



# Flowery Cloth

## THE ART AND ARTISTRY OF HMONG PAJ NTAUB

Linda McShannock

**H**MONG TEXTILES from the Minnesota Historical Society's collection will be featured in an exhibit at the James J. Hill House gallery in St. Paul, opening April 10 and running through November 29, 2015. This collection, begun in the early 1980s, expanded significantly in 2011 with a generous donation by Corrine Pearson, owner of Hmong Handwork, a St. Paul retail outlet that operated from 1981 until 1999. Pearson's gift of nearly 300 textiles as well as her store records greatly enhanced MNHS efforts to document Hmong resettlement in Minnesota.

In hopes of learning more about the textiles and the women who made them, we reached out to the Hmong community. Over the last two years, Historical Society interns have cataloged the collection, making it available on the MNHS website (go to [www.mnhs.org/research](http://www.mnhs.org/research). Click on Search Collections and search for Hmong). They connected with stitchers and their families through social media, radio interviews, and telephone calls. They also conducted interviews and invited the women to share stories about their lives. These have been transcribed and are available in MNHS collections.

MINNESOTA IS HOME to one of the largest Hmong communities in the United States, and the Twin Cities have more Hmong residents than any other of the nation's urban areas. An ethnic group without a homeland, the

*FACING: Quilt-sized paj ntaub (detail) with reverse appliqué, appliqué, and embroidery, made by Pa Lee in Nam Yao refugee camp, Thailand, in 1975 (on loan for exhibit). The Hmong words embroidered at the top give her location and express sadness at the loss of family and homeland: "Hmong life is like . . . no country for Hmong to live in . . . Hmong are very poor and cry of loneliness."*

Hmong originated in southern China about 4,000 years ago. Continuous southward migration brought many of them to Laos, where they lived in villages and farmed. The Hmong supported American troops during the Vietnam War and, as a result of their part in covert guerilla operations, the "Secret War," they fled to refugee camps in Thailand, including Ban Vinai and Nong Khai, and eventually resettled in other countries. From 1976 to the early 2000s multiple waves of immigration brought many Hmong to the United States as political refugees.<sup>1</sup>

In Southeast Asia the Hmong were a nomadic people, and the portable textile art that women produced was a response to their frequent relocation in search of new farmland. Traditional Hmong clothing incorporated designs that carried cultural beliefs, clan identification, and legends. Clothing style also distinguished the different subgroups, such as White Hmong, Blue Hmong, Green Hmong, and Striped Hmong.<sup>2</sup> Young girls learned to create fine handwork at an early age, taught by example from one generation to another. Each year for the New Year celebration, new outfits were created for family members, with the woman's being the most elaborate. Skill with a needle and artistic interpretation of a design enhanced a young woman's marriageability.

The Hmong words *paj ntaub*, pronounced pa ndau and meaning flowery cloth, describe the labor-intensive appliqué, reverse appliqué, batik, cross stitch, and embroidery work that decorates traditional Hmong clothing. According to oral history, the Hmong lost their written language

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Official opening of Hmong Handwork's Grand Avenue store, 1983. Corrine Pearson and Congressman Bruce Vento stand at left, St. Paul mayor George Latimer at right; Mao Yang is in the center behind the children with Der Lee at her immediate left.

over their years of migrating; *paj ntaub* designs were the women's way of recording the language in imagery: invented motifs to represent the sounds of words. Today, all that remains are the designs themselves, devoid of meaning.<sup>3</sup> Individual motifs are now identified as familiar objects: snail, elephant foot, steps, peacock eye, mountains, cucumber seed, and others.

While in Thai refugee camps, Hmong people began adapting traditional *paj ntaub*, using the techniques and motifs to embellish new types of objects for sale, such as wall hangings and table decorations. These items would appeal to a broad market of buyers curious about the needlework appearing in their countries when Hmong refugees arrived. Another new form, the story cloth, emerged in

the camps, where refugees—both men and women—filled the time drawing and stitching these textile narratives to be sold abroad for income.

HONG HANDWORK in St. Paul was one of several local efforts to assist Hmong families economically. From 1981 to 1999 Pearson's consignment shop sold hand-stitched items made either by Hmong women who had resettled in Minnesota or by their relatives still in Thailand. A member of St. Paul's First Covenant Church, Pearson wanted to help the refugee women of her church market their skills. Her store soon expanded as the local Hmong population grew. At one point, 400 stitchers were providing work to the shop.

