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Hmong Textiles: Memory, Migration, and Community

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Hmong Textiles: Memory, Migration, and Community

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To my parents, my grandparents and my brother, for providing the best examples of what community and family mean when navigating my place in the world. Without you all I would not understand the importance of preserving our shared memories, and practicing being present with every life experience.

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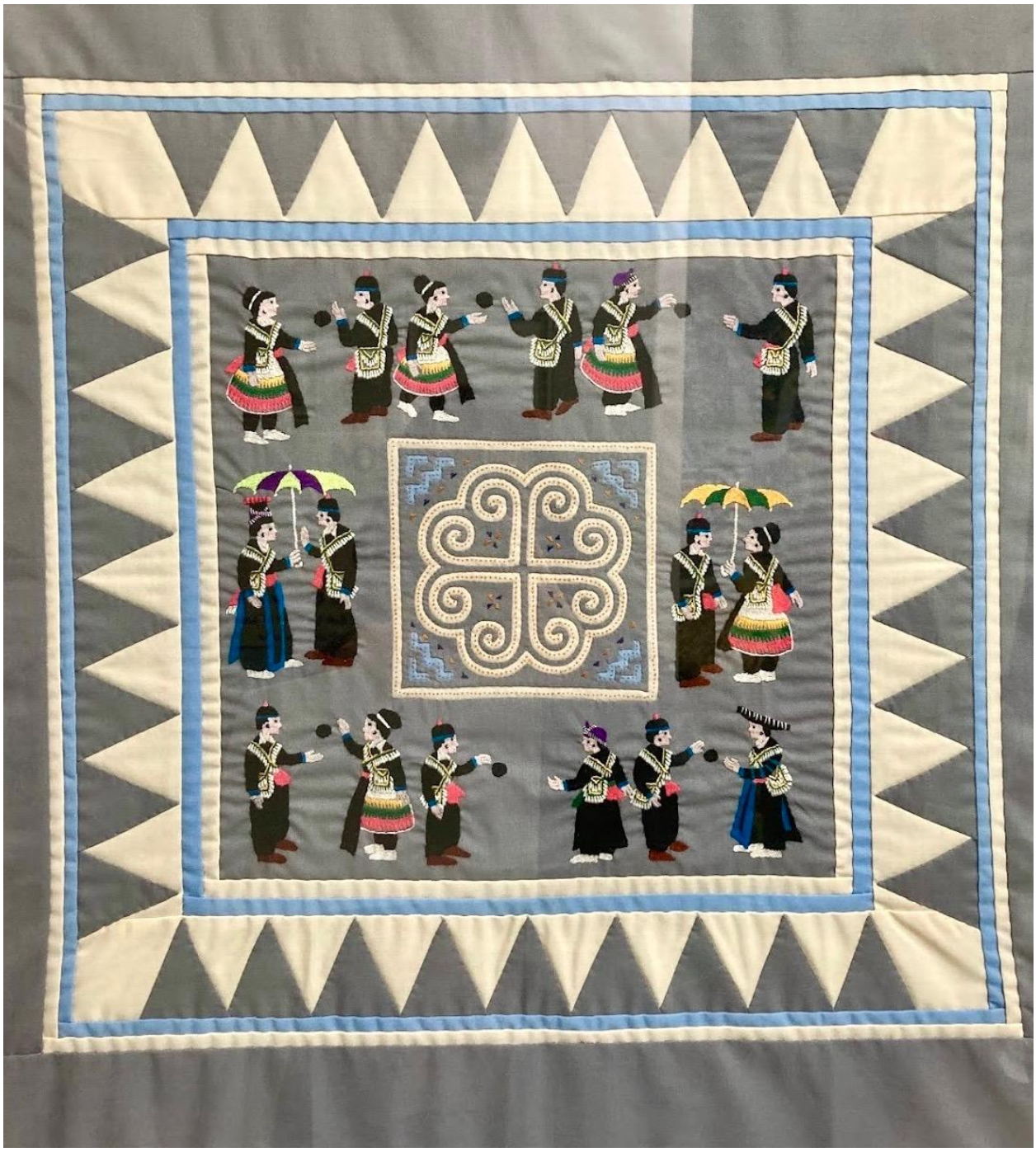

Paj Ntaub
Unknown Artist, Embroidered Story Cloth, 1970s-1980s, 25x25 in

Introduction

Memory is one of the human necessities, used to help us in everyday life, for historic background on science, medicine, environmental changes, wars and politics. As humans, we rely on memory to record our histories, inform morals and determine values. Memory also helps maintain the identity of the self, and the self within a cultural history. Memory is what allows there to be a national identity, along with cuisine, architecture, language and art forms. Memory can be personal or communal, familial or global. While personal memories are held within the self, or within the private parts of our lives, such as diaries, routines and homes, community memory is held within conversations with others, storytelling, images and cultural practices.

