

"Gold Mine in Southeast Asia"

*Russel Wright, Vietnamese Handicraft, and
Transnational Consumption*

Jennifer Way

In a 1956 essay, the designer Russel Wright (1904–1976) confessed that on his first trip to Vietnam, “I expected to find little or nothing to export.” Instead, he found a gold mine, a Southeast Asia “bursting with opportunities for the American importer or developer who goes there with designs and merchandising know-how.”¹ Best known for his contributions to interior and industrial design in the United States, Wright was also, during the Cold War era, involved in a transnational relationship with Southeast Asian craftsmen based on the reciprocity of production and consumption.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Wright’s Melmac plastic dinnerware was on the tables of millions of Americans, and his organization of “The American Way” led to a consortium of artists, craftsmen, and manufacturers working together to produce low-cost home furnishings for sale in major department stores. After World War II, when American cultural production became an important element of global diplomacy, Wright’s successful designs and activism as an ambassador for good design attracted the attention of the U.S. State Department, and in 1955 he contracted to help the new Republic of Vietnam improve “the design, production and distribution of Vietnamese handicraft products for export and domestic consumption.”² Wright also traveled with Ramy Alexander, a craft expert, and Josette Walker, a fashion designer, to Taiwan, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Hong Kong in 1955–56 to assess the larger region’s potential to produce handicraft items for American domestic markets. In Vietnam, he and his colleagues observed people making pottery, handloom textiles, needlework, baskets, silk weavings, wood furniture, and lacquerware at sites ranging from cooperatives to semi-mechanized factories, schools, and refugee camps. Afterward, he

submitted a report to the State Department and published an article in *Interiors* magazine entitled “Gold Mine in Southeast Asia” about the possibilities he saw for craft export.³ He ultimately oversaw the establishment of several handicraft centers in Southeast Asia, mounted trade shows and department store exhibitions of handicraft in the United States, and designed materials for furnishing middle-class American homes that he named after places in Southeast Asia. By 1958, when hopes had dimmed for the success of handicraft exports from Vietnam to America, Wright proposed a “Handicraft Program for Tourism” in Vietnam. He established the “Russel Wright Program Silk Screen Workshop” in Saigon the next year and oversaw its teaching of color, design, and printing.⁴

In the American design world, Wright was considered an educator and called a “designer diplomat” in recognition of his efforts.⁵ His work in Southeast Asia came about as part of the State Department’s promotion of handicraft production from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s as a means to foster economic conditions conducive to establishing and maintaining democracy in the nations there. The U.S. government wanted to help the new Republic of Vietnam meet its economic challenges, considering it “the proving ground of democracy in Asia,” as Senator John F. Kennedy put it.⁶ In the years following the French withdrawal from Vietnam in 1954 and the division of Vietnam along the 17th parallel and before the arrival of the first U.S. combat troops in 1961, the American government largely described its role in terms of giving aid to the anti-communist republic that was established in the south. The *U.S. Army Area Handbook for Vietnam*, for example, reported that American cultural influence there had risen steadily, thanks to an influx of educators as well as U.S. economic aid and military assistance, noting, “Substantial U.S. assistance has been given to the government of South Vietnam in the fields of graphic arts and crafts, music, motion pictures and the publication of textbooks.”⁷ The Army handbook presented the relationship between Vietnam as unidirectional geopolitics. Yet, if we examine Wright’s trips to Vietnam, the information about modern design, American culture, and middle-class American life that he brought to Southeast Asia, the mobility of the things he collected there and brought back to the U.S., the images and texts about Asia that he and his colleagues circulated, and the handicraft objects he oversaw being produced and then displayed in Southeast Asia and the United States, it is clear that they participated not only in nation-state geopolitics but also in an in-betweenness of place characterizing transnationalism.

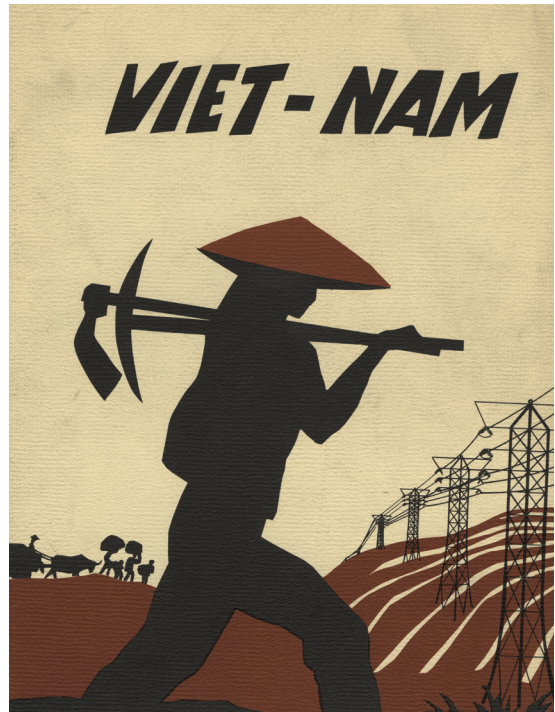
“Transnational” refers to activity between and crossing national borders. To be sure, methodologically, it alerts us to activity that is “inter-national,” or between nations. But crucially, a transnational approach invites us to consider the agency of nongovernmental people and to look at programs, goods, and services crossing national borders as part

of temporary and long-term initiatives in addition to the activity of governments' diplomatic corps and armies. Using transnationalism as a methodological framework for scholarship helps us to consider the ways in which flows and exchanges across borders have been uneven in regard to power, and to examine dynamic processes that involve but in many ways exceed the nation state.

