the same profile; the openings, in the Empire manner, are mostly glazed, with semicircular fanlights above. The two side elevations follow the same rule, with discreet variations.

Three squares, a threefold rhythm, and behind it three repeated semicircular arches: nothing more. This is neo-classicism at its most concentrated, an idea turned into architecture. The wall is almost absent; there is just enough masonry for the pilasters to show their role. The ground floor becomes a "box of light", where the idea of the house and the house itself are one.



The ground floor as a box of light.

The terrace columns reinforce this sense of solidity: slender yet imposing, with column bases 40 cm wide – a size the structure does not require.

From stilt house to the Empire solution

The first sketches show the passage from a local form to the neo-classical solution. A nhà rường set on posts like a stilt house looked ungainly; set on stone piers, it led to the more harmonious Empire scheme. The open ground floor and the sculpted, almost stone-like columns were kept from those early schemes.



The first SketchUp studies, from stilt house to the Empire solution.

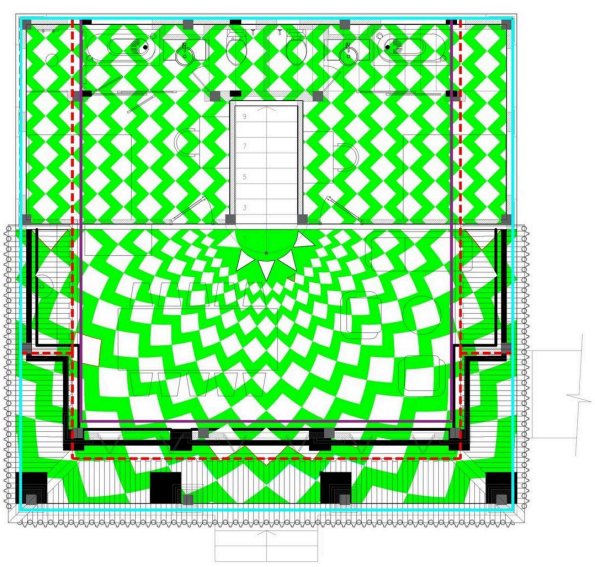
Inside

Inside, the same idea governs. The front half of the ground floor is an open living room; the back half holds two bedrooms on either side of a staircase set against the rear wall, their arched doors repeating the arches of the façade in perfect symmetry.



An artist's perspective, the blue scheme.

Where the staircase meets the reception room, at the very centre of the plan, one detail organises the whole ground floor: a floor of green and white marble laid in concentric circles of increasing radius. Each band carries both colours and radiates without a break from this point out to the terrace.





From top: CAD drawing of the stone floor; the finished floor.

Laying this pattern in Vietnam's brittle marble took a full year. The floor's value is to bring whoever enters into the culture of the house: centrality, circles radiating from a single origin, mathematics made visible in space; and more deeply, Neoplatonic philosophy – the intellectual foundation of neo-classicism – made something one can see and feel.

Keeping the ideal alive

How can such a building stay true to Nguyễn architecture? The two aims can go together. Neo-classicism, above all in its Empire form, always carries a risk that the style itself only partly avoids: formalism, rigid formulas and façades repeated until they are lifeless. Birds House looks for two ways out: controlled variation within the rules, and a deep bond with Huế to bring abstract formulas to life.

Variation within the rules

Look closely and the strict lines grow richer. On the two sides, the inner square – walls and arched doors – bends outward to meet the outer square of the terrace, until the two become one. At the front corners, where there is not room for a whole arch, the designer uses a half-arch, cut vertically through the middle. In the bedrooms, two arched doors are trimmed to three-quarters of their width and joined by a short length of wall: the partition keeps its arched glazing, but has a solid part in the middle as a dividing wall needs. The doors are fitted with hand-forged iron grilles in a bronze finish, giving the bedrooms privacy.





