

1994

## *Paj Ntaub*: Textile Techniques of the Hmong

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Smith, Joyce, "*Paj Ntaub*: Textile Techniques of the Hmong" (1994). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 1050.  
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## **PAJ NTAUB: TEXTILE TECHNIQUES OF THE HMONG (A 40 minute video)**

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### **NARRATION OF THE VIDEO**

#### **Who Are the Hmong?**

Until the 1970's few in the United States had heard of the Hmong or seen their textile arts. In 1975, as political refugees from Southeast Asia, 300 Hmong arrived in America. Today that number has grown to nearly 100,000.

While the origins of the Hmong are not clear, it is possible that they existed as early as 10,000 BC in China. The Hmong are bob-Chinese who for centuries have settled in the mountains of southern China. From the 18th to the 20th century some groups of Hmong migrated south out of China into the highlands of Vietnam, Thailand, Laos and the Union of Myanmar.

The basis of the existence for these mountain people was and is freedom and independence. The word "Hmong" means freedom in their language and indicates that the Hmong identity is bound up with this concept of freedom, especially from outside domination.

The Hmong who now live in America came from the highlands of Laos. There they practiced slash-and-burn farming, spoke their own language rather than Lao and followed ancient traditions of agriculture, crafts and religion. Their religion, called Animism, recognizes animate forces in nature.

The Hmong, although widely dispersed geographically, have kept their own language alive in spite of centuries of change and migration. Until the 1950's they had no known writing system. Legends claim that in ancient times the Hmong had a written language which has been lost. Some believe that the batik patterns used in Hmong textiles are the remains of the lost alphabet.

The Hmong are divided into two major groups, the white Hmong and the Blue Hmong. The white Hmong wear a very finely pleated white skirt as part of their dress. The Blue Hmong also wear a very finely pleated skirt which is partly decorated with batik using indigo dye. These Blue Hmong skirts also include decoration made with cross-stitch and reverse applique. Members of both groups live in Providence, Rhode Island.

In the guerilla warfare against the communists in Northern Laos during the 1960's and 1970's a large number of Hmong men were used as foot soldiers by the United States Central Intelligence Agency. Their help was extremely valuable because they knew so well the densely forested highlands.

However once victorious the communist government took revenge on the Hmong - gassing the people and burning their villages. To avoid genocide they fled their mountain homes. Hmong casualties were 100 times greater than the United States casualties. Many Hmong did escape over the Mekong River into Thailand where they lived in refugee camps.

### What is *Paj Ntaub*?

*Paj Ntaub* is the Hmong word to describe all of the techniques used by Hmong women to decorate cloth for clothing. "*Paj*" means flower and "*Ntaub*" means cloth. The techniques Hmong women practise are: embroidery, batik, reverse applique, and "story cloth stitchery", a type of embroidery which has developed in the refugee camps after the war in Southeast Asia.

In Laos all young Hmong women learned these techniques of "*Paj Ntaub*". At the age of 5 or 6 a Hmong girl learned from her Mother or other relatives. It took many years of practise to create clothing which used the "*Paj Ntuab*" techniques of embroidery, batik and reverse applique.

Hmong women in Laos used to produce their own cloth as well as decorate it. First the women grew hemp which was called "*Maj*". The hemp was picked and spun into fibers which were first bleached and then woven into cloth on a special loom. The Blue Hmong dyed the cloth with indigo and the white Hmong left the cloth natural.

In Laos Hmong women wore every day what we now call the traditional clothing. The women made special clothing for the New Year's celebration. These special clothes were also worn at weddings, funerals, naming ceremonies and healing rituals.

During the 30 years that the Hmong have lived away from their homes in Laos they have gone through many abrupt changes. "*Paj Ntaub*" has undergone changes too. The women use the same designs and patterns which have been passed down from generation to generation. However in America the Hmong must take classes in English and work in factories so they no longer have time to make the cloth itself. Here it is quicker to buy cloth. Some Hmong women prefer to buy synthetic cloth because of its shiny surface. This cloth reminds them of earlier times in their homeland when they spent many hours polishing and waxing the hemp cloth to create clothing which sparkled.

War and life in the refugee camps did not prevent Hmong women from making "*Paj Ntaub*". At this time a new Hmong textile form which is called "Story Cloth" developed. These are squares of cloth decorated by hand stitchery which depict Hmong legends and history as well as war memories. The "Story Clothes" record the lost traditional past as well as recent history. The "Story Clothes" change the Hmong oral traditions into visual narratives.