With regard to Wright's involvement with handicraft and Southeast Asia, such an approach invites us to identify many kinds of cultural artifacts—photographs, films, pamphlets (Figure 1), references to historical art and culture, exhibitions, van-

guard modern Western art and design, and Southeast Asian handicraft objects—and inquire about their significance in linking South Vietnam and the United States in the context of U.S. policies during the Cold War. Doing so advances existing scholarship about American governmental and corporate use of cultural diplomacy abroad during the 1950s, in the interlude before the conflict that many Americans would call the Vietnam War and many Vietnamese the American War.⁸ By examining transnational aspects of American government-sponsored handicraft programs in Vietnam, we broaden the scope of a new body of scholarship on U.S.–Vietnam relations that looks at the period before the 1960s, including books such as Kathryn Statler's *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam*.⁹ Recent work in American studies reminds us to push beyond cultural imperialism as “too simple a model to understand how culture works” and to open for consideration “the place of the Asian in American life and her or his understanding of America” as well as “the cultural work that forms originating in the United States do in cultures outside this country, studying their reception and reconfiguration in contexts informed by a deep understanding of the countries where that cultural work is taking place.”¹⁰

Wright, along with other Americans and Southeast Asians, was also participating in a transnational activity based on the interconnectedness of production and



1. *Viet-Nam* (Washington, DC: Press and Information Office, Embassy of Viet Nam, ca. 1959). Pamphlet. Folder, Foreign Activities, Box 45, Russel Wright Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library, New York.

consumption as people, ideas, services, and goods crossed national borders. This was a relationship under study by contemporary American economists. Ruth Mack, for instance, explained that “the economics of consumption and production inter-mesh”; “effect becomes cause and cause effect.”¹¹ In this case, American business and the middle classes were targeted as consumers of Southeast Asian culture. Yet Southeast Asian artisans also were encouraged to consume American and Asian culture in the very process of making handicrafts for export—to design and make craft objects in ways that anticipated what the U.S. market wanted, tailoring their products to its desires. This important feedback loop rendered Vietnamese handicraft less indigen-ous than already transcultural—or between cultures.

“The Refugee Problem”

The U.N. Economic and Social Council issued a report in 1951 on a survey of 10 Asian nations’ readiness and potential to export handicrafts to the United States, where “a great demand exists for goods in the house furnishing line” due to record home construction after World War II. The survey, based on a specialist’s tour and observations, noted that in Indochina, including Phnom-Penh, Saigon, and Biên Hòa, handicrafts arts were “very highly developed” and training facilities excellent. It identified some financial disincentives for Americans exporting handicraft from Indochina, however, and problems including “poor quality” and “lack of standardization.” And it cautioned Asian handicraft exporters not to expect that Americans “will like or want the same things which local markets prefer.” Instead, exporters must ensure that handicrafts created abroad are styled “for the [American] buyer’s taste,” it said, urging participating nations “[t]o study the American market requirements and to be prepared to shift production to those items in demand.” Furthermore, it recommended that the U.S. government “engage services of a capable American merchandising expert to assist in introducing products to the American market and in guidance in understanding the requirements of that market.”¹²

A few years later, the U.S. government put many of the survey’s recommendations into practice. With the departure of the French, the political division of Vietnam in 1954, and the founding of the Republic of Vietnam in South Vietnam, the U.S. Operations Mission to Vietnam [USOM] sought to help the new republic counter communism and attain economic stability by providing programs based in part on educating the populace.¹³ “The United States is proud to be on the side of the effort of the Vietnamese people under President [Ngo Dinh] Diem to establish freedom, peace, and the good life,” the State Department reported in 1956.¹⁴ That same year, Senator Kennedy explained Vietnam’s significance as “the cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia,” with an “economy . . . essential

to the economy of all of Southeast Asia,” and the U.S. International Cooperation Administration dedicated \$767 million to support personnel from government and business to help establish economic pathways linking America and Southeast Asia. Their efforts included working with small industries and craftsmen to raise the quality of their products, and locating markets for their work at home and abroad.¹⁵ A Hoover Commission report in early 1955 had criticized the U.S. foreign aid program for not directly aiding the craftsmen of so-called underdeveloped countries.¹⁶ In response, and in correlation with the U.N.’s “Handicrafts Marketing Survey,” the State Department summoned American industrial designers for help in completing surveys in different countries. Wright was one of those called into action.