Across the globe, textile production has historically held familial, cultural and community memory. From American church basement patchwork quilts, to the Korean *norigae* tassels, Indian kantha and West African batik dyeing, textiles signify a cultural meaning, allowing the maker and the user to be understood through an inherent collective language. Textiles as a medium of communication allow for the preservation of cultures in physical, portable, wearable, tactile form, informing generational sustainability of techniques and storytelling. The Hmong people of Laos and Southeast Asia follow a practice of conserving their histories through the medium of cloth, throughout generations, changes in place and need.

The Hmong people are a stateless people from Southern China and Southeast Asia, today living all over the world in small diasporic communities from Vietnam to France to the United States. Historically an agricultural people, Hmong farmers grew highland crops such as rice and corn, and grains such millet, buckwheat and barley. The Hmong ethnic group originated in

Southern China, thought to be close to the Yangtze and Mekong rivers.[1] Over time, the Hmong people migrated to Laos and Northern Vietnam, living in highlands which favored their agricultural practices. Hmong people lived separated by language groups: the Green Hmong, White Hmong from Xieng Khouang, Sayaboury, and Louang Prabang, Laos, and Striped Hmong from Northeastern Laos being the three primary groups of Hmong people.[2] The origins of the different language groupings can be tied back to the styles of clothes that different Hmong people wear, with Green, White and Striped Hmong people all having a specific garment style. The use of textiles to enforce the delineations between Hmong groups speaks to the significance Hmong culture places on its embroidery and fabric traditions. While the Hmong people have other cultural signifiers, textiles are a visual object, transcending language and portable on the body, allowing Hmong people to celebrate their cultural practices without the need for words or explanations.

Of the Hmong languages, the White and Striped Hmong linguistic groups have an extremely similar etymology and are mutually intelligible, with the Striped Hmong being almost a close dialect of the White Hmong language group.[3] The Green Hmong dialect, sometimes referred to as Blue Hmong, is a much more complex language, which is not intelligible by those who speak White Hmong. Those who speak the Green Hmong language, however, are able to understand the White and Striped Hmong language. Within the Hmong groups, there are eighteen clans, which are similar to family groups, identified by last name. Every Hmong person

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[1] Hmong who still live in China are called the Miao people, and share some of the same cultural practices, influenced by Chinese cultures rather than Laotian, Vietnamese, and later Thai cultures. Read more in Louisa Shine, *Minority rules : the Miao and the feminine in China's cultural politics*, (United Kingdom: Duke University Press, 2000)

[2] Black Hmong also exist in Vietnam- but are not related to the migratory trajectory of this work. There are also Red and Flowery Hmong, but their textile tradition is not well documented, so I would have to do more research.

[3] Some sources say it is the same language, and that Striped Hmong are part of the White Hmong group, while others say they are just mutually intelligible but still distinct groups, because of their clothing. For the purposes of this paper, I will consider them to be different groups, as the focus is on the creation and changes within the vocabulary of textiles, not verbal language and ethnic groupings.

living within a Hmong community will be born into a clan, and given their father's clan name. The names are as follows: Cha (Chang), Chue, Cheng, Fang, Hang, Her (Herr), Khang, Kong, Kue, Lor (Lo, Lao), Lee (Ly), Moua, Pha, Thao (Thor), Vang, Vue, Xiong and Yang. In some places, different names are more common, so five or six clans could be the dominant family groups in one area.[4]

Despite linguistic and familial differences, Hmong textiles create a language of their own, which can be used to communicate within the Hmong ethnic group, transcending language barriers. There is something inherently unique about Hmong textiles, as they carry not only cultural memory, but have also been carried through cultural memory. Hmong textiles have persevered through cultural traumas, migrations and the difficulties that present Hmong people as ethnic minorities throughout their histories. In "Stitching Hmongness into Cloth", Geraldine Craig writes, "(T)he story of *paj ntaub* is one of tremendous cultural and aesthetic power, renewed with each generation, and now transformed by self actualizing artists and designers who imagine alternative social and cultural purposes of their own."[5] I believe this summarizes my argument in a succinct form: Hmong textiles are mutable and personal, but contain the history of the Hmong people, and the community memory of Hmong culture both past and present.