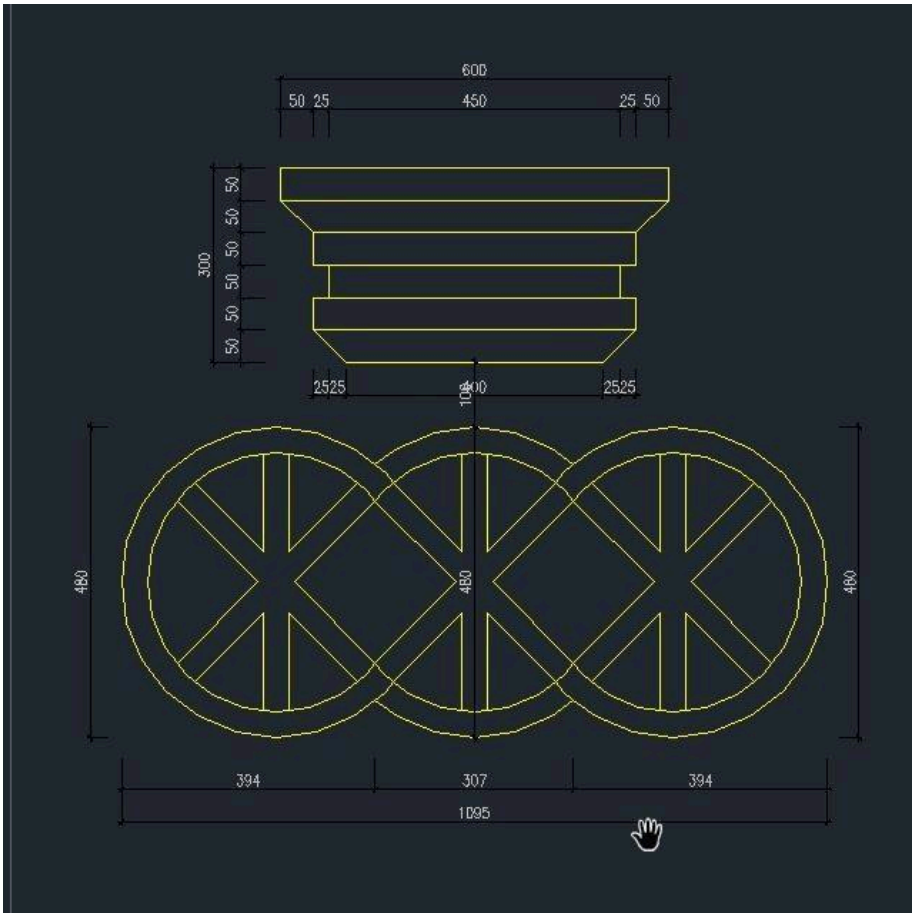
From top: side elevation, first hand drawing; side elevation, the corner half-arch and the pair of bedroom doors with grilles.

Has the building then left neo-classicism behind, a style in which form is placed above function? The surrounding colonnade runs only along the front and turns the corners, a kind of hybrid with a front veranda. The varied openings might also lean towards an art of outward appearance, far from the conviction neo-classicism holds: that architectural form must express the nature of the building.

These variations keep the style alive without betraying it: the arches, though adjusted, keep their symmetry, centrality, openness and light. Another style might stray far from the original façade and keep only a few features for coherence; here the departures are almost hidden, and each detail is still seen in relation to the general theme, which is always present. Neo-classicism needs to move beyond strict repetition, or it becomes monotonous.

The rhythm of three

Neo-classicism is an art of abstraction, but it is richer when it makes its spiritual roots visible, as the floor does. At Birds House everything also rests on the number three: three arches on the façade, three arched doors behind, a similar division in the nhà rường above, and round windows made of three interlaced rings. The triad is present in Eastern and Western spiritual traditions alike and gives the house its pervading rhythm. In Vietnam, as across the world shaped by China, it is an ancient frame of thought about the cosmos: heaven above, earth below, and humankind in between, joining the two – Tam tài. Builders apply the principle as a matter of course: a house has an odd number of bays, because odd numbers belong to yang and stand for life and growth; the central bay lies on the main axis and is reserved for the ancestors.



A round window of three interlaced rings.

A deep bond with Huế: Empire–Indochina

The second approach is to place the architecture in relation to its local historical and cultural setting. The word "Empire" has two layers of meaning here. On one hand, it is the name of the Empire style, which flourished in France and Europe in the early nineteenth century with a strict neo-classical language. On the other, "Empire" also recalls the Nguyễn dynasty, founded in 1802 when Gia Long took the imperial throne, in the same historical period.

This parallel does not mean that Huế architecture was directly influenced by the Empire style at that time, since the mark of European architecture appeared clearly in Huế only later. The connection the design team has in mind lies in a likeness of form and architectural language between the buildings, rather than in matching dates or direct influence.

Three pavilions in the Imperial City

Three pavilions in the Imperial City have much in common with Birds House: the Tứ Phương Vô Sự pavilion (1923), Tịnh Minh Lầu (1927) and Thái Bình Lầu (1921). Each took up some neo-classical features and transformed them through local tradition and invention. Birds House carries on this evocative blend without copying any one of them.

Tứ Phương Vô Sự, recently rebuilt after war damage, is a large, striking two-storey building with a plan centred on its middle and a masonry core in the colonial neo-classical manner. It stands apart

through a use of timber far beyond European models and through ornament that is pure Huế, above all the roof-ridge decorations that give the building its distinctive outline.

Tịnh Minh Lâu has a similar plan, with a wide entrance veranda. The large ground-floor veranda roof uses a mixed structure: big decorated brick corner columns, while the other columns and the veranda roof are timber.

Thái Bình Lâu stands on the site of Trí Nhân Đường, a timber building raised by Emperor Minh Mạng in 1821, at the very time the Empire style was flourishing. It was rebuilt under Thiệu Trị and Đồng Khánh, and took its present form under Khải Định in 1921. Of the three, it is the most deeply local: vernacular architecture taking on neo-classical lines. Timber and masonry interlock: masonry for the base, the richly decorated corner columns and the large veranda; timber for the upper floor and the ground-floor partitions. Ceramic mosaic densely covers the columns, the ridge ornaments and the eaves.