Even though many Hmong women now dress like Americans the unmarried women still wear the traditional clothing at the New Years celebration.

Using traditional Hmong patterns many women have made things of use in the American home - wall hangings, table clothes and bed spreads. The Hmong needlework has also been adapted to American fashions, embellishing coats, shirts, jackets, scarves, vests and aprons. The embroidery designs which once symbolized traditional Hmong beliefs even appear today as decoration on Christian liturgical vestments.

The Hmong make "*Paj Ntaub*" for New Years but they also make things to sell to Americans and to give as gifts to American friends and to family members.

### **Why Providence?**

In 1976 the first Hmong family to arrive in Providence, Rhode Island was the Vangs. In the next few years eight clan leaders settled in Providence and sent word to family members in the refugee camps in Thailand to come to Providence. Some of the clan names of Hmong who have settled in Providence are: Chang, Kue, Khang, Lor, Moua, Thao, Vang, Vue Yang and Xioung.

In spite of the many abrupt and extreme changes in their lives the Hmong are maintaining many of their traditional ways while integrating with life in America. In Providence the Hmong-Lao Unity Association helps this happen. Every two years the Hmong community elects a president who takes charge of organizing the yearly events, such as the New Year's celebration. The president also makes decisions on problems within the Hmong community and assists new arrivals from the refugee camps in Thailand. The President works with 11 board members and 6 members of the legal advisory council.

### **Zoua V. Lor**

Zoua V. Lor, a white Hmong, arrived in Providence with her husband, Cher Pao Lor and son, Xa Thao, in 1987. She was born in Zos Quar Tshis, a village in the mountains of Laos. This village where the Lors lived was destroyed by the Viet Cong in 1975 and Zoua and her family fled. For five years they survived in the jungle. Some times they constructed temporary shelters of banana leaves and ate tree bark. Finally they crossed the Mekong River into Thailand and remained for seven years in the lowland refugee camp, Ban Vinai. Some of Zoua Lor's relatives were already living in Ban Vinai. Her sister-in-law, Bang Yang, was the first one that she remembers making story cloths.

Bang Yang asked a Hmong man in the camp, Geu Yang, if he could make drawings on cloth of animals, plants and flowers from their mountain homeland in Laos. She wanted to remember these images and she filled in the drawn forms with colored stitchery.

The Hmong had no written language to document their past. These "Story Clothes" took the place of photographs and books. In Hmong this new stitchery was called "*Paj Ntaub Chia*" when animals and plants were drawn and "*Paj Ntaub Daning*" when stories and legends were depicted.

Most Hmong villages of the Laotian mountains had no schools. Occasionally a family could afford to send a child to boarding school in the city of Xieng Khouang or the capitol city of Vientiane. Girls were not sent to the school; only the boys. Zoua thinks that this might be where Geu Yang learned to draw.

Before she left Ban Vinai for America, Zoua asked Geu Yang to make drawings on many cloths so she could continue her "Story Cloth" stitchery here. Zoua also brought to the United States many colored threads.

Zoua works quickly using a running stitch to outline and a satin stitch to fill in the drawn images. When the thread runs short she pulls the needle to the back and stitches over several stitches and cuts the thread. Using her imagination, Zoua picks the next colored thread and continues making stitches very neatly and close together.

Both Zoua and her husband, Cher Pao Lor, need to work to survive in America. She does not have time to go to school to learn English. Zoua has worked in a factory and also as a house cleaner.

As often as she can Zoua works on her stitchery but does not have the time for it that she had in Laos or in the refugee camp. She continues to do stitchery on the original drawings made for her by Geu Yang at Camp Ban Vinai. She feels that it is very important to use her spare time to work on different types of "*Paj Ntaub*".

Zoua Lor is working on a piece of cross-stitch embroidery. These decorated strips will be used as cuffs and decorations on the edge of the jacket of the female dress for New Year's. Cross-stitch is the first type of embroidery a Hmong girl learns. Zoua remembers learning cross-stitch from her older sister when she was eight years old. Now she teaches other young women in America. Her eight-year-old niece, Kia, has just arrived from camp Ban Vinai. She has already learned cross stitch and is now working on a "Story Cloth".