In Hmong culture, textiles and embroidery are a significant part of cultural production, and are also the primary art objects produced within Hmong communities historically and present day. This project will attempt to expand on the significance that Hmong textiles carry within Hmong culture, as holders of community memory, translation, movement and loss. In order to reconsider the role of Hmong textiles as active agents shaping Hmong history and

[4] In STP/MPLS Vang, Xiong, Lor, Her, Thao and Lee are commonly seen family names
[5] Geraldine Craig, "Stitching Hmongness into Cloth: Pliable Identity and Cultural Agency," in *Claiming Place: On the Agency of Hmong Women*, edited by Chia Youyee Vang, Faith Nibbs, and Ma Vang, (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 196, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt1b4cx58.11

memory, I have drawn upon theories of material culture studies. For instance, Bill Brown's "Thing Theory" provides the basis for thinking about the concept of the life of an object, in its original intended position and then being estranged from place, therefore taking on a new role.[6] The migration of Hmong textiles places them into a new role, taking on the viewership of an unintended audience, and holding a different form of cultural significance during a need for preservation. Jules Prown's "Mind in Matter" emphasizes the life of the object in its relationship to the maker, the user, the purchaser, and the viewer.[7] The object has multifaceted interactions with people, and their monetary value carries just as much significance as their intellectual value and emotional value. Hmong textiles have held the place of souvenir, language, art, and garment, giving the fabrics a different purpose depending on the person interacting with them, even across Hmong generations. Arjun Appadurai's "The Social life of Things" discusses the ways in which objects have value within social relationships, both emotional and economic, and how objects are used to construct identities as they move between cultural and geographic boundaries.[8] Hmong textiles have held cultural memory through the migration of Hmong people, being used as a physical object in the determination of a Hmong identity.

Moving in semi-chronological order, this project will explore Hmong textile traditions being transformed and maintained within the diaspora, rooting itself in the cultural significance textiles hold for the Hmong people, globally, presently and historically. The first chapter, titled "*Paj Ntaub* and Indigo Batik: Pre-Migratory Traditions," will discuss the practices involved in producing Hmong physical textiles and embroidery before the splintering of the Hmong ethnic group into the global diaspora. I will then move into my second chapter, titled "The Story Cloth:

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[6]Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1, (2001), 1–22, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344258
[7]Jules David Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no. 1, (1982), 1–19, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1180761
[8] Arjun Appadurai, ed, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, (India, Cambridge University Press, 1988)

Adaptation through Trauma," and speak to the impact of war on the Hmong visual language, as well as the introduction of outside forces on the fabrication of Hmong art. My third and final chapter, "Hmong Clothing: Unity of Past and Present," will attempt to organize the changes in Hmong garments and styles from pre-Laotian civil war to post-war Hmong culture, and highlight the incredible efforts of Hmong artists, designers and historians currently working to both modernize and preserve their textile traditions. These case studies will contextualize a narrative of Hmong textile history, followed by changes in vernacular, the development of scholarship, and the continuation of artmaking.