From top: Tứ Phương Võ Sự; Tịnh Minh Lâu; Thái Bình Lâu.

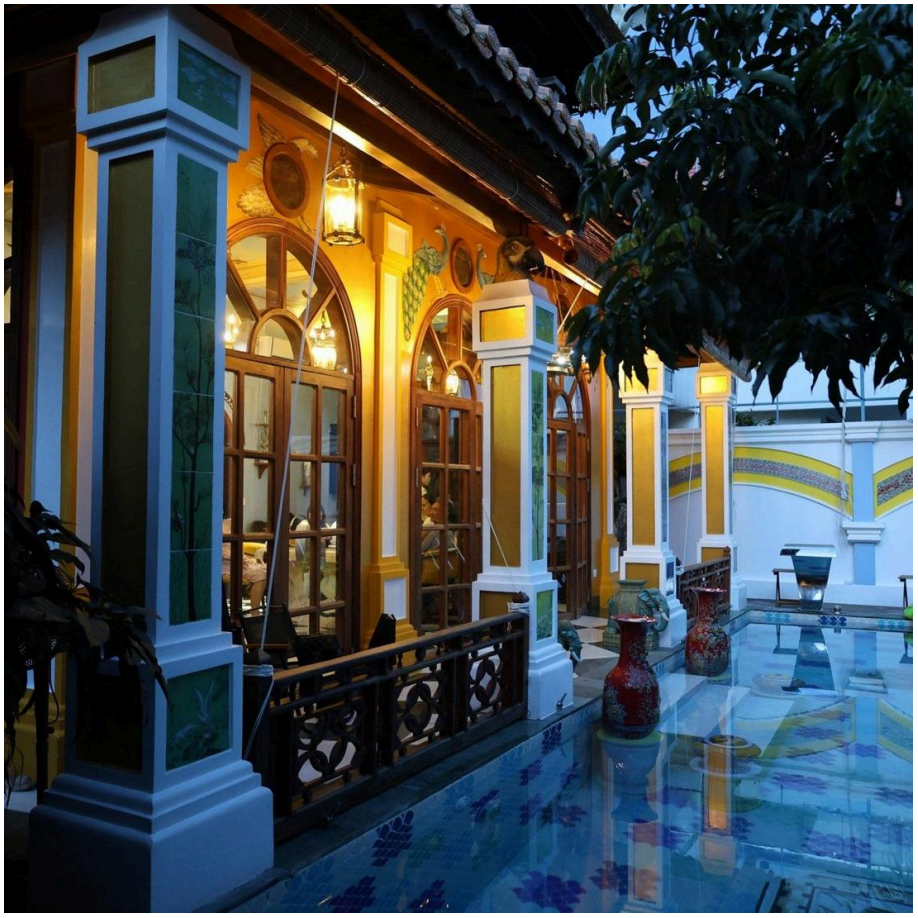
Birds House shares many features with these three: a mixed structure, a masonry ground floor with large timber openings and a timber upper floor; an almost pyramidal outline from wide veranda roofs combined with a tall hip-and-gable roof; large Huế-style ridge ornaments; ceramic decoration in warm tones with themes tied to the land; a square plan centred on its middle, with neo-classical features and a threefold rhythm; and veranda columns close in form to those of Tịnh Minh Lâu, but with different decorative themes.



The nhà rường being raised on the ground floor.

At first sight Birds House recalls the court architecture of Huế, yet it has features of its own. The upper floor uses an existing nhà rường, while the whole building is organised in a neo-classical spirit. The ground floor is mostly open, a space like a glass box that recalls the structure of a stilt house. Notably, the decorative elements – carved wood, ceramics, bronze and built-in furniture – were all planned from the very first design drawings.

These architectural features may go back to the reign of Gia Long – the emperor who employed French engineers and built ramparts in the Vauban manner – or may have appeared later. It is hard to date their origin precisely. What matters, though, is not the date but the way neo-classical principles combine with local architectural nuances to create a language of its own, marked by Huế. Birds House sets out to recreate that combination in a new architectural form.



Birds House at dawn.

Ornament and motifs

In neo-classical architecture, ornament must follow the architectural lines, but that does not make it secondary or something to be left out. That misunderstanding easily leads to rigid buildings without life or soul. To counter its own leaning towards formalism, neo-classicism may need ornament even more than some other styles. If architecture is the frame that builds the stage, ornament is the body that brings movement and voice to the space.

Percier and Fontaine – the two architects who laid the foundations of the Empire style – were first of all decorators. In the same way, at the Ara Pacis Augustae, one of the major sources of neo-classical architecture, the architectural lines seem to have been made to honour the art of ornament. And how rich that ornament is!



Ara Pacis Augustae, carved flowers.

