

Hmong Textiles and Cultural Conservation

by Marsha MacDowell

Our cultures are so different. . . . It is difficult since we are not Americans. We were not born here, we have migrated here. There is no good way for us [elders] to look to the future . . . the only way is through the young. It is the hope of all the heads of the families that the youngest sons and daughters will learn so that they will help us.

— Neng Vang, Hmong refugee, Lansing, Michigan

The Hmong, a tribal people from highland Laos, are recent immigrants to the United States. During the Vietnam War, many Hmong villagers were recruited by the United States to fight against the communist forces in Laos. When the United States forces withdrew from Vietnam and Laos, the Hmong became the target of violent reprisals by the Lao government, and thousands of Hmong were forced to flee across the Mekong River to seek refuge in Thailand. Now almost 50,000 Hmong live in semi-permanent Thai refugee camps, where they await church, civic, or family sponsorship for resettlement in France, the United States, or other countries.

Like the many immigrants and refugees who settled this country before them, the Hmong brought with them a distinctive and highly developed traditional culture, including an elaborate textile tradition called *paj ntaub*, or “flower cloth,” comprised of embroidery, appliqué, and batik work. For centuries the Hmong have been closely identified with a strong textile tradition. According to one ethnographic study, the Hmong at one time referred to themselves as *M’peo*, or “embroidery people.” This association with a needlework tradition persists today. Because the skill, patience, and diligence required in making textiles has been transportable, it has made it easier for the Hmong to continue their textile production in the face of cultural disruption and displacement. The form and meaning of Hmong handicrafts have changed, however, because of the pressures exerted on traditional Hmong ways of life by the totally new and different American social and economic context.

In Laos, the Hmong were subsistence farmers — an independent, economically self-sufficient tribal people. The production and use of textile arts was an integral part of everyday and ceremonial life. The creation of *paj ntaub* was associated with the ceremonial cycles of the village and with rites of passage, such as birth, marriage, and death. Hmong babies were carried in intricately decorated backpacks; their first toys were small mobiles made of *paj ntaub* and beads. Decorated pieces of clothing were exchanged as forfeits during the new year’s courting games. A woman sewed special squares of *paj ntaub* for her parents to be buried with them. In their highland villages, *paj ntaub* was also a major expression of a woman’s initiative, hard work, and creativity. In preparation for a special holi-

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Pang Xiong Sirirathasuk teaches young Hmong apprentices the techniques of applique and embroidery during the 1985 Philadelphia *Paj Ntaub* Apprenticeship Program. Photo by Chakarin Sirirathasuk, courtesy Hmong Community Folklife and Documentation Project

day, a young girl might spend a whole year creating an elaborate piece of *paj ntaub* for her costume, an effort which would command great respect, recognition, and praise.

However, as the Hmong experienced cultural displacement, the conditions for making and using traditional *paj ntaub* also went through changes. In the Thai refugee camps the Hmong were divorced from their traditional occupations as subsistence farmers. Upon arriving in the United States they became immersed in a post-industrial, high-technology society where they lacked the language and technical skills necessary to find a job. In an effort to promote alternative means for supporting their families in these new contexts, the Hmong have been encouraged to make use of their traditional textile skills — first by missionaries and refugee camp workers in Thailand, later by sponsors and social workers. Under the direction of CAMA (Christian and Missionary Alliance) and other groups, Hmong have been supplied with materials and given suggestions for producing and marketing such non-traditional Hmong articles as aprons, wall-hangings, pillow covers, and bookmarks. Still, such items relied heavily on the traditional geometric and abstract Hmong motifs and patterns.

The differences in items made for Hmong people and those for non-Hmong are considerable. The most notable changes have been: the use of colors, such as blues and beiges, to match those popularly used in American home interiors; the enlargement of stitches and patterns to reduce production time; and the use of new designs, such as quilt patterns and floral motifs more familiar to a Western audience. Although many of these changes have been prompted by outsiders, Hmong women themselves have been consciously changing their textiles to attract new buying audiences.

As refugee camp workers sought new products to market they began to encourage the Hmong to use their needlework skills to represent scenes from traditional Hmong culture as well as from their recent experiences. Templates were drawn up and sample pictorial cloths or textiles were produced so that the images and words could be easily copied. Thus an almost formulaic format to these textiles emerged, one which can be grouped into several styles according to their pictorial content. Portraying a narrative text or a sequence of activities, they depict Hmong folk tales, scenes of traditional activities remembered from their Laotian homeland, recollections of the war and the exodus to the Thai camps, and descriptions of the events associated with their immigration to the United States.

At first, this type of textile was sold primarily to non-Hmong, who were either especially interested in southeast Asian culture or who had had direct experience with the Hmong. Now, however, Hmong have begun to display these pieces in their own homes and cultural centers, as visual props which help explain their history and traditions. The textiles clearly demonstrate a mastery of community knowledge and technical skills — both achieved through a lifetime of practice. They summarize a knowledge of activities, objects and events with which only Hmong of a certain age group have had experience. In several instances it has been observed that the pictorial embroideries, like family photograph albums, serve as memory aids in helping some Hmong to reconstruct their past.



A Hmong girl wears her traditional White Hmong ceremonial clothing for the New Year's festivities in Hunting Park, North Philadelphia, 1985. Photo by Chakarin Sirirathasuk, courtesy Hmong Community Folklife and Documentation Project

Suggested readings

Campbell, Margaret, Nakorn Pongnoi and Chesak Voraphitak. *From the Hands of the Hills*. Hong Kong: Media Transasia, 1978.

Dewhurst, C. Kurt and Marsha MacDowell, eds. *Michigan Hmong Arts*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Museum, 1984.

Downing, Bruce and Douglas Olney, eds. *The Hmong in the West*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1982.

Hmong Art: Tradition and Change. Sheboygan, Wisconsin: John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 1986.

Johnson, Charles, ed. *Myth, Legends and Folk Tales from the Hmong of Laos*. St. Paul: Macalester College, 1985.

Suggested films

Great Branches, New Roots, by Rita LaDox, Kathleen Laughlin and Nancy Haley. 42 min. color sound. Hmong Film Project, St. Paul, Minnesota, 1983.

Miao Year, by William Geddes. 16mm, 90 min. University of California, Extension Media Center, Berkeley, California, 1976.

Contact with western refugee workers prompted the initial production of these pictorial textiles and has since influenced all aspects of production and marketing. But, true to their reputation as adaptable people, the Hmong have begun to use this traditional medium to conserve their own cultural knowledge, while producing income and providing information to outsiders. By marketing and exhibiting these pictorial and narrative textiles, non-literate Hmong artists have been able to express vital individual and community knowledge and provide a visual record for future generations of Hmong. The validity of content within these narrative textiles and the long-range implications of their use in preserving Hmong cultural knowledge are only now beginning to be recognized and studied.

As Hmong elders and younger Hmong work hard together to record and preserve their past, they will succeed in finding alternative ways to maintain their cultural traditions. Perhaps it is true that, for Hmong elders such as Neng Vang, the hope of the future is in the hands of the young, but it is evident that young and old alike are struggling with the responsibility of preserving their cultural heritage.