Chapter 1

Paj Ntaub and Indigo Batik: Pre-Migratory Traditions

Hmong textile design and production began with the reflection of the world around them. The textiles were first rooted firmly in nature, a way to capture the beauty in the world into the weave of a cloth. Hmong textiles then evolved to include a form of communication, a written record of makers' stories, community and themselves. Legend has it that the Hmong people once had their own written language, before the migration from China to Southeast Asia. It is said that the Chinese ruling class made it illegal to speak or write in Hmong, and the language was hidden into the folds of women's skirts through *paj ntaub*.[9] While the Hmong people have adapted to use a romanized alphabet for their written language, *paj ntaub* provides a visual and tactile medium to disseminate cultural teachings, and a way to signify ethnic independence. Similarly, Hmong indigo batik takes part in holding significant cultural symbols, with the time and technique used to produce batik textiles defining not only the skills and dedication of the current artists, but also the ancestral maintenance of the craft. The traditions of pre-migration Hmong textiles inform the development of a specific, highly valued and widely protected craft tradition. From the lens of *paj natub* and indigo batik, this chapter will discuss the techniques and styles of Hmong textiles before the introduction of outside art and cultural forces, emphasizing the importance of Hmong innovations, and creating a foundation for the developments in Hmong textiles to come. Pre-migratory Hmong textiles form a base for adaptation of traditions in the

[9] Geraldine Craig, "Patterns of change: transitions in Hmong textile language," *Hmong Studies Journal* 11 (2010), *Gale Academic OneFile*, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A247740086/AONE?u=nysl_se_bardcsl&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=dc42b96f

new vernacular, but also persist and expand their reach and significance. I will also touch on the importance of makers and their genders, the place of women as social and cultural producers, with textiles being contained under the umbrella of "women's work."

Throughout global history, women have been slated as the workers and producers within cultural communities.[10] Unpaid women's labor is considered the cultural norm in most countries, adapted to fit cultural nuances. Caring for children and creating a home environment is maintained as a necessary practice for a good woman and good wife . The dismissive sentiment regarding women's labor follows into textile production, often called "craft" in modern Western circumstances. The idea of the craft versus the standard of fine art permeates into the way art is valued in museums globally, with harder materials, delicate materials, or expensive forms of making preferred in conversations about the art market and history. Often left unnamed in history books, many softer and natural materials, such as textile, and occasionally ceramics, are considered women's work and art forms, and therefore are seen as lesser materials in art production.[11] Divisions between "fine art" and "craft" are obvious in museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City or the Louvre in Paris, both cultural epicenters of art viewership, simply based on the way the museum directs the flow of human visitors.[12] While this is a misogynistic expression of biases within the art critiquing discipline, there is also something beautiful about the global anonymity that working with textiles provides. Embroidery is an art form throughout the world, with significant examples including India, China, the Middle

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[10]Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Culture & Politics*, (United States: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1990)

[11] Throughout history there have been switches between ceramics as women's versus men's work, including potters in Ancient China and subsequently East Asia being held as significant cultural producers

[12] Centering of Venus de Milo in the middle of Greek Antiquity, base floor, and Winged Victory of Samothrace in a central staircase, first floor, at the Louvre. In contrast, arts of Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas all together in a small wing gallery. At the MET, going up their stairs is a massive Western painting, The Triumph of Marius, which leads back into European Paintings. On the other hand, Islamic Art is hidden in the southernmost corner of the building, after passing through European Paintings or Greek and Roman Art

East and France.[13] In Hmong cultural art production, embroidery marks the main form of Art, thus excluding Hmong makers from global discourses on "fine art."

In Hmong textile tradition, women have historically been responsible for the fabrication of textiles, dyeing, sewing of garments and household fabrics, and any embroidery or embellishments needed. Beginning as children, Hmong girls would learn to do cross stitch embroidery, with visual and practical teachings commencing before the age of ten.[14] The comprehension and application of embroidery was considered just as significant a skill for a girl of marrying age as farmwork and homemaking. From birth, Hmong women belonged to their father's clan, which marks ownership over the woman, and also guarantees her status in Hmong society. A woman would marry into a different clan when a husband was chosen for her, often at a young age, and husbands would frequently be found during celebrations between different clans. One of the ways Hmong women would make themselves appear of good marriage material was with their textile and embroidery skills, shown off in the clothing they wore for holidays and events. Hmong women's value was partially placed within the physical beauty and quality of their craftsmanship, accounting for the significance placed on textile for the entirety of a woman's life. However, Hmong women also carried power within their knowledge and practice of textile making. In "Stitching Hmongness into Cloth," Craig writes, "Then as now, the evolution of *paj ntaub* traces the personal, economic, and political empowerment of Hmong women, despite living within other dominant structures."[15] Hmong women's value was not only carried within the embroidery, women created their own power using embroidery and *paj ntaub*.