This suits Huế especially well, where ornament is treated as a language and plain walls are almost unknown, except for the natural beauty of the grain on old wooden boards. If we read Birds House as an open book, what story does it tell? The story of Nguyễn-era architecture carried on in the twenty-first century, of Huế and Vietnam, of how a local culture converses with outside influences: first Europe, through style and history, then China and, to a lesser degree, the Hindu world.

The villa was placed under the patronage of birds to set this story from the start on a cultural and, one might say, spiritual plane. In Europe as in Vietnam, though read differently, birds carry deep spiritual meaning. The emblem of the house expresses this kinship: a bird pecking at its own breast to draw a few drops of blood to feed its young – an image found in both cultures, each understanding it in its own way. In the West, the pelican feeding its young with its blood became a symbol of sacred sacrifice for eternal life. In Vietnam the image evokes the mother, a life given day after day for her children; the poet Lê Trúc Anh expresses this in "Kể chuyện một loài chim" (The story of a bird), written for his mother. Alike yet different: two spiritual worlds, one turned more towards the transcendent, the other more bound to life here and now.

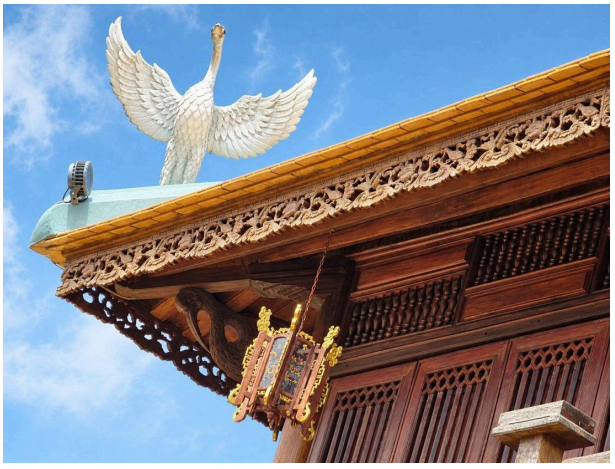


The emblem of Birds House, at the entrance gate.

Birds, in their countless species and shapes, carry many layers of symbolic meaning in Vietnam and elsewhere. That makes them rich material for bringing subtle ideas closer to human feeling.

Following a Huế custom, most often seen on religious buildings, and close to the natural ways of birds, our birds perch on the roof, turning it into a kind of stone aviary. It is the right place for their first role: to be a bridge between earth and heaven, and to remind people to raise their thoughts.





A bird-shaped roof ornament in the Citadel; a white crane taking off from a corner of the Birds House roof, above a pelican-shaped wooden bracket.

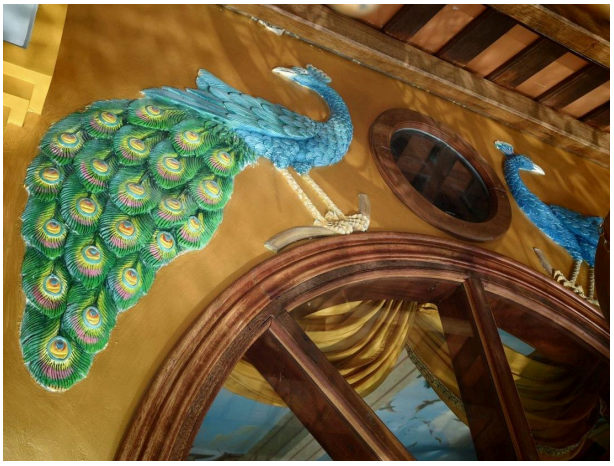
On the balcony, a pair of bronze cranes cast by the craftsman Nguyễn Phùng Sơn stand one above the other, beneath an emblem of harmony between people.

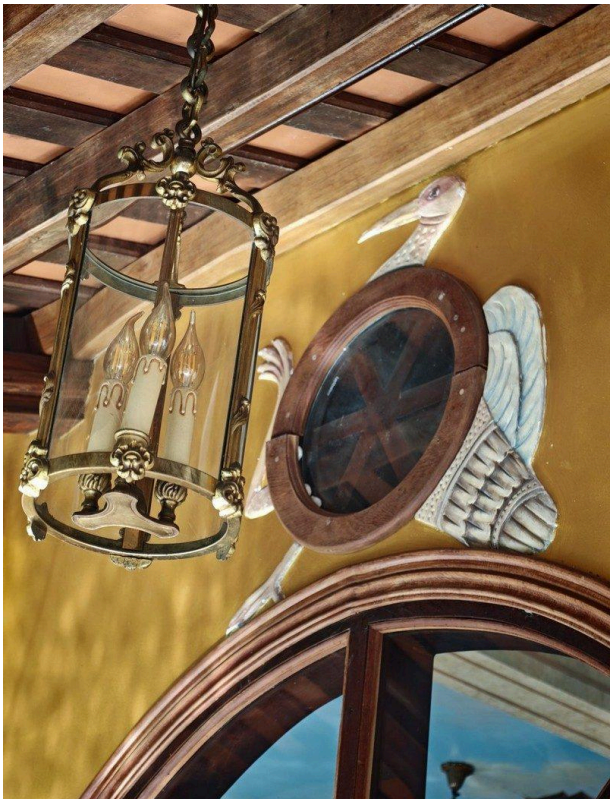




Birds on the side walls and above the column capitals; the pair of bronze birds at the centre of the upper balcony (below).