A crucial issue that Wright latched onto in his tour of Vietnam was what he termed “The Refugee Problem.”¹⁷ By this he meant the people who, following the division of Vietnam at the 17th parallel, left their homes to migrate from the north, ceded to communist forces, to the south before the border dividing the nation closed in May 1955. They moved south to flee the Viet Minh as part of what the U.S. Navy called Operation Passage to Freedom, and the U.S. distributed funds to help integrate these refugees.¹⁸

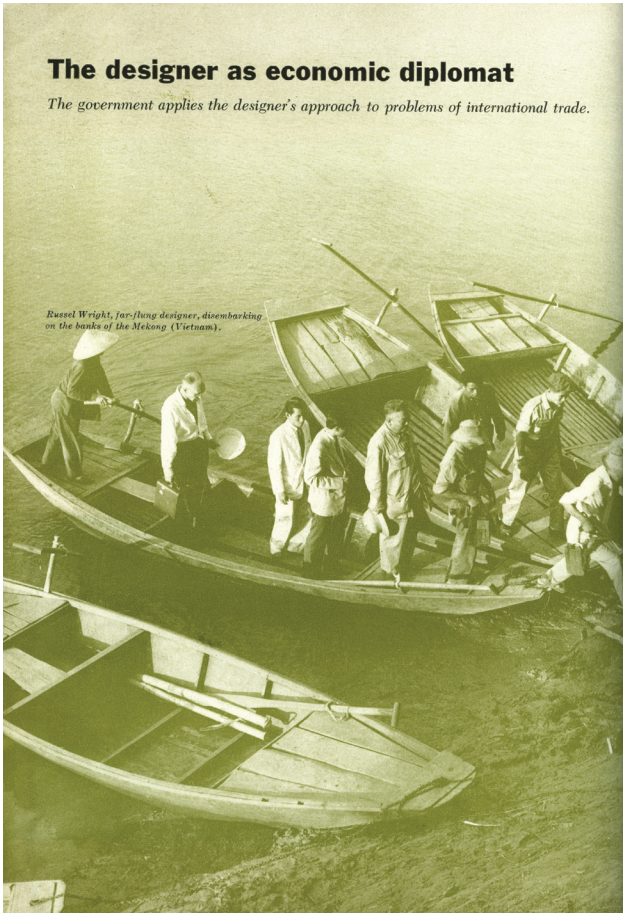
In an unpublished essay summarizing his travels in Southeast Asia during 1956, Wright wrote that “of all the needs in this area, none is more pressing than that of help to refugees.” Moreover, he said, in Vietnam “our Technical Mission is taking part in the project of resettlement on reclaimed land.”¹⁹ In his article in *Interiors* magazine that same year, Wright described the refugees as “helpless Southeast Asians who, cut off from their past, look to the United States for a road to the future.”²⁰ His phrase “road to the future,” like the Navy’s use of the word “passage” for its refugee aid operation, could refer to the means of access provided to people moving from north to south Vietnam. Additionally, the phrase suggests progress toward a destination, and implies that American aid could shepherd Vietnam into the territory of the Free World and a modern era that embraces the future.

A simply designed landscape scene on the cover of a report published by the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington, DC, illustrated these ideas of movement through space and time to a better life (Figure 1). The focus is on the middle foreground, where a single, androgynous figure dressed in traditional pants, a jacket, and hat strides from left to right, carrying two farming implements over the shoulder. Behind the figure, the landscape changes dramatically. On the left, on a low hill, a farmer rides atop a very full wagon pulled by a water buffalo. Several people walking in front of the wagon balance enormous loads, some above their heads. This is a land and way of life the West conceived as a pre-industrial economy. On the right, a row of electric towers recedes across a taller hill covered by an orderly tilled field. In the foreground, the

The designer as economic diplomat

The government applies the designer's approach to problems of international trade.

Russel Wright, far-flung designer, disembarking on the banks of the Mekong (Vietnam).



2. Russel Wright photograph in Avrom Fleishman, "The Designer as Economic Diplomat: The Government Applies the Designer's Approach to Problems of International Trade," *Industrial Design* 3 (August 1956): 68.

figure strides away from the pre-industrial economy toward the place characterized by modern methods of farming and forms of energy and its distribution. In doing so, the figure visually narrates the government's expectation that its citizens actively move in the direction of epic change for the nation. Inside the pamphlet, short essays give the government of the Republic of Vietnam credit, with assistance from the United States, for achieving what the cover depicts.

On the title page of the essay "The Designer as Economic Diplomat" published in *Industrial De-*

sign, a photograph of Wright speaks more directly about U.S. initiatives to provide Vietnam with a "road to the future" (Figure 2). Like the pamphlet cover, it references mobility and aid leading to a change for the better. From the vantage-point of bird's-eye-view perspective, the photograph invites readers to look down on the scene that the caption describes as "Russel Wright, far-flung designer, disembarking on the banks of the Mekong (Vietnam)." In the photograph, Wright stands inside a boat (the second figure from the left, holding a hat in his left hand), waiting to disembark along with a retinue of unidentified design colleagues, U.S. officials, and local dignitaries.