Pearson worked to identify color trends and objects that would sell

better in the local community, and she commissioned the best artistic work that she could find. Many of the Hmong refugees who settled in Minnesota were particularly skilled at reverse appliqué techniques. Their ability and artistry transformed plain cloth into unending, complex patterns of color and design. The shop closed its doors in 1999, a victim of changing times as young Hmong women found better and less time-consuming ways to make a living.

Together, the textiles and store records from Hmong Handwork are a valuable resource for documenting how Hmong culture changed during resettlement in Minnesota. The collection shows modern innovations, such as changes in colors and fabrics, as well as the process by which everyday American items were trans-

### Also on exhibit . . .

*We are Hmong Minnesota* at the Minnesota History Center, St. Paul, through November 29, 2015. Developed in partnership with the Hmong community, it celebrates the fortieth anniversary of Hmong migration to the state and the significant political, social, and economic contributions they have made to Minnesota and the nation. For more information, visit [www.minnesotahistorycenter.org/exhibits](http://www.minnesotahistorycenter.org/exhibits).





*Cher Xiong (left) and a companion stitcher, Thailand, 1983*



*Pa Lee (left) and intern Soua Thao, 2014*

formed with *paj ntaub*. Western-style garments—including aprons, jackets, and dresses—were embellished with Hmong embroidery. Reverse appliqué and embroidered squares, which quickly became popular on these items, were adapted from designs on traditional Hmong clothing accessories such as collars and belts. Incorporating a traditional design into a decorative table cover, pillow top, or wall hanging was a particularly popular adaptation for the U.S. market.

The Hmong Handwork donation represents the work of more than 100 makers. Many of these textiles came to MNHS with an inventory tag showing the name or vendor number of the needleworker or supplier, the latter in cases where local stitchers such as Pa Lee or Mee Yang also provided work by relatives still in the refugee camps. Other pieces in the donation had been gifts to the store or to Pearson herself.

In processing this donation, one of our priorities was to identify individual stitchers and find out more about them. To date, we have been

able to gather biographical information on seven who provided work to either Hmong Handwork or other local venues. Six of them have work represented in this collection and are shown here. Each of these women was born in Laos and learned traditional needlework as a child from her mother or other women in her village. Often, the stitching was done after family farm chores were completed or during the winter season when new clothes were made for the New Year celebration. Most of the women we identified came to the U.S. in 1979 or 1980.

Thanks to diligent efforts by four MNHS interns, we have cataloged this textile collection, reached out to this community, and conducted oral interviews with three of the stitchers who still live in the Twin Cities. Pa Lee, Mee Yang, and Chue Xiong welcomed us into their homes to learn more about their experiences and to share their textile art. We look forward to further efforts to document Hmong settlement in Minnesota and preserve

for future generations both the history of their textile art and evidence of their adaptability. □

