This lifelike spray of daisies made by Pearl Le is an example of the Vietnamese craft of silk flower making.

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highlands of Laos, who have brought with them the ancient traditions of embroidery, appliqué, batik, and silversmithing.

The Hmong are mentioned in Chinese texts dating back almost 2000 years. They are famous for their organization, independence, and initiative, and for their folk art. The Hmong lived in mountainous areas, usually at elevations of over 3000 feet. The various subgroups of the Hmong, such as the green, the white, and the black are differentiated by costume. The women make kilt-like skirts of many small pleats. The material itself is an intricate combination of bright colors—reds, greens, black, and white—with an underlying level of subtle batik. The batik is made by growing cotton or hemp and weaving it into cloth. Wax, gathered from wild bee hives, is applied in an intricate pattern. The cloth is then dipped into a vat of natural indigo dye. (Indigo is a plant that grows in Asia and Africa whose stems are fermented in a crock and made into the deep blue dye.) Where wax has been applied to the fabric, the dye does not take, and a subtle pattern emerges when the wax is removed.

The Hmong are also famous for their appliqué and reverse appliqué work. Small pieces of fabric are sewn on top of each other, and some are cut and folded back to reveal layers of another color underneath. For example, the cloth is cut in a spiral shape and folded back to produce a narrow even spiral shape in a contrasting color. Hmong women make cloth carriers for their infants consisting of rows of appliqué with batik underneath and red cloth cross-hatching over the batik. They also do skillful embroidery with silk thread, which because of the closeness and precision of the stitching, often looks like beaded work. The beauty of the Hmong costume was also important during the New Year’s festivities when boys and girls tossed a cloth ball back and forth. The person missing the ball would have to give the person who threw it an embroidered belt or silver necklace. Later they would meet to return the items; this was part of their courtship. The Hmong may not wear their costumes everyday, but they continue to produce appliqué and embroideries using American fabrics and sometimes American color schemes and stitches. While many of the older women know how to make batiks, it quite difficult to get natural indigo in the United States.

It is not only the lack of materials, however, that challenges the persistence of traditional crafts, but also the available time. A large and complex Hmong textile may take two years to complete. The new immigrants do not have two years to devote to these tasks. It is similar with the arts of Cambodia. In
Cambodia weaving was done on a large rectangular loom; a scarf thus woven might take one month. The traditional garment for men and women, the sampot might take two months. Vegetable dyes, available only in certain months are mixed for each garment, making each one unique. The most complicated design, using pre-dyed multicolored thread takes three months. Along both of these dimensions—availability of materials and time-frame—the folk arts of Southeast Asia will be changed by the pressures of living in the United States.

For the new arrivals to the United States who left their homes so abruptly, the appliquéd baby carrier, the sarong woven of silk and silver threads, and the reed organ are all treasured mementos of the past and models for production and innovation of folk artistic forms. The new forms will be adapted to the American environment—some things will have to change. A Hmong man looks at his sturdy twelve-inch bamboo flute and laughing remarks that the bamboo in the United States is very skinny, and he continues to play on his old flute.
5 A close-up of the cross stitch that decorates the tightly pleated skirt of the Hmong costume.

6 Hmong textile work includes batik, embroidery, appliqué and reverse appliqué (see the covers for examples of the latter two.) This type of fine batik work would have been done with bees wax and natural indigo dye in the home village.

7 Detail of the belt that shows the tiny, even stitches characteristic of Hmong needlework.

8 A young Hmong watches as an older woman works on the small appliqué and embroidery squares that form the long belt of the costume.

9 This pa ndao uses chain stitch to form the popular "snail" motif and satin stitch on the flowers.

10 Detail of chain stitch on pa ndao

11 Another part of the Hmong costume is an elaborate silver necklace like the one pictured here. In this country Hmong craftsmen have turned to aluminum as a less expensive material.

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