Interestingly, mobility, modernity, and resources for an improved way of life contrast with the immobility and provincialism the *U.S. Army Area Handbook* associated with the refugees. The handbook stated, for example: "The Vietnamese . . . do not readily migrate"; "Their ancestor cult tends to bind them to their birthplaces, and to leave the family land remains for most Vietnamese an extremely serious step." The observation weds the people to their land and family, and renders the choice to leave

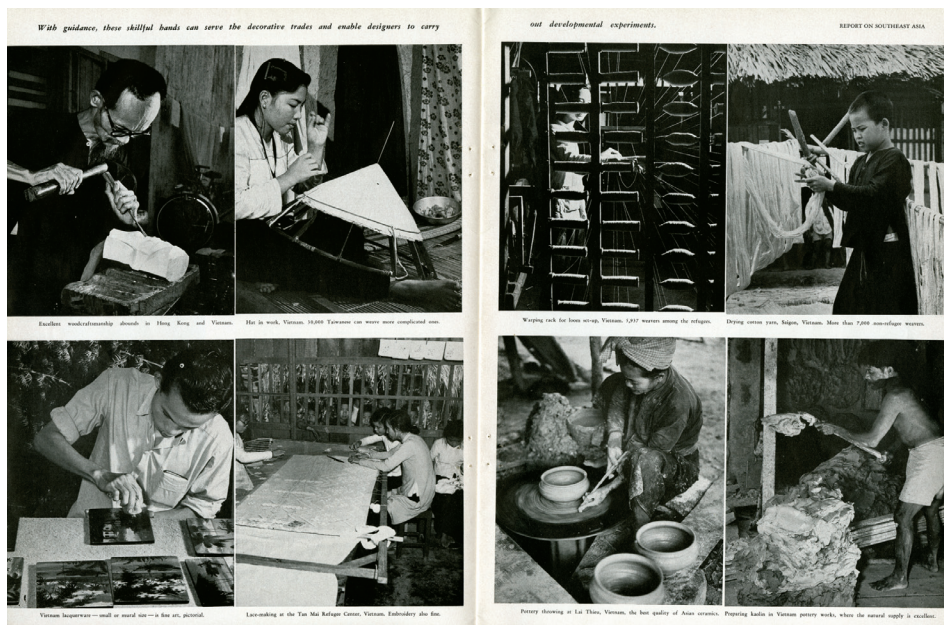
an example of the Vietnamese commitment to what the U.S. conceived as the larger political issues at stake: “That over 900,000 Vietnamese in the Communist-controlled north chose, after the division of the country in 1954, to go as refugees to the South [w]as an indication of the strength of their feelings about conditions under Communists.”²¹

Wright creatively emphasized the refugees’ potential as a workforce, writing: “There are between 500,000 and 800,000 refugees in Vietnam eager to work but with little to do.”²² He sought to help attract the patronage of the

American businesses and middle classes by turning the refugees from a potential political liability into cultural artisans ready to participate in transnational economic and cultural flows. A major contribution to the effort came from black-and-white photographs Wright published in his article in *Interiors*, including some photos by renowned photographer Henri Gilles Huet. Huet was then working for USOM after serving as a combat photographer for the first Indochina War (and before covering what Americans refer to as the Vietnam War). The pictures evoked the homelessness of refugees from Cambodia and northern Vietnam by visually emphasizing their singularity (Figure 3). For example, one individual sits surrounded by baskets with eyes downcast, focusing on his handicraft. The caption explained, “The young basketmaker . . . in the Xom Moi refugees camp, Vietnam, is typical of millions of willing but helpless Southeast Asians, who, cut off from their past, look to the United States for a road to the future.”²³ Equally, the images championed the refugees’ personal industry. Photographs show refugees making hats, lacquerware (baskets), and lace as well as weaving, dying cotton yarn, throwing pottery, and preparing kaolin (Figure 4).



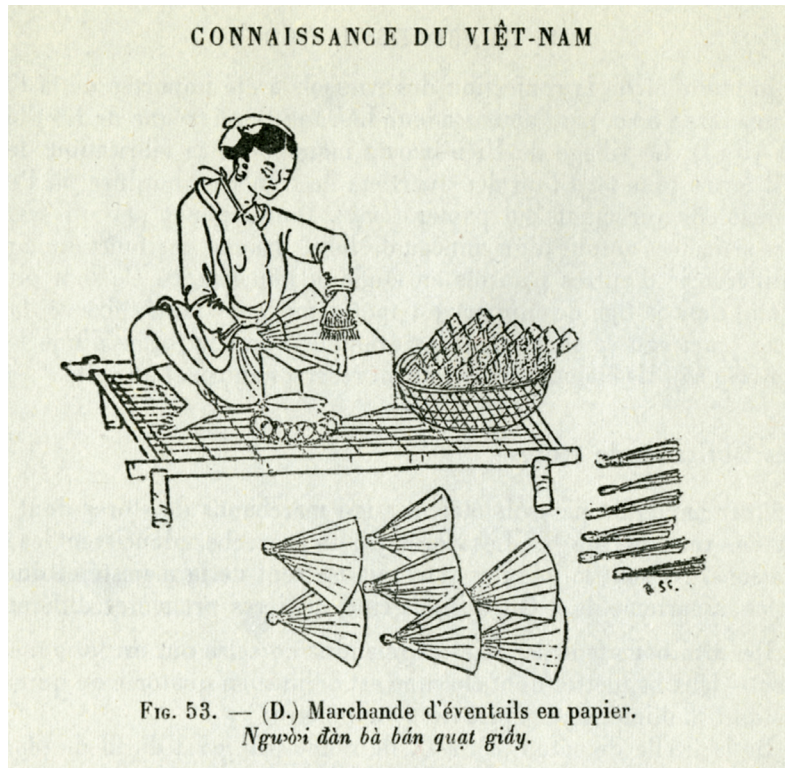
3. Russel Wright, “Gold Mine in Southeast Asia,” *Interiors* 116, no. 1 (August 1956): 94.