## Notes

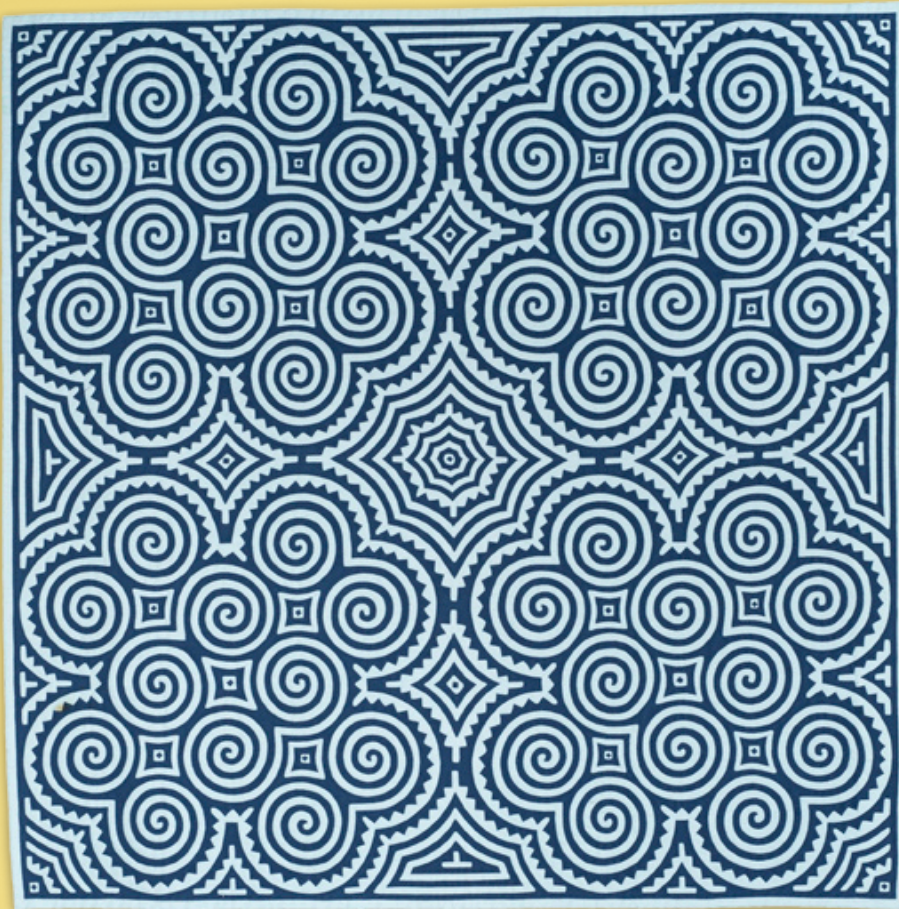
1. For more on Hmong history, see Chia Youyee Vang, *Hmong in Minnesota* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2008), 1–9. The Ban Vinai ([www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/laos/hmong-children-changing-world-ban-vinai](http://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/laos/hmong-children-changing-world-ban-vinai)) and Nong Khai ([www.oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/hb900008z5/?brand=oac4](http://www.oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/hb900008z5/?brand=oac4)) camps sent refugees to Minnesota.

2. There are 18 recognized clans, which trace their ancestors to a common person and share rituals; Vang, *Hmong*, 31 and 85n28. For White and Blue Hmong, see 46.

3. Mary Louise Buley-Meissner, “Stitching the Fabric of Hmong Lives: The Value of Studying Paj Ntaub and Story Cloth in Multicultural Education,” in *Hmong and American: From Refugees to Citizens*, ed. Vincent K. Her and Mary Louise Buley-Meissner (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2012), 234.

All photos, here and following, are in MNHS collections: p. 183 (right) is by Linda McShannock; other recent portraits and all *paj ntaub* by Jason Onerheim/MNHS. Historic photos are in the Corrine E. Pearson Papers.





*Cher Lee, reverse appliqué*

In reverse appliqué such as this square, it takes a skilled cutter to create the pattern to be stitched. The design shows through from the bottom layer when the top layer is cut. In this design of repeating snails, the top layer is one piece of fabric.

Cher Lee and her husband arrived in the United States in 1980, and she spent many hours here creating *paj ntaub* designs. Her specialty is a two-color, reverse appliqué with variations that resemble ripples on the water. Each 30-by-30-inch piece, its flowing curves of appliqué constructed with perfect symmetry, requires a year to make. Cher Lee adapted her traditional work with silk fabrics in Laos to the cotton and cotton blends that were available in the United States. The most current information we have is that she and her husband relocated to California after 1988.

Cher Xiong has been engaged in needlework since the 1960s and specializes in both cross stitch and reverse appliqué. This 12-by-12-inch piece repeats a ram's horn design, which forms a circle within the square.

In the Thai refugee camp, *paj ntaub* provided money for necessities. Once in the U.S., while raising her family of seven children, *paj ntaub* again provided an income. The Hmong Handwork collection holds two of her reverse appliqué squares embellished with additional embroidery. One of her designs won a second-place ribbon at the Minnesota State Fair.