Hmong women do cross-stitch in two different ways. Both methods look the same on the front but different on the back. The first method, "*Lang Pluas*" is being demonstrated by Zoua with a blue thread. In this method the first arm of the cross is completed for several inches and then the second arm is added in a return direction.

The second method of doing cross-stitch is called, "*Lang Keej*", and is being done here with red thread. In this method the first and second arms of the cross-stitch are made consecutively. In both methods the direction of the top arm of the cross is always the same direction throughout the piece of stitchery.

Zoua begins the cross-stitch project by cutting a piece of white, balanced weave cloth the size of the dress pocket. She then picks a green color to use for the beginning. She ends by stitching over other stitches in the back. Here Zoua makes the same design in pink cross-stitch and then repeats the green shape again. As Zoua continues sewing the pink and green patterned cross-stitch project, she uses the "*Lang Keej*" method.

After filling in all of the green and pink shapes with cross-stitch Zoua completes the piece by adding decorative triangles, using a satin stitch. The final step is to finish the edges with applique and tiny beads. The piece will then be added to the woman's jacket.

Zoua also decorates cloth using a very fine chain stitch. The chain stitch is particularly well done by the White Hmong women. She begins by cutting a square of pink cloth which will be decorated. On the back of this she bastes a piece of white cloth to strengthen the surface. Using a running stitch around a core thread Zoua outlines a divided square. This sectioned square will be embellished by adding tiny chain stitch outlines of curved and straight shapes.

Zoua Lor is doing much in her new life in Rhode Island: working three days a week, teaching stitchery classes at the church, and exhibiting in local museums. She also takes care of her family and spends as much time as she can keeping alive the tradition of "*Paj Ntaub*" which she learned in such a different time and place.

### **Seng Yang Vang**

Seng Yang Vang, her husband, Koua, and their five children arrived in Providence in 1987. They are White Hmong. She and her husband were forced to leave their Laotian village of Tomuka in 1976 and spent 10 years in the Thailand refugee camp, Ban Vinai. Five of her children were born in Ban Vinai and two more were born in Providence.

Seng does a very fine detailed kind of "*Paj Ntaub*" called "*Da Chua*". This minute reverse applique and stitchery decorates the collar which is attached to the jacket of the New Year's outfit worn by Hmong women. This collar is a special part of the dress dating from ancient times when the Hmong lived in China. The Hmong proudly wore the collar to differentiate themselves from the Chinese who had no such collar showing in the back of their clothing.

Seng is left handed and works only in the daytime. She sits on a small low

stool near a window to take advantage of the natural light. Seng remembers learning "*Paj Ntaub*" from her Mother when she was nine years old. She started by making a belt which was decorated with cross-stitch patterns. She did not go to school. She remembers that it was her job to feed the chickens, cows and horses. Occasionally a man would come through her village selling yarns for "*Paj Ntaub*". If he did not come she would go to the town of Nahia, a day's walk away, to buy yarns and threads.

The most important annual "*Paj Ntaub*" project is a new dress for New Year's for all of the unmarried females in the family. In December, as time for the celebration draws near Seng's husband, Koua, helps with the housework and taking care of the children so that she has more time for "*Paj Ntaub*". She remembers that this was also true in Laos.

The entire process of making the delicate reverse applique on the collar of the woman's jacket is accomplished without using patterns or drawing on the cloth. The repeat pattern is laid out by using a series of careful folds of the cloth.

To begin, a piece of white cotton the size of the collar, is measured and cut into an exact rectangle. Fold marks are a guide to cutting. Next, a series of folds mark the divisions of the patterning to be used in the reverse applique. After creasing the cloth, the point of a fine needle is used to mark the fold lines more clearly. With the folds completed, cuts are made in the corners of the design. These will later allow Seng to begin stitching the reverse applique.

The cloth which will be the top surface of the collar is now ready to have colored cloths layered underneath. Pink and orange rectangles are cut. These will be basted to the back of the white cloth with the pink rectangle next to the white. The orange rectangle will not show as a color in the reverse applique. It is added for stability. Seng cuts a rectangle from a green cloth and one from a white cloth. These will be basted underneath the other cloth layers. The green cloth will show in the reverse applique but again the white is used for stability and will not show.

In Laos Seng used silk thread but here she uses nylon. Before beginning the reverse applique stitching, she splits the fine nylon threads to make them even finer. She begins tucking under the edges of the white top layer and sewing them down with very tiny neat stitches. This reveals the green color underneath the top layer. A zig zag shape is cut near the green corner. Seng stitches back these edges again showing the green cloth beneath.

Seng works very carefully and meticulously. She is happy to be able to work at home and be near her family. Having finished the reverse applique parts of the collar, Seng begins adding decorative blue triangles using a satin stitch. She measures the size and placement of these triangles by holding her

thread tight and lining it up with the pattern. Again she uses no marking tool to place the design on the cloth.

Seng is changing the color of the nylon thread to pink. She must thin out the strand to make it fine enough for sewing. She knots the new strand of pink thread and starts sewing the pink triangles.

Seng's husband and father-in-law look after her children while she works on the collar. Next, Seng stitches tiny metallic star shapes into some of the pink and green areas. The final step is to finish the edges of the reverse applique design. This is done by sewing narrow strips on three sides. The fourth side is sewn to a patterned fabric which will be attached to the back of the jacket.

Seng takes time out from stitching to attend to her son. She goes back to sewing with her son nearby. Using very fine thread and a fine needle Seng stitches the strip around the edge. To complete the collar a hem is made around three sides. Now this fine example of "*Da Chua*" made by Seng Yang Vang is finished.

### **Lee Khang**

Because of the war in Laos, Lee Khang, a Blue Hmong, left her village of Kong Young with her husband and two small sons. They fled to the small city of Long Hay. There she had another son and two daughters. Her husband was killed in the fighting. After spending one year in Ban Vinai refugee camp she came to Providence with two sons.

Lee Khang is decorating cloth using batik patterning which is a specialty done by Blue Hmong women. In Providence Lee is using cotton cloth purchased from a store. However in Laos she remembers weaving flax cloth on a loom, something learned from her Mother. Lee brought from Laos a piece of flax cloth she wove 30 years ago. She considers it a special treasure from the past.

With a spoon edge Lee makes indented lines on the cloth as guides for drawing with wax. The drawing tool she uses is called "*Toe Kia*" which translates "wax spoon". These tools are hand made by Hmong men. Lee uses bee's wax which is heated in a pan over a charcoal fire. This long narrow piece of batik will be incorporated into a "*tda*" or pleated skirt. Lee says the designs are very old going back generations. These patterns she learned from her Mother. Lee considers them to be not so much pictures of things but as looking more like writing.

Using a hard edge Lee Khang makes indented marks on the cloth to guide her in making the line drawings with her "*Toe Kia*" or wax spoon. She works on a one foot square section at a time. Rolling up the portion which is already waxed she goes on to the next section.



When the waxed drawings are finished, Lee is ready for the dyeing. Along with the cloth for the skirt, Lee has also waxed patterns on three rectangles which will be the centers for baby carrying cloths.

In Laos, Lee made dye from the indigo plant. In Rhode Island the climate is not warm enough to grow the indigo plant. Here Lee is using a synthetic indigo which has been used by American dyers for some time. Since there are five grandchildren in Lee Khang's home she has decided to do the dyeing in the studio of a local Providence fiber artist.

The synthetic indigo vat contains zinc dust which in 1991 was reclassified as a toxic substance by the EPA. Thus when the dyeing is finished the spent vat must be taken to an approved disposal sight. Lee much prefers the plant for dyeing and has written to her sister in Thailand asking her to send the natural indigo.

In her Laotian village, Lee used the green part of the flax plant and mixed it with water and the powder from a burned stone. This mixture fermented for from 3 to 5 days and could be used when the bubbles stopped. The waxed cloth was wetted with a wine spray before immersion into the dye vat.

After repeated dippings into the dye bath to achieve the color she wanted Lee now must remove the wax from the cloth. In her basement, away from the grandchildren, Lee is heating a large container of water to boil away the wax. She immerses the waxed pieces and stirs frequently. Lee skims wax from the surface of the boiling water. She transfers the cloth to clean hot rinse water and repeats the boiling bath and clean rinse water two more times. The last rinse water is made by immersing the cloth in the water which remains in the manufacture of tofu. Lee says this last rinse will give a final special cleaning for the batiked cloth.

Upstairs Lee is inspecting the dewaxed wet cloth. She also shows a skirt she has made. She finishes the day by playing with her grandson who is fond of being close to her in a baby carrying cloth she made for him when he was born.

### **Chia Vue Moua**

Chia Vue Moua, a white Hmong, arrived in Providence in 1987 with her husband, Lue Moua, and three small children. She brought with her pieces of reverse applique that she had made as a young woman in Laos. These pieces were to become belts but when the war came she could not find the silk to complete them.

The type of reverse applique that Chia does is called "*Neng Tzu*" which means elephant foot in Hmong. She learned this technique from her mother. At

the age of 8 she started doing cross-stitch and by the time she was 18 she had become very accomplished at reverse applique. She made "*Neng Tzu*" panels for herself and her two sisters for their New Year's dresses.

To begin the "*Neng Tzu*" process Chia cuts a square of cloth. Like other Hmong women she measures by folding and pulling threads and not by making marks on the cloth. This square of light blue cloth will be the top layer in the reverse applique. Chia makes two diagonal folds in the square. She bastes the folded edges.

Chia's life is not easy. She now has 6 children and works 4 nights a week in a factory. Her aunt and other family members help with the care of the children.

Chia cuts, freehand, a circle out of stiff paper. Using the paper as a pattern Chia cuts a spiral shape which is the main form in the "*Neng Tzu*" or elephant foot pattern. Most of the cloth and thread that she uses is from a large supply that she brought with her from Thailand.

On the basted sides Chia cuts 7 slits which will be important later in the reverse applique process. Chia pulls out the basting and opens up the square of light blue cloth. It has 4 cut spirals and 4 diagonal rows of "v" shaped cuts. She places the light blue square with the cut outs on top of a darker blue piece of cloth. She cuts this new square larger than the light blue square. With careful basting she attaches the light blue square to the dark blue square.

Chia's 16 year old Niece helps take care of the baby. She was orphaned during the war and now lives with Chia. She carries the child in the traditional baby carrier which leaves her hands free to work on cross-stitch.

Chia starts the reverse applique process by pushing back the edges of the cut spiral and sewing them with tiny invisible stitches. This reveals the darker cloth underneath.

Chia's husband, Lue, is a member of the Hmong-Lao Unity Association. Among other family photographs on the mantle is a picture of General Vang Pao visiting a meeting of the Hmong-Lao Unity Association. Gen. Vang Pao is the leader of the Hmong in the United States and lives in Montana.

One week later Chia has finished the four swirls in the center. She is now stitching the rows of radiating shapes going out from the center. The v shaped slits mark where to cut the radiating lines. She cuts a line, stitches down one side only, and then cuts the next radiating line.

While Chia is sewing down the second side of the radiating lines her

Mother, Blia Yang Vue, helps with the baby. Chia and Blia talk about their life in Laos and the ten years spent in the refugee camp. Chia made many "*Neng Tzu*" there. She remembers buying cloth at a market near the camp.

Blia brings out "*Paj Ntaub*" that she made in Laos; aprons with very long sashes. The ends are decorated with fine reverse applique and chain stitch. Blia and Chia are full of memories and Blia decides to try on the long apron and sash over her American skirt and sweater. The oldest treasures from Laos that these women have are 2 white Hmong skirts. Blia's mother grew the flax and wove the skirts. Blia does not try them on because they are so fragile.

Blia recalls how she and her four children wandered from place to place in the jungle for two years as they tried to escape the fighting. Finally they reached the Mekong river. Chia remembers how she and her mother, brothers and sisters had to cross the Mekong river in rubber tires. Because she was the strongest swimmer, Chia went first with the others tied to her by a rope. Blia could not swim and was holding her baby son. It took 3 hours to cross the river.

Chia Vue Moua, another fine Hmong artist to settle in Providence, tries to continue the traditions of her people through her handwork. Her life in America is not easy but she and her family are safe and there is the promise of an education for all of her children.

### **What Next?**

Zoua, Seng, Lee and Chia all are worried about the future of "*Paj Ntaub*". Most of their daughters are doing cross-stitch and chain stitch. However, because they are busy with school or work, few are learning the fine cutting and stitching involved in reverse applique.

These women cannot imagine the continuation of their culture without the presence of "*Paj Ntaub*". New Years, courtship, birth ceremonies and gift giving would not be the same thing if "*Paj Ntaub*" no longer existed.