4. Russel Wright, "Gold Mine in Southeast Asia," *Interiors* 116, no. 1 (August 1956): 98–99.

A comparison of these images with line illustrations published two years earlier in a French book entitled *Connaissance du Viêt-nam* (Figure 5) helps us to see how the photographs modify as well as affirm existing visual narratives about Vietnamese handicraft. The line illustrations do not individualize artisans or indicate the times and places of their work. Instead, they stage them in a silent tableau suggesting timeless materials, techniques, forms, and makers. In contrast, some aspects of the photographs Wright published seem to render handicraft artisans topical rather than timeless. The glossy pages of *Interiors* magazine, the graphic quality of the black-and-white photographs, and Wright's text referring to the refugees' homelessness loosely associate them with the look and subject matter of American mass print media reporting on current events.

Yet other aspects push the photographs beyond reportage. For example, they emphasize the vulnerability of the subjects with dramatic angles and chiaroscuro (see Figure 3) and promote a visual narrative similar to the illustrations in certain respects. Like the line illustrations, the photographs avoid making direct political references. Nor do they suggest that handicraft production has a changing history. Most interesting is the photographs' omission of visual references to the refugee status of many of the artisans, who lived and worked in camps along with thousands of other migrant people. The title of Wright's article—"Gold Mine in Southeast Asia"—takes this treatment a step further. It refers to the refugees collectively, as a malleable, precious element that the U.S. government, business, and trades could mine and refine. The endeavor would turn the refugees themselves into consumers of American



5.

Gustave Dumoutier, in Pierre Huard and Pierre Durand, *Connaissance du Viêt-nam* (Hanoi: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1954), 155.

culture and inspire Wright to engage with places in Southeast Asia in his own work. Before considering some examples, it is necessary to review how Wright represented Vietnam to the United States and what ideas about American consumers shaped his approach to facilitating handicraft production and distribution abroad.

Opportunities for Importers

An especially revealing element of the 1956 essay is a two-page spread of black-and-white photographs of crafts workers. A caption states, “With guidance, these skillful hands can serve the decorative trades and enable designers to carry out developmental experiments.”²⁴ Wright was saying that under the tutelage of American designers, refugee artisans could make handicrafts for the American decorative arts market. They also would serve as resources for American designers’ “developmental experiments.” *Interiors’* readership was consuming references to refugees that signified both their need for assistance and their labor potential. In addition, these readers may have absorbed the idea that Southeast Asian handicraft artisans themselves amounted to a resource American designers could use to advance their own agendas.

Interestingly, Wright set limits on the extent to which the Asian artisans’ consumption of American culture should affect their work. He told American readers of

Interiors that he wanted handicraft artists to “improve their condition within their actual potentialities, rather than concentrating on an unhappy, piece-meal imitation of us.” In addition, Southeast Asian handicraft production should avoid modern technological production. He urged, “Instead of becoming the helpless victim of industrialization, village crafts, revitalized, could play a minor, perhaps, but active part in a new kind of over-all development.”²⁵ The call for Southeast Asians to preserve pre-modern craft production dovetailed with comments by U.N. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. associating craft with heritage. At the opening of the Southeast Asia Rehabilitation and Trade Development exhibition held in the First International Housewares Show at the New York Coliseum, Lodge commented, “Economic development should not mean disrupting old cultures, uprooting people or throwing away the best heritage of past centuries.”²⁶ It also dovetailed with a post-war American rediscovery of handicraft and concomitant valorization of natural materials and evidence of hand labor as compensation for what the objects of everyday life lost by being made in modern, mass industrialized processes.²⁷ In the draft of an essay Wright wrote in response to a letter Lodge sent to the *New York Times*, he argued that “this need for the old and the handmade grows right along with the new, machine-made products.” But he clarified, “The best way we evolved to have the Asian small producer make things that Americans would want to buy was to have Americans design the products.” Thus, “rather than poor copies of Western goods that have no place in their life,” he said, “native designers must learn the demands of the U.S. consumer” and designers will “train them to our standards of production” so “we can get people who have never seen American life to create things that Americans may buy.”²⁸