*Cher Xiong, reverse appliqué and embroidery, 1986*

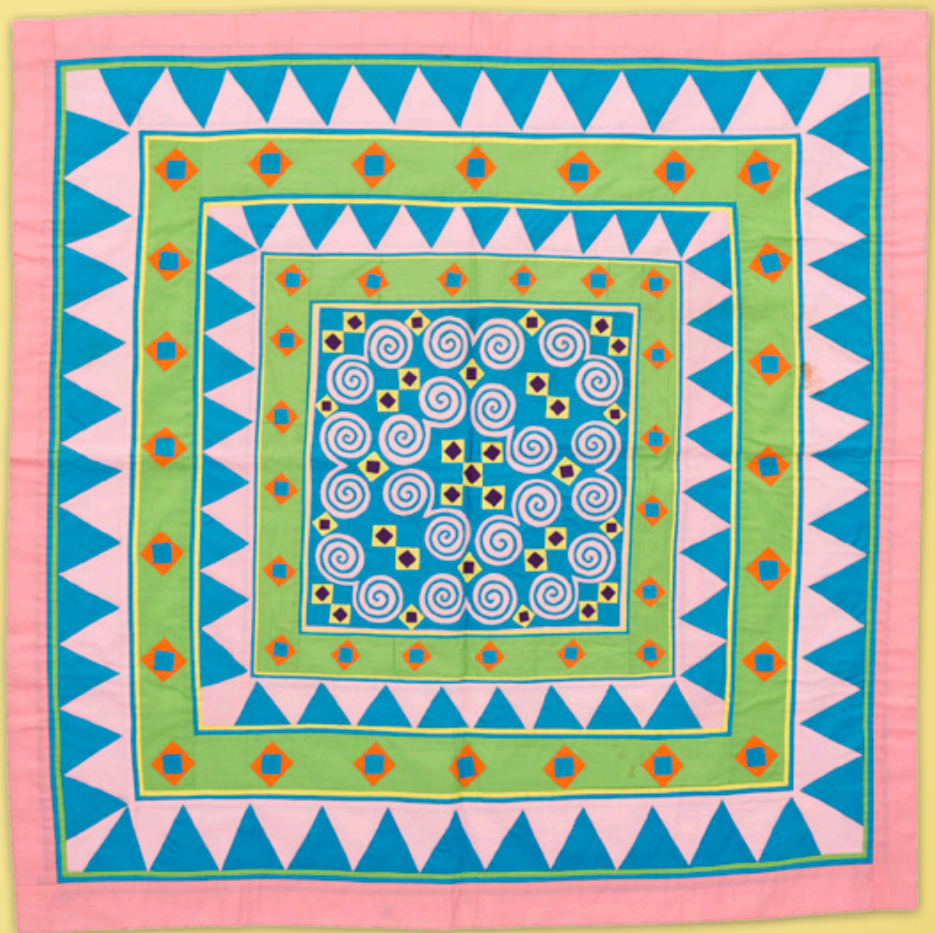




Blia Cha's 20-by-20-inch polychrome cross-stitched square features geometric designs with blocks of alternating colors. In the U.S., evenweave (commercially made cotton fabric) replaced the traditional hand-woven hemp as a ground for cross-stitch embroidery. The multiple borders, which repeat the embroidered colors, increase the size of this square that was made for sale.

*Blia Cha, cross-stitch embroidery*

This 40-by-40-inch square with repeated green borders separated by pink and blue mountain motifs is a good example of how small squares were expanded to create larger pieces for sale. The smaller center square is a design of repeated snails on a pink ground with blue cutouts. Though the motifs are traditional, the pastel colors were meant to appeal to a non-Hmong market. This was one of the first textiles presented as a gift to Corrine Pearson, owner of Hmong Handwork in St. Paul. The maker's name was not recorded.



*Maker unknown, reverse appliqué and appliqué*





Mao Yang (below), 1986, when she demonstrated *paj ntaub* at New York's American Folk Art Museum, and an example of her reverse appliqué work, 1987

When Mao Yang was learning the art of *paj ntaub*, her mother cut the appliqué designs for Mao to sew. Once her appliqué or cross stitch work was good enough to be worn, she applied it to the traditional costume for the New Year's celebration. The outfit for women of the White Hmong subgroup included collars, sashes, and purses decorated with *paj ntaub*, worn with a white skirt and/or black pants. Traditionally, the collars and belts were also decorated with cross-stitch designs. This 12-by-12-inch green and purple square features a symmetrical design of repeated steps and snails.

Mao Yang was well respected in her community for her sewing skills; women who did not sew came to her for advice and instruction. In 1989 she moved to California.