Above the main entrance and the fountain, two brightly coloured peacocks face each other – an ancient and powerful symbol of peace and eternal life. Around the round windows, water birds drawn in an archaic manner follow the curves of the architecture.





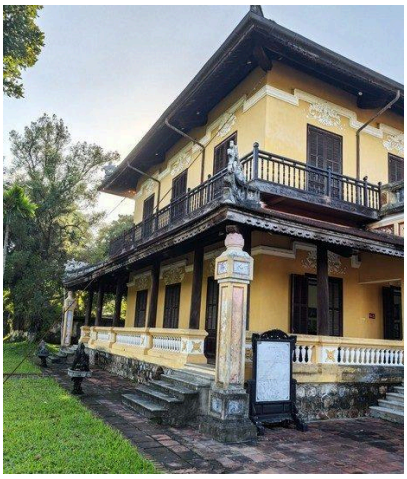
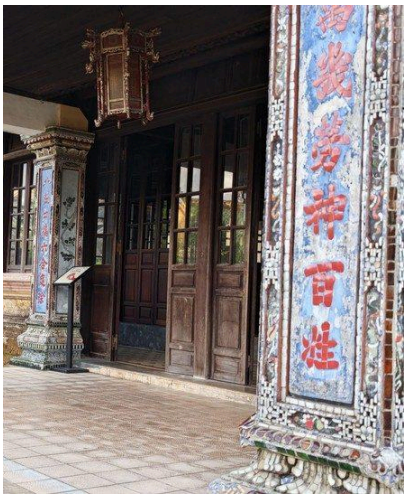
Facing peacocks playing with the architectural details; detail, archaic birds around a round window.

The four front veranda columns resemble in form those of Tịnh Minh Lâu, and are as richly decorated with ceramics as those of Thái Bình Lâu. The hand-painted glazed tiles were made in Bát Tràng by Mr Khánh, after drawings by LOR Vietnam. Their motifs tell a very Vietnamese story, unfolding in three parts, linking heaven, earth and life.

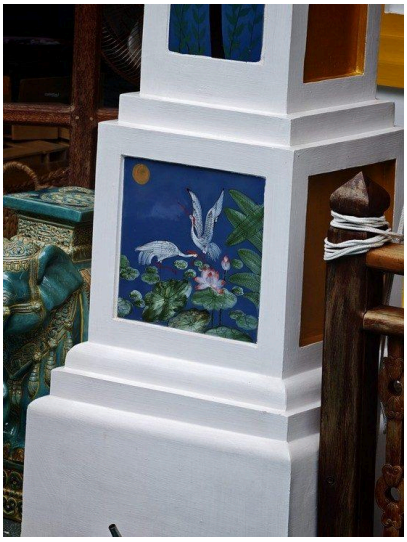
On the wide column bases, cranes – symbols of spiritual life and longevity in Vietnamese culture – appear among lotus flowers opening on a village pond. On the shafts, cranes perch along a tall tree that joins the two ends. On the capitals, cranes fly on among clouds under the moon.

In Vietnamese culture the crane carries a deeper meaning than in common European readings. It is the bird that carries the soul to heaven; when an old person dies, they are said to have "ridden the crane to the land of the immortals". Before the altars of many pagodas stands a pair of cranes on the backs of tortoises: the crane stands for heaven, the tortoise for earth, and both for long life.

So the veranda columns tell a story from the bottom up: from the lotus pond, through the tree, to the clouds – the three levels of heaven, earth and humankind in between. The story runs across all four columns, but never mechanically: each column has its own variations in motifs and in the tone of its tile ground, giving richness to the whole.


From left: Tịnh Minh Lâu; a column of Thái Bình Lâu; the Birds House veranda columns.





From left: column base; shaft; capital.



Detail of a column shaft.

Inside, the theme of peace continues in the large ceiling fresco by Mr Huỳnh Tấn Niền and his workshop: a Huế garden with balconies, seen from below in striking foreshortening.



The ceiling of the main room.

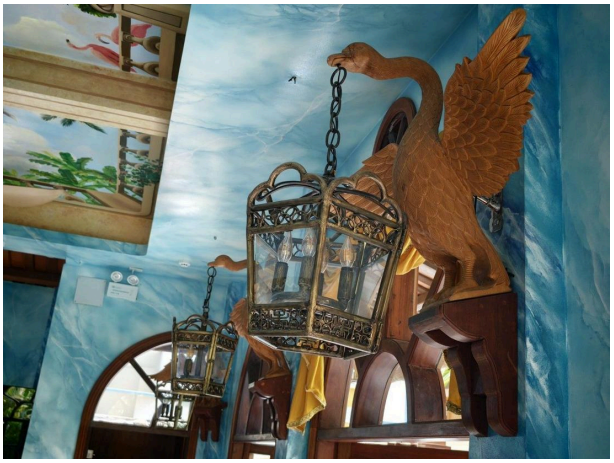
Lamps and chandeliers are another part of the house where its story unfolds – both because neo-classicism was a product of the Enlightenment, and because light and birds are close kin in the spiritual world.