Wright’s remarks belie power coursing along transnational pathways. By expressing “a desire to rescue ‘authenticity’ out of destructive historical change,” in anthropological terms, Wright denied subjects in relations of power a complete “contemporaneity and a modern history of their own.”²⁹ In a draft for a lecture about his travel throughout Southeast Asia Wright specified, “[I]n each country I saw that there was a small advanced guard group that were ashamed of this wholesale and vulgar imitation of the west.”³⁰ He asked, “This is what happens in highly industrialized countries such as [*sic*] the U.S.—but in our country, handicraft labor is almost extinct—so how will the increased need for handicraft products be supplied to the industrialized nations?” Rhetorically, Wright responded, “We want handmade products from foreign countries but we want them to have the character and the personality of the particular foreign country from which they come. And so the great population of craftsmen of the Far East can supply a goodly amount of the increasing and eternal need for handicraft products in the western industrialized countries. However, it is necessary that such products be designed for a world of which the Asian craftsman has little knowledge or understanding.”³¹ Wright

demonstrated his power to determine what alterations could be allowed in regard to handicraft even as he brought American ideas, materials, and resources, such as modern design and visual and material culture, to the artisans, for whom it modeled consumer expectations and good design.

Markets and Adaptation

As a result of his first trip to Southeast Asia, Wright concluded that in Vietnam handicraft production was already operating at a level close to readiness for export. He thought this would be feasible with American “assistance . . . by means of design and styling” and a “program of education in design and technical training.”³² The assistance Wright provided included his selection of “some 1,500 articles made by hand in Southeast Asia” for the Southeast Asia Rehabilitation and Trade Development exhibition, not as evidence of art’s history or a living culture but rather, as the *New York Times* reported, “on the basis of their appeal to American merchants and consumers” and “leading department store executives, import-export companies and manufacturers” who will study them.”³³ The following year, Russel Wright Associates contracted to participate in the handicrafts development program in Vietnam, to “increase output, improve quality, extend marketing product variety and reduce costs of village and urban craft industries so as to raise living standards for the large sections of populations who depend on these industries for most of their livelihood and material goods.” Wright would also design castings in the United States and at the Lai Thieu pottery factory in South Vietnam.³⁴

During the late 1950s Wright oversaw the establishment of handicraft centers. In 1958 he supervised Ken Uyemura of Russel Wright Associates and Michiko Uyemura in launching “A Handicraft Development Center [in Saigon that] . . . provided organization and technical assistance and also extended long-term loans to craft enterprises.” It exported types of hats worn by Vietnamese women along with hall and floor coverings, window blinds, table mats, basketry, and lacquerware. The center also organized traveling exhibitions of lacquerware and reproductions of Khmer sculpture and ceramics.³⁵ Wright received permission to go to temples in Cambodia “to reproduce metal castings of sculpture to export”; he explained, “In our homes the ancient motifs can create a new dimension for walls.” The reproductions had cultural value as simulations of works of art, commercial value as things created for sale, and pedagogic value, as did the “more than 200 demonstration items designed by the Uyemuras that were sold there to the Vietnamese and the large American colony and the tourists that came through Saigon.”³⁶ USOM praised the handicraft program in Vietnam overall for “greatly expand[ing] both the domestic and foreign handicraft market.”³⁷ Beginning in 1959, the Handicrafts Sales Center

in Saigon directly sold the work of artisans and small industrialists. The *Area Handbook for Vietnam* credited the center's "financial and technical assistance to craftsmen" and its store with achieving "an expanded domestic market for handicraft products" and for its progress in creating "a foreign market which shows promise of becoming increasingly important."³⁸

Throughout these initiatives, Wright consistently warned handicraft artisans not to produce "an unhappy, piece-meal imitation of Americans," while at the same time encouraging them to adapt to American tastes, adopting a bit of a topsy-turvy strategy.³⁹ In early 1956, when Wright returned to the United States from his first trip to Southeast Asia, he "started right in adapting Asian handicraft products to twentieth-century American usage." He believed that producing handicraft for American markets necessitated establishing chains of production and consumption linking the United States and Vietnam, with handicraft ranking as a key link. "We do not simply make designs expecting the producers to produce them somehow, and then sell them somehow. The essence of our method is—the joining of a specific market to a specific production."⁴⁰

Rita Reif of the *New York Times* reported that this was how it worked: "Once a product is successful here [in the United States]," Mr. Wright acquaints the producers and craftsmen abroad on how it is used in American homes. . . . Mr. Wright films interiors of homes, shows the well-stocked shelves of department stores and small shops and educates artisans abroad on how their work has meaning in our homes," she reported.⁴¹ Among other methods used "to bring out in the students a strong sense of Vietnamese design and thus establish a design style which could be identified as Vietnamese in character" was the relay to Southeast Asian craftsmen of information relating to modern design, as evidenced by slides of "The Logic and Magic of Color: An exhibition celebrating the centennial anniversary of the Cooper Union," 1960. To Vietnam Wright also brought material on American culture, world culture, and design, for example, prototypes for costume jewelry, a "Survey of Oriental influence in the current U.S. Home Furnishing Market," films about Frank Lloyd Wright's studio, Taliesin, and the arts of India and Japan, and slides and the catalogue of the Museum of Contemporary Crafts' exhibition, "Designer-Craftsmen USA 1960," which featured the theme of objects "designed and handcrafted for use."⁴²