*Der Lee, reverse appliqué, 1987. She too demonstrated paj ntaub at the American Folk Art Museum, New York, in 1986.*

Der Lee's first embroideries were used on her own clothing. Later, she taught needlework to other young girls in a Thai refugee camp. Since moving to St. Paul in 1979 she has been named a master craftsman at the Renaissance Festival and won prizes at the Minnesota State Fair. In 1986 she traveled to the Great American Quilt Festival at the American Folk Art Museum, New York, to demonstrate *paj ntaub*.

Her lively 16-by-16-inch square of pink reverse appliqué on white and black grounds features a radiating star design surrounded by ram's horns.







Full view of Pa Lee's large, intricate paj ntaub and the artist herself, 2014

Pa Lee's skill at *paj ntaub* has been recognized at local craft festivals and exhibitions. Her work interpreting traditional *paj ntaub* for articles with American market appeal was especially prized.

It was important to her to pass on her needlework skills to her daughters and sons. In Laos, *paj ntaub* was not taught to boys, but in the refugee camps, men picked up needlework activity and embellished the reverse appliqué designs with additional embroidery stitches. "We worked so hard back then, didn't have time to sew things for sale. It's not until we migrate to Thailand that we'd have all the time."

Pa Lee sews her own clothing, such as this jacket, and trims it with purchased embroideries that appeal to her. She also enjoys wearing her own knitting.







*Maker unknown, embroidered and appliquéd story cloth, 1980*

Besides her own work, Pa Lee supplied Hmong Handwork with items sent to her by friends and relatives still in Thailand. This 53-by-35-inch story cloth, depicting traditional Hmong rites of courtship during the New Year festivities, is one such item. While the maker is now unknown, we do know that this piece came from Ban Vinai refugee camp in 1980.

The story cloth was one of the new textile forms that emerged in the refugee camps. These pieces might illustrate varying combinations of migration from the traditional Hmong village in Laos, actions of soldiers during

the Secret War, the tragic crossing of the Mekong River to Thailand, refugee-camp settlements, and dispersal of the Hmong to many countries, including the U.S. Other cloths depict folk tales or the activities of traditional village life. Early examples are simple depictions of birds and animals familiar to the makers.

Since men often sketched the figures and women did the embroidery, story cloths provided employment and income for both. Drawing on sewing and storytelling skills, they found a market around the world.