In the main room, one special detail continues and stresses the architectural rhythm of the room – true to the usual role of ornament in the classical tradition – while setting off the three openings and giving the space its character. Facing the terrace and the pool, above each pilaster, a large swan carved in orange jackfruit wood spreads its wings and holds up a heavy bronze lantern decorated with old Huế patterns.

The swan is the bird of Apollo – god of art and reason in Greek mythology – and the emblematic bird of the neo-classical style. The Vietnamese, for their part, descend from a Dragon father and a Fairy mother and the legend of a sac of a hundred eggs – an origin that also carries echoes of birds.

As mentioned, realism is an important element of neo-classical ornament. Yet subtle departures from natural shapes are accepted, and even enrich the work, giving the object its own meaning and keeping its visual appeal. In that spirit, the necks and body curves of the swans were lengthened a little, to stress the softness and femininity long associated with this bird.

The swans also serve to hold up the lanterns. Each lantern weighs 7 kg and was made of bronze in Nam Định, with a neo-classical spirit read in a strongly Indochinese way. Each was carved by hand, so that every one has its own details.





From top: a swan holding a lantern; a swan on a relief of the Augustan age.

In the two bedrooms at the back, two similar but not identical bronze chandeliers explore the same symbolism and craft. Each carries two birds at opposite ends: one bright and colourful, the other dark. They suggest first a moral contrast and the snares a soul may meet on its way. Under the influence of this land, the opposition softens into intermediate shades rather than a stark contrast; the meaning moves from plain symbol to something more poetic and open to interpretation. The bright bird is the goldfinch, said to feed on thorns – here standing for evil and suffering. The dark bird, through its beauty, suggests that it cannot be reduced to darkness, and that beauty can rise above the temptations of evil.

Just as the chandeliers explore the opposition of good and evil from several symbolic angles, they also show two very different techniques and crafts reaching a similar result: one was cast, the other forged, in two workshops, in Nam Định and in Huế.





a bedroom chandelier and its pair of birds; the dark bird on painted glass, answering the chandelier's birds.

Another bronze lamp, with a quite different story. On the terrace we wanted to interpret, lightly, the meaning of Empire–Indochina. The Empire style loved many forms of Antiquity; in lighting design, Roman oil lamps were often reworked as candlesticks or chandeliers. With the bronze master Nguyễn

Phùng Sơn of Huế – known for casting some of the most important pagoda bells in the country, still working entirely by hand and perhaps one of the last to keep the craft in this way – we designed a monumental chandelier inspired by the shape and spirit of the Empire style, then adapted to the richness of Huế's decorative art and style. The chandelier weighs 120 kg of bronze. Its curving arms reach two metres wide, holding the candle cups like open hands, yet it keeps the clean lines and dignified bearing of its Empire forebear. Original without being odd, free of stylistic constraints yet clearly claiming both its origins: these are the qualities we wanted for this style itself.





the terrace chandelier; an original Empire chandelier, in the house.

In the classical tradition, the highest path of ornament is narrative, where ideas speak for themselves; painting and storytelling carving are seen as its highest forms. We made the two bedrooms the showpiece of Empire–Indochina and entrusted them to Mr Huỳnh Tấn Niên of Biên Hòa and his workshop. The theme continues and deepens the same inspiration: Huế, and Vietnam more widely, strengthening its own identity by taking in and exchanging with other cultures, first China and Europe. Exploring those dialogues is also a journey into the soul of Huế.

The theme begins with the painted doors, symmetrical on either side of the rising staircase. Everything sits in a strict neo-classical frame, organised in threes, through three shapes: square, rectangle and semicircle. At the centre is a woman's figure in a medallion; above, in the lunette of the arch, a dreamlike garden inspired by the poetic frescoes of the Villa of Livia, evoking an ideal Huế garden house. This wall can be seen as the shell around the box, already in itself a manifesto of Empire–Indochina. Three openings, the middle one only slightly taller; three pure semicircular arches, topped by a simplified three-lobed border that repeats the door frames, based on the Vietnamese key-fret motif (hồi văn), renewed from the art of Biên Hòa and related ethnic patterns.

The straight staircase suggests the ascent of the sovereign – the emperor being the Son of Heaven; one may think of the Hiển Lâm Các with its clouds painted in the old manner, its rhythmic balustrade and a semicircular window, in blue-green tones recalling the tomb of Minh Mạng. Above hangs a short ceremonial silk curtain, gathered in the Western manner in the earthy yellow of Huế; higher still, a long silk band painted with a procession.



rear wall of the main room, three arched openings: an Empire–Indochina "manifesto".