The archives suggest that Wright facilitated the consumption of American culture in Southeast Asia as part of the process of handicraft production there for distribution and consumption in the United States. Ostensibly, from studying examples of good design and American culture and lifeways, artisans would learn how to make items pleasing to Americans yet still identifiable to them as Vietnamese. With regard to silkscreen training, Wright explained that "throughout the course

of study and practice, effort was made to bring out in the students a strong sense of Vietnamese design and thus establish a design style which could be identified as Vietnamese in character.” The efforts proved successful insofar as they “awakened in the Vietnamese people themselves real awareness of Vietnamese handicrafts which they had not known of or had taken for granted.”⁴³

At the same time, Wright was working with DuPont market research to create an upholstery line called “Cambodia, A Fabrilite Upholstery that Breathes for Greater Comfort,” “executed both in light pastels and rich, deep-toned colors, given the exotic, deeply sculptured texture of handcrafted oriental fabric”—in Mekong Tan, Malacca Yellow, Salavan Chartreuse, Bandai Green, Kanchow Coral, Tonkin Turquoise, Saigon Tan, Malaya Green, Nanking Red, Rupert Pink, Tahan Brown, Amoy Pepperwhite, and Kangar Ivory.⁴⁴ The names of the upholstery colors transpose the geography of China, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Burma into a palette for decorating the American middle-class home.

As part of this elaborate feedback loop of production and consumption, Wright helped to build an American market for Southeast Asian handicrafts with displays at trade fairs at the New York Coliseum in 1956 and 1958. In 1958 Russel Wright Associates also launched an exhibition of Vietnamese handicrafts and art at W. & J. Sloane in New York City that traveled to 11 major American department stores.⁴⁵

Wright’s displays in all of these venues promoted the allure of items based not on current political and economic relations but on their association with far off places of mystery and exoticism. The displays recycled photographs taken during Wright’s first trip to Southeast Asia, but they lacked contextualization. For American viewers, the displays referenced a kind of cosmopolitanism, a way of knowing the world that comes from traveling widely or being exposed to cultures of many places. The tone echoed what the Washington embassy for the Republic of Vietnam was promoting in those pre-war years: “Viet-nam as a tourist center” that is “likely to appeal to the tourist who seeks relaxation and quiet comfort in an exotic atmosphere” and to “the admirer of the arts [who] will find Viet-Nam’s historical treasures an unending source of interest.”⁴⁶ Wright noted that the lacquerware paintings on wall panels and decorative screens “while highly regarded by collectors in the Orient and in Paris, have never been seen in the U.S. Typically oriental in their rich, highly decorated style, their craftsmanship is extraordinary.” The items forged a pathway for the transnational consumption of Vietnamese handicraft as part of an American practice of using cultural worldliness as a sign of status. How worldly? *The New York Herald Tribune* explained, “Objects on view are typical of ancient crafts excelled in by the natives. In some cases the natives have been encouraged to adapt proportions and design changes suited to our needs.”⁴⁷

Notes

1. Russel Wright, "Gold Mine in Southeast Asia," *Interiors* 116 (August 1956): 94–101, quotes at 100.
2. "Amendment No. 5 to Agreement between the United States of America International Cooperation Administration and Russel Wright doing business as Russel Wright Associates" (July 11, 1957), 1; box 46, Russel Wright Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library (hereafter Wright Papers).
3. "Survey and Recommendations for Advancing the Economic Welfare of Workers in Small Production Shops and Cottage Industries of Taiwan, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Hong Kong (December 20, 1956)," box 44, Wright Papers. Wright, "Gold Mine in Southeast Asia," 94–101.
4. "Final Report on Services and Accomplishment by Russel Wright Associates to the Republic of Vietnam under contract with International Cooperation Administration" (May 1961), 2–3; box 45, Wright Papers.
5. "Design as a Political Force, Part 2," *Industrial Design* 4, no. 4 (April 1957): 44–60. See also Conrad Brown, "ICA's Technical Assistance of U.S. Industrial Designers and U.S. Craftsmen Promise Some Exciting Results in Their Efforts to Aid the Asiatic Craftsman," *Craft Horizons* 18, no. 4 (July/August 1958): 29–37.
6. John F. Kennedy, "America's Stake in Vietnam: Cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia," *Vital Speeches of the Day* 22 (1 August 1956): 617–18.
7. George L. Harris et al., *Area Handbook for Vietnam/US Army* (Washington, DC: American University, Foreign Areas Studies Division, September 1962; reprint, October 1964), 108.
8. Robert Haddow, *Pavilions of Plenty: Exhibiting American Culture Abroad in the 1950s* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997).
9. Kathryn C. Statler, *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007). See also Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919–1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and James M. Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954–1968* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
10. For the first and last quotes, see Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies—Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (March 2005): 33, doi:10.1353/aq.2005.0004. "The place of the Asian" quote is from Gordon H. Chang, "Emerging from the Shadows: The Visual Arts and Asian American Art History," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 1, no. 1 (17 February 2009): xii.
11. Ruth Mack, "Trends in American Consumption and The Aspiration to Consume," *American Economic Review* 46 (May 1956): 67.
12. The report issued by the U.N. Economic and Social Council outlined the results of a survey sponsored by the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE), which sent a handicraft marketing specialist to 10 nations. See ECAFE, "Handicrafts Marketing Survey" (U.N. Economic and Social Council, 15 February 1951), 39, box 43, Wright Papers, 65, 69, 73.
13. *USOM Vietnam operational report* no. 7 (Saigon: Republic of Vietnam, 1961), 71; box 45, Wright Papers.
14. Walter S. Robertson, "Progress in Free Viet-Nam," *Department of State Bulletin* 34 (11 June 1956): 973.
15. "Design as a Political Force," 45–46.
16. Brown, "ICA's Technical Assistance," 29.
17. Russel Wright, "Gold Mine in Southeast Asia," 96.
18. "U.S. Gives Viet-Nam \$37 Million for Refugee Resettlement," *Department of State Bulletin* (6 February 1956): 208.
19. "Far East Article," box 43, Wright Papers.
20. Wright, "Gold Mine in Southeast Asia," 95.
21. Harris et al., *Area Handbook for Vietnam/US Army*, 49.