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[13] I would recommend just searching these embroidery styles: Kantha, Indian fashion designer Rahul Mishra, French Menswear https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/now-at-the-met/2015/elaborate-embroidery

[14]Jane Mallison, Nancy Donnelly and Ly Hang, *H'mong Batik: A Textile Technique from Laos*, (University of Washington Press, 1988)

[15] Geraldine Craig, "Stitching Hmongness into Cloth: Pliable Identity and Cultural Agency," in *Claiming Place: On the Agency of Hmong Women*, edited by Chia Youyee Vang, Faith Nibbs, and Ma Vang, (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 195, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt1b4cx58.11

Textiles not only had an impact on the lives of each individual woman, but also held broader Hmong communities' access to family and ethnic history. As Hmong culture had an oral storytelling tradition, textiles took the place of books, images, or paintings in the preservation and creation of physical memory. The abstract nature of embroidery allowed for meaning to be placed on specific designs, which then grew roots into the vocabulary of *paj ntaub* and Hmong clothing creation.

The image presented in fig. 1 is a *paj ntaub*, or flower cloth, a traditional form of Hmong embroidery used to communicate metaphorical and cultural meaning, depending on the motif chosen. The *paj ntaub* can also be used simply for decorative purposes, depending on the maker and wearer. *Paj ntaub*, pronounced Panh (flat tone) Dao (rising tone), present colorful geometric patterns in a three-dimensional, tactile square of cloth. The designs in the squares represent many aspects of Hmong life, and create a record of historical Hmong visual environments. Each Hmong group has a specific vernacular of *paj ntaub* styles, with some of the most commonly seen motifs including elephant foot, steps, mountains, fish scales, flowers, snails shell, flying insects, cucumber seed and peacock ocellus.[16] There are many other motifs employed, including hearts, chicken eyes, stars and other geometric designs, especially in modern *paj ntaub* interpretations. The meaning a flower cloth is ascribed is due to natural motifs and reflections of nature seen in the squares' designs, an interpretation of the Hmong people's ancestral and current environments.

Inlaid on a dark blue fabric square, a bright pink clover pops out against the inky background. Rings of pink and blue form a spiraling illusion around a small white inner motif, reminding the viewer of a four leaf clover, a butterfly, or an elephant's foot. Beginning at the center of the square, four small embroidered beads form a red and green flower. As the eye is

[16]*Hmong Art: Tradition and Change*, (United States: John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 1986)

drawn out, a symmetrical white butterfly appears on the diagonal, outlined in pink and accented with tiny orange perforated stitches. Moving out in a rounded four pronged pattern, rings of pink are appliquéd onto the blue background, creating a striped effect. The final pink ring creates a square, adding four triangular corners, and turning the blue background into a framing element. The corners are layered with a white fabric mountain motif, with a zig-zag at the base and the triangular point reaching towards the corner's edge. As with the white butterfly, the mountains are embroidered with small orange dots, creating a broken line to emphasize the white color inlay. The mountains are given a base of green and red embroidered triangles, mimicking the same geometric lines of the white fabric, and creating a barrier between the mountains and the elephant's foot. Fig. 1 appears sharp and clear at first glance, but nuances in embroidery accents, textile levels, and interpretive shapes allow for an expansion of analysis and emotional interest in the *paj ntaub*.

One of the Hmong traditional embroidery techniques used to sew the *paj ntaub* is the reverse appliqué technique. Reverse appliqué is an embroidery style unique within White Hmong culture, as technique allows for the illusion of one color cloth being embedded almost seamlessly into a different colorful textile base, creating an intricate map of lines and patterns on the base cloth.[17] While the motifs and fabrication of *paj ntaub* are not specific to the White Hmong, the size and application most often used today originated within the White Hmong textile tradition. The technique was historically taught to young Hmong girls as they began to make their own celebratory garments, including skirts for the New Year's Harvest Festival.[18] To begin, the artist would choose a design she wanted to embroider and layer a base cloth with the eventual design fabric of a different color. She would then cut out the pieces of cloth needed to fit the motif into

[17] For more info on Reverse Appliqué see Hmongembroidery.org and Hmong Art: Tradition and Change
[18] Jane Mallison, Nancy Donnelly and Ly Hang, *H'mong Batik: A Textile Technique from Laos*, (University of Washington Press, 1988)