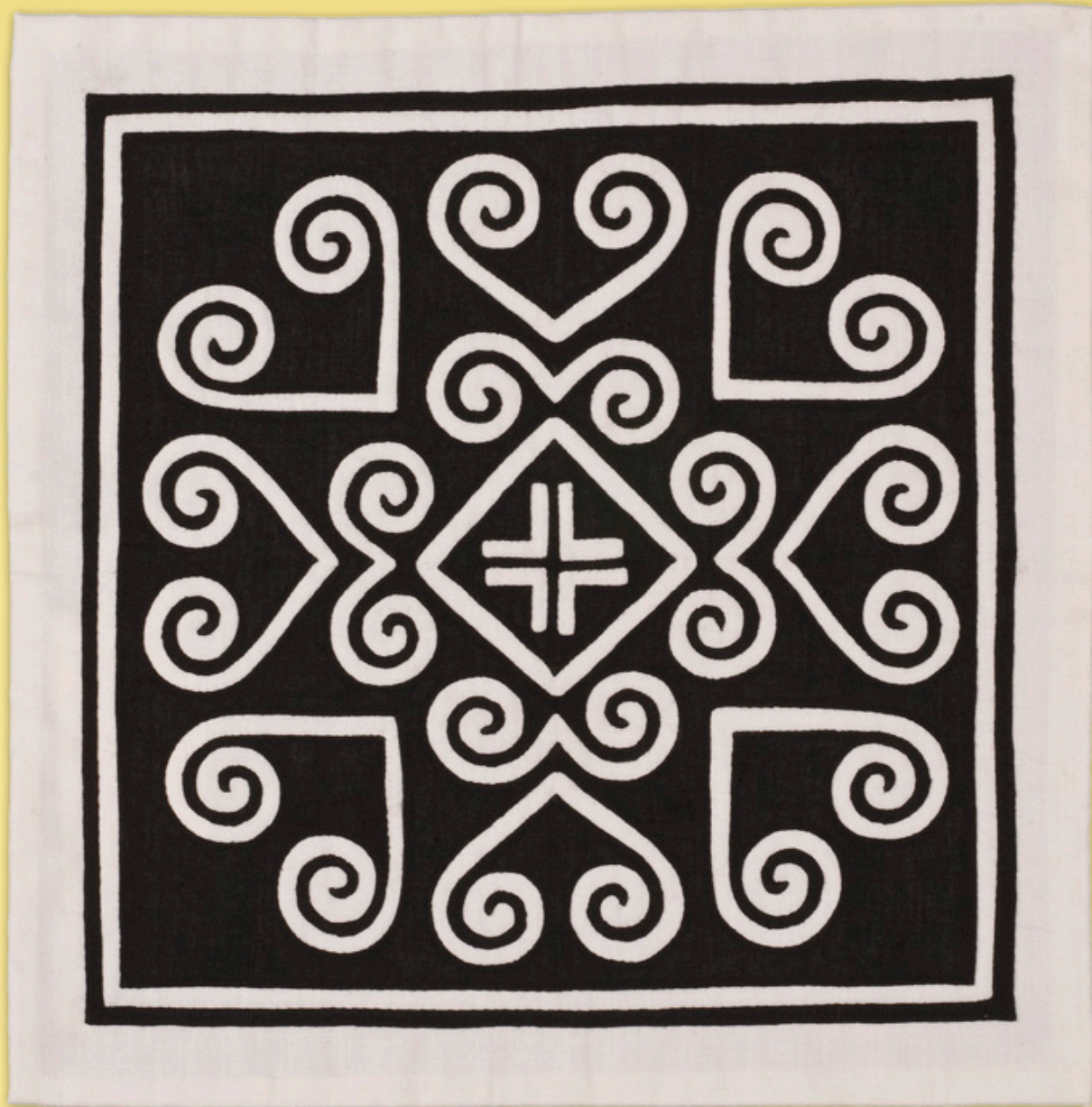


*Phia Lao, reverse appliqué, 1985*

In about 1985, Phia Lao of St. Paul made this 11-by-11-inch reverse appliqué square of green and red lozenges—the cucumber-seed motif—interspersed with blue and white appliquéd squares. Each seed has either a yellow or blue embroidered center. Multiple borders in pink, white, blue, and red frame the piece.

This small square represents an amazing use of color, as Phia Lao skillfully combined eight different ones in her reverse appliqué, straight stitch, and borders. At Hmong Handwork, color combinations that followed fashion trends were recommended to stitchers, but the makers chose the pattern and how to use those colors.





*Mee Yang, 2014, and her reverse appliqué square, ca. 1985*

Mee Yang was born during the Secret War and lived in Thai refugee camps from 1979 to 1992, when she joined her sister in St. Paul. She learned the art of *paj ntaub* in the Ban Vinai camp, starting with cross-stitch examples and then progressing to appliqué designs to sell. She also stitched story cloths that had images drawn by men.

Once in St. Paul, she continued to make and sell her own textiles as well as work produced by family members overseas. Most of her time was committed, however, to the day care center that she ran for more than 10 years. She now does little stitching, instead spending her days caring for her grandchildren.







*Lo family, reverse appliqué*

The first Hmong textile given to Corrine Pearson was this gift from the Lo family in 1980. This large 40-inch square, made in Nong Khai refugee camp, Thailand, shows patterns of reverse appliqué snails and crosses with bor-

ders of mountain motifs. The colors are traditional, not adapted for western taste. In the camp, Hmong women sold textile handicrafts to Thai visitors and staff members of refugee organizations.





Chue Xiong's family farmed in Laos, but she grew up in Thailand, where they fled in about 1977 due to the war. She and members of her family sold embroideries to the Thai people and used the money to buy food and supplies.

After her arrival in the U.S. in 1987–88, she learned to make appliquéd textiles, but she prefers the cross-stitching that she learned in Thailand. She is currently stitching reverse appliqué pieces that her sister-in-law cut 15 or so years ago and finding it challenging to retrain her eyes and hands to do the exacting stitches.

*Chue Xiong, 2014, and a purse made from her cross stitch, 2000 (on loan for exhibit)*







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