22. Wright, "Gold Mine in Southeast Asia," 100.
23. See Horst Faas and Tim Page, eds., *Requiem: By the Photographer who Died in Vietnam and Indonesia* (New York: Random House, 1997). Wright, "Gold Mine in Southeast Asia," 95.
24. Wright, "Gold Mine in Southeast Asia," 99, 98.
25. *Ibid.*, 96.
26. For the Lodge quote, see "Caution is Urged in U.N. Aid Role," *New York Times*, 26 June 1956.
27. George William Eggers, "Handcraft, The Lore of Substances," *Craft Horizons* 14, no. 6 (November-December 1954): 11.
28. "A Bamboo Bridge: Aid Where it is Needed Most" (typewritten manuscript labeled as a draft, 1961), 7; Box 38, Wright Papers.
29. James Clifford, "Of Other Peoples: Beyond the 'Salvage' Paradigm," in *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, no. 1, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1987). Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Objects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 97.
30. "Far East Drafts," ca 1957, 2; box 38, Wright Papers.
31. "Market for Asian Handicrafts in the US" (January 1960 slide lecture), 8, 12; box 38, Wright Papers.
32. "Recommendations for Development of Handicrafts Products in Vietnam," *Survey and Recommendations for Advancing the Economic Welfare of Workers*, 142.
33. "Caution is Urged in U.N. Aid Role," *New York Times*, 26 June 1956; box 43, Wright Papers.
34. "Contract with USA Foreign Operations Administration" (30 June 1955), 2; box 46, Wright Papers.
35. Design Derby, Miami (1958), 5; box 38, Wright Papers.
36. Harriet Morrison, "Designs from S.E. Asia Coming Here," *New York Herald Tribune*, 2 April 1958, 2:2; box 45, Wright Papers.
37. *USOM Vietnam operational report* no. 7 (Saigon: Republic of Vietnam, 1961), 71.
38. Harris et al., *Area Handbook for Vietnam/US Army*, 392.
39. Wright, "Gold Mine in Southeast Asia," 96. "Market for Asian Handicrafts in the US," 12.
40. "Movie Narrative for Vietnam," *Survey and Recommendations for Advancing the Economic Welfare of Workers*, 173. Design Derby, Miami (1958), 3.
41. Rita Reif, "Art Works from Orient Seek American Market," *New York Times*, 29 August 1960, 19.
42. *Final Report on Services and Accomplishment by RWA to the Republic of Vietnam under Contract with ICA* (May 1961), 5, 9, 7, 8. Box 45, Wright Papers.
43. *Ibid.*, 5, 10.
44. DuPont (1956–57); box 7, Wright Papers.
45. "New Business with Vietnam," memo paper from RWA; box 38, Wright Papers. The schedule for the Vietnamese handicrafts and art object show traveling September 1958 to June 1959 included stops at W. & J. Sloane, New York; Hudson's, Detroit; Jordan-Marsh, Boston; Wanamaker's, Philadelphia; Woodward & Lothrop, Washington, DC; Rich's, Atlanta; Pogue's, Cincinnati; Scruggs, St. Louis; Foley's, Houston; W. & J. Sloane, Beverly Hills; W. & J. Sloane, San Francisco; and Frederick & Nelson, Seattle.
46. *Exhibition of Art and Handcraft of Viet Nam*, Russel Wright Associates, New York; box 43, Wright Papers. *Viet-Nam* (ca. 1959), 20. On correlations between cosmopolitanism and exoticism, see Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen, *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context and Practice* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2002): 1–22, esp. 7.
47. *Exhibition of Art and Handcraft of Viet Nam*, 1–2; box 43, Wright Papers. Harriet Morrison, "Art Objects of Vietnam," *New York Herald Tribune*, 17 September 1958, 2:2; box 45, Wright Papers.