

Folk Arts of Southeast Asia: Persistence and Change

By Maxine Miska

Photo by Nicholas Bocher for the Smithsonian



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

Arts and crafts are the expression of the community that creates them, but they also belong to the land that produces the materials used in their manufacture and according to whose seasons the calendrical festivals are set. The folk arts of a people embellish the festivals and ceremonies of their lives and are produced in accord with the cycles of the community—the availability of raw materials and time of the craftspeople. While ceremonies and costumes are to some extent portable, one of the tasks of the new immigrants from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia is to seek ways of preserving and adapting their crafts to the United States, which has its own holidays, work pace, and raw materials.

The nations of the Southeast Asian mainland have been built on many cultures. Just as the countries of Western Europe incorporated the civilizations of Rome and Byzantium into their cultures, so were the Southeast Asian countries influenced by China and India. Their distinctive cultures were formed by selective adaptation and innovation. Hindu and Buddhist ideas were incorporated with the original belief systems of spirit worship, and animism. Styles of sculpture, architecture, dance, and drama were adapted and given a distinctive stamp. But this process of accumulation in one's own land is quite different from transplanting one's arts to a new land with its own landscape, festivals, and raw materials. In various ways the new immigrants have made these folk arts part of their lives in the United States and a link with their former lives in Asia.

The Vietnamese maintained their own cultural identity under 1000 years of Chinese domination. They fought the Mongols and resisted the French. Now in the United States they are engaged in a different struggle—to preserve their Vietnamese tradition through art and poetry. Vietnamese homes are decorated with rice paper and ink paintings, delicate silk paintings, lacquer paintings, glass-encased scenes of plum blossoms, birds, and trees made of cut pieces of wood, or pastel paintings of young women crossing the fields, their long silk dresses (*ao dai*), blowing in the wind. The images evoke life in Vietnam—wide, slow rivers, tall bamboo forests, houses with boats moored beside them.

The function of some of these arts has changed. For example, in Vietnam silk flowers mimicked nature, fooling the eye with their skill, but now these same flowers preserve images that can otherwise be held only in memory.

Vietnam has a very ancient poetry tradition. Poetry and song are closely related, and many people can recite from memory parts of the old poems. The poets still get together as they did in Vietnam, but with the added mission now of bringing their fellows the images, sounds, and smells of Vietnam, which they might not otherwise remember. The following verse from the 1000-year-old tradition of oral poetry (*ca dao*), exemplifies this:

*Sad, idle, I think of my dead mother,
her mouth chewing white rice, tongue removing fish bones
The Red Cloth drapes the mirror frame:
men of one country must show love for each other.*

Another Southeast Asian group, the Hmong, have continued and adapted their textile arts to life in the United States. In Philadelphia and other cities with a Hmong population, there are women dressed in skirts of many-colored pieces stitched together like a quilt, with long embroidered sashes, silver necklaces, and turbans or caps. These are the Hmong people from the

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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.

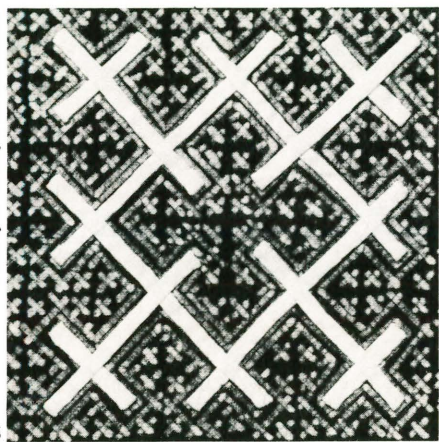
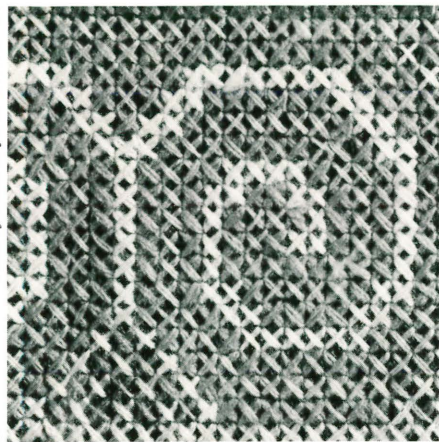
It is not only the lack of materials, however, that challenges the persistence of traditional crafts, but also the available time. A large and complex Hmong textile may take two years to complete. The new immigrants do not have two years to devote to these tasks. It is similar with the arts of Cambodia. In



2 Sing Soulamani works on a loom constructed by her husband. In Laos she wove silk but here she has substituted cotton thread.

3 Like many other Cambodian stone carvers, Doul Phuoc's designs are derived from carvings at Angkor Wat and adapted to practical objects.

4 Hmong women wear their distinctive traditional costume at a gathering in Philadelphia.



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 laughingly remarks that the bamboo in the United States is very skinny, and he continues to play on his old flute.





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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.

Suggested reading:

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