Behind those doors are the glass-walled bedrooms. Once again the architecture lets the artistic story unfold, like a stage set in a theatre. Each room is in three parts: in front, the blue-grey sleeping area, separated from the stone-clad bathroom only by a large glass panel; further back, a wide arch opens onto the courtyard, where the stone bathtub stands. The painted glass thus becomes the element through which the artistic story shapes the space.



the three-part room, with the painted glass in the middle.

The glass panels explore different cultural roots of Huế: one room is close to the solemn Sino-Vietnamese court art, the other recalls the soft, misty painting of local artists of the mid-twentieth century. The colours recall both the strong tones of Antiquity and the colours of the Nguyễn tombs.

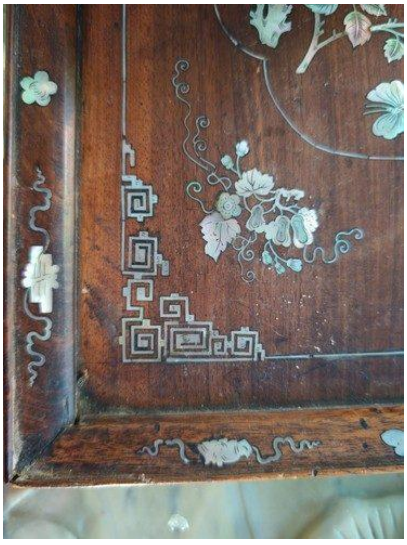


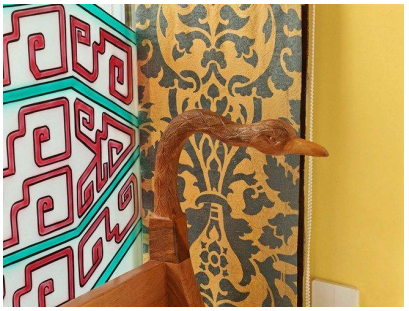


an echo of the court; the poetry of Huế.

Here the artist takes further a captivating motif thousands of years old. The motif itself shows how Vietnam absorbs and recreates distant traditions: taking in universal or kindred elements and turning them into a language of its own without losing its identity. It is the hồi văn, also called the "Greek" motif. Its modern Vietnamese form is linked to Nguyễn-era Huế, when the culture here was

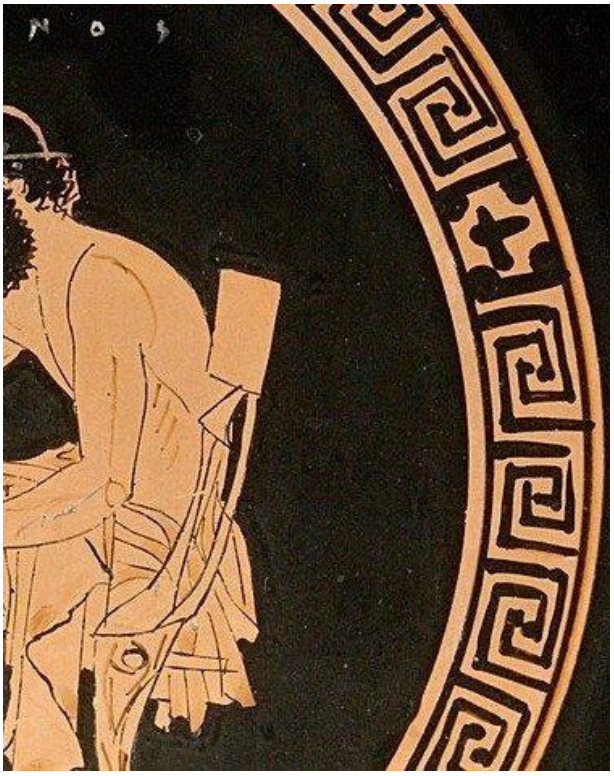
in exchange with Europe, and to Nam Định; the motif then spread widely, in many forms and materials.





hồi văn in mother-of-pearl inlay on a carved wooden tray; illustration from an early twentieth-century study of Huế art, stands decorated with hồi văn; hồi văn at Birds House.

In Huế, however, local decorators clearly loosened the strict geometry of neo-classical motifs, even those of Greek origin, to create freer shapes, often clearly evoking plants and sometimes taking on elements of metamorphosis.

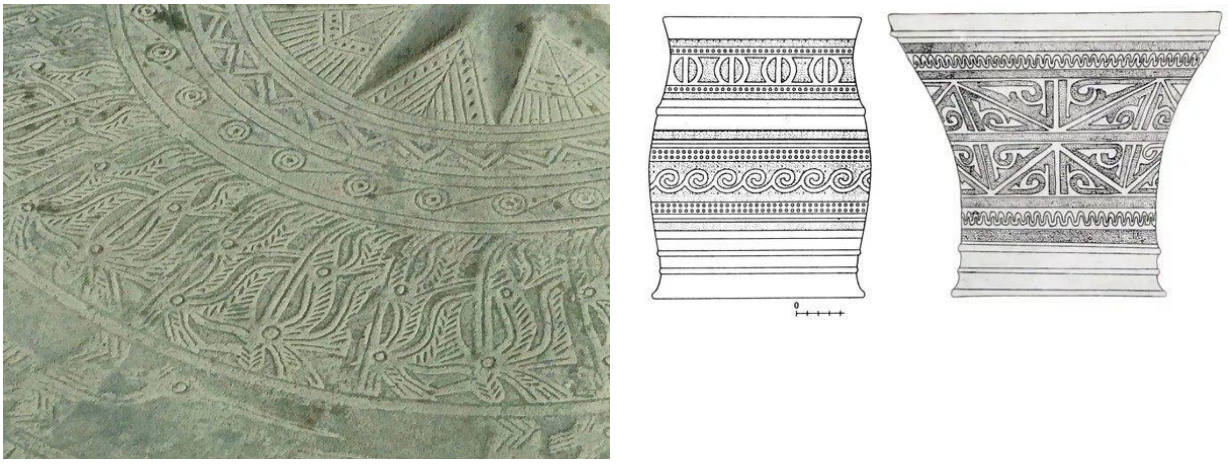



From top: an ancient Greek meander; a European neo-classical "Greek" motif.

These motifs were quickly taken up and developed into many rich and imaginative variants. The resonance came from their meeting with an old local tradition, rich in symbolism, that always valued continuity and lasting vitality through the upheavals of history. The roots of that tradition can be

traced back before the period of Chinese influence – which also had many similar motifs – to the Đồng Sơn culture and further still to the Phùng Nguyên culture.

In that sense, by giving movement and, one might say, new life to the European meander, Indochinese decorative art also brought it back to the cultural layers of its own past. For the meander was once linked to plant forms and to similar deep natural symbols. Over time those links were forgotten, hidden behind somewhat rigid ornamental forms.



From top: Đồng Sơn bronze drum pattern, first millennium BC; Phùng Nguyên pottery pattern, second millennium BC.

Looking back, these rooms form an aesthetic world of their own, in which Empire–Indochina is expressed as a total art: architecture, ornament, furniture and painting combined in one whole, deeply rooted in the place and entirely contemporary, giving inspiration to those who stay.

Let us end with two views that may help keep the particular character of this space in mind and in the senses.

The Empire–Indochina living room. Every element is present here, to be studied, to be felt, and gradually to settle into the space. A palette of green and blue gives a mineral feeling: walls in blue faux marble echo the geometry of the floor on a blue-grey ground. The materials, the cool tones and the enlarged neo-classical window – like an ideal model – all aim at the eternal and the universal, without compromise: nothing is added to soften that rigour.

Then, in complete contrast, the "body" of local Indochina appears: a carved nineteenth-century folding table with a bronze tray, an old lantern and vase lamps; then ethnographic collector's pieces, with the corresponding motifs of Biên Hòa, bringing the room back to a particular character, the opposite pole to the universal neo-classical frame. Behind lies the lush Huế garden. A place of rest that calms the soul, with clear and rich lines, both stable and open to the landscape around it.



The Empire–Indochina living room.

Next comes a decorative ensemble expressing the Empire–Indochina spirit, where many aesthetic influences meet. A classic Empire bronze wall light is set beside a neo-classical mirror. The mirror reflects a stylised woman in Sino-Vietnamese dress of the Nguyễn period, set among branches painted in the warm tones typical of the region.

Behind is the arch opening onto the courtyard, where the pale green of the plants blends with the blue of the bird-shaped fountain. Beside it, a bathtub and basin in Nghệ An stone, carved in a neo-classical spirit, complete the whole.





From top: the reflection in the mirror; the bathtub and the painted glass.

Taken to its ideal form, neo-classicism is a frame of symmetry, a plan centred on its middle, repetition and a rhythm of three. The nhà rường answers point by point with its own order: symmetry about the central bay, an odd number of bays, and the threefold scheme of heaven, earth and humankind. The two orders meet and recognise each other in Birds House, where they are filled with the materials of Huế: a nhà rường set on columns, ridge ornaments and hand-painted tiles, bronze cast in Nam Định and Huế, and paintings by local artists.

Filled in this way, the frame becomes an open book. Through its birds, its lamps and its painted rooms, the house carries on the story Nguyễn-era Huế told: a culture that keeps its identity while in dialogue with Europe and China. That is the balance the pavilions of the Imperial City found a century ago, and that Birds House continues today. The name Empire–Indochina sums up the meeting: the European architectural order of the early nineteenth century and the Nguyễn dynasty founded in Huế in the same period, coming together in one house.

Editor: Hà Nhi

Translation: Thiên Ý, Huế. Photographs and drawings: Thiên Ý / LOR Vietnam, as published with the original article in Kiến Việt (kienviet.net). thienyhue.com