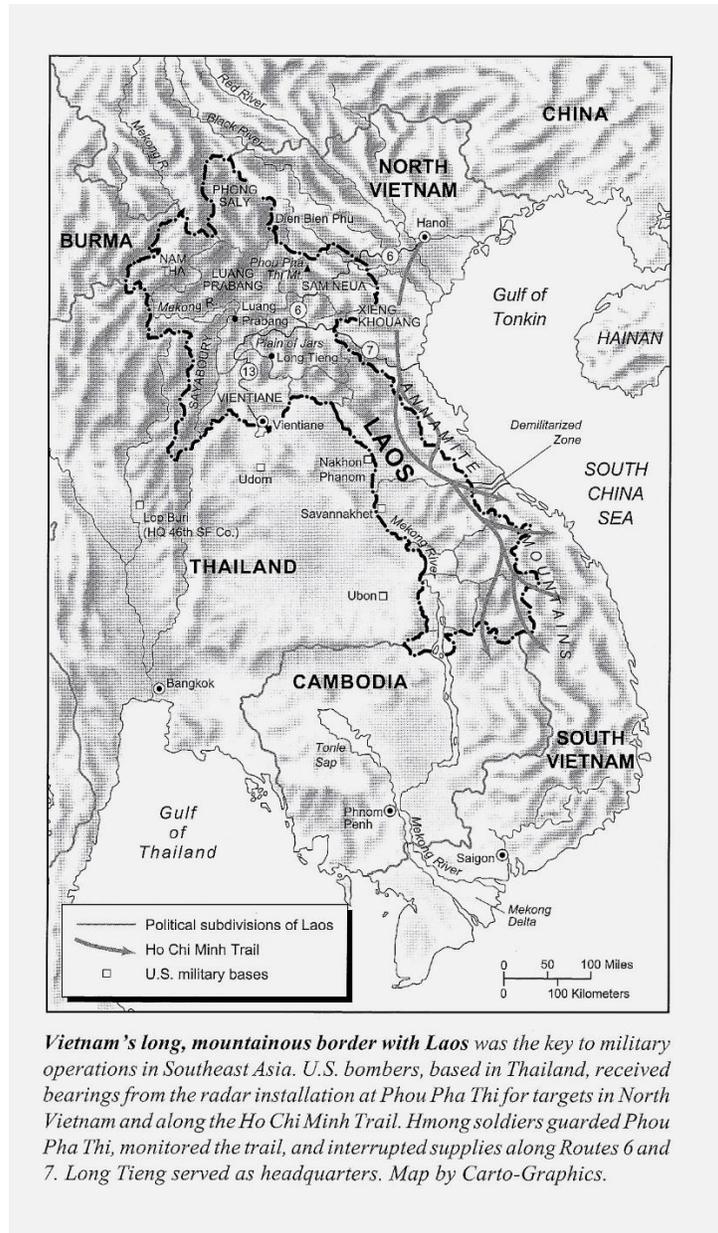


HMONG STORY CLOTHS: A MODEST INTRODUCTION

History in a Nutshell



After fleeing Laos, the Hmong were placed in refugee resettlement camps in Thailand. Some of the men were able to draw images from their traditional culture that Hmong women further elaborated into needlework creations. The resulting artwork, especially the production and sale of story cloths, opened new possibilities for Hmong women to achieve income, recognition and a measure of entrepreneurial skill that have served them well in the transition to American society. The story cloth is therefore both traditional and recent, an important link between the past and the continuing present.

What to Expect in this Exhibit

“Story cloth” refers to Hmong needlecraft on a flat textile surface (rather than, for instance, as part of a costume), using traditional designs and depicting a scene, event or narrative from Hmong history or culture. The term sometimes refers to any piece of Hmong needlework on a banner-like surface, even if it is mainly decorative and there is no depiction of a specific event or story. This broader is also useful, since – as we shall see – much of what we need to know about story cloths can be learned from a familiarity with more general Hmong needlecraft.

A good place to start is at <http://www.hmongembroidery.org/index.html>. There are pages dedicated to various needlework techniques (embroidery, appliqué, reverse appliqué, batik); a visual catalog of common symbols; typical representations of village life, farming, animals, the war experience; traditional and recently acquired narratives (such as the Christmas story); non-narrative embroidery (for women’s sashes, baby carriers, etc.); an overview of attire; designs on utilitarian and decorative items (from an apron to Christmas stockings to a quilt to stuffed animals).

From the Exhibit (Many reproduced images are of details, rather than whole works.)

These two pillows, on dark red and green backgrounds respectively, portray village life in the highlands of Laos, and the flight from Laos and the crossing of the Mekong River into Thailand. The themes, life before and after expulsion from Laos, dominate many of the story cloths.



Three larger story cloths on the wall also depict the Hmong exodus from Laos; one of them includes embroidered texts explaining the Hmong cooperating with the French in fighting the Japanese during World War II, and helping the Americans during the Viet Nam conflict. Collectively, these three story cloths – perhaps we should say history cloths – are as fine as any in documenting the salient events in Hmong history.



In this scene of village life, we see a rice grinder in the upper left, and a soy bean press in the upper right. In the middle, villagers go to the fields. At the bottom, we see the harvest of corn, rice, and pumpkins.



These two story cloths include a wonderful glimpse into the natural world of Laos as refugees recalled it. The piece on a brown background includes a purely decorative center featuring symbols associated with the home and family unity.



Celebrations that brought together members of the larger Hmong community were both very important and highly enjoyable. The New Year celebration included a game of tossing and catching a ball that was part of the process of forming and identifying couples.



Though not all Hmong are Christians, many are, along with many members of parallel Asian hill tribe cultures. Note the embroidered identification of this picture as “Yesus Birthday” (above the angels).

Decorative Cloths



The center of this purely decorative piece has at its center the basic elements of the elephant’s foot, symbol of family unity.



The Hmong named shapes for naturally occurring forms. Shapes may have symbolic meaning, or simply be decorative. The shapes here are the heart and the “concentric teardrop shape” of the cucumber seed.



These cross-stitch cloths are an example of the exuberant delight that the Hmong take in creating designs for the sake of their aesthetic impact, rather than to share a particular narrative.

Check It Out (there is much more out there to discover)

City of refuge. Central College Media Center Video (VHS) 325.31 Ci 7 r. Produced in 1981, this film documents the first wave of Hmong to arrive in Pella.

Pfaff, Tim. 1995. *Hmong in America, journey from a secret war*. Eau Claire, Wisconsin: Chippewa Valley Museum Press. Recently acquired by Pella Public Library.

There are many great videos on Hmong history and culture. The following three are good and complement each other well:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OGPWwTk1-Ds>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hYuXbtlvHg>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8YFiEXxi7M>

Shea, Pegi Deitz. 2003. *Tangled threads: a Hmong girl's story*. New York: Clarion Books. Recently acquired by Pella Public Library.

Comprehensive (!) Hmong study portal: <http://www.hmongnet.org/>

Needlework and more: http://www.womenfolk.com/quilting_history/hmong.htm

Cultural preservation: http://my-ecoach.com/modules/custombuilder/popup_printable.php?id=17531

Sample descriptions: <http://miculturelink.h-net.msu.edu/curricula/hmong.html>

Hey Teachers! http://www.papertigers.org/gallery/Group_Story_Cloth/index.html

And more: <http://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/cool-things-hmong-story-cloth/10367>

The Hmong and parallel Asian hill tribe cultures: <http://www.hilltribe.org/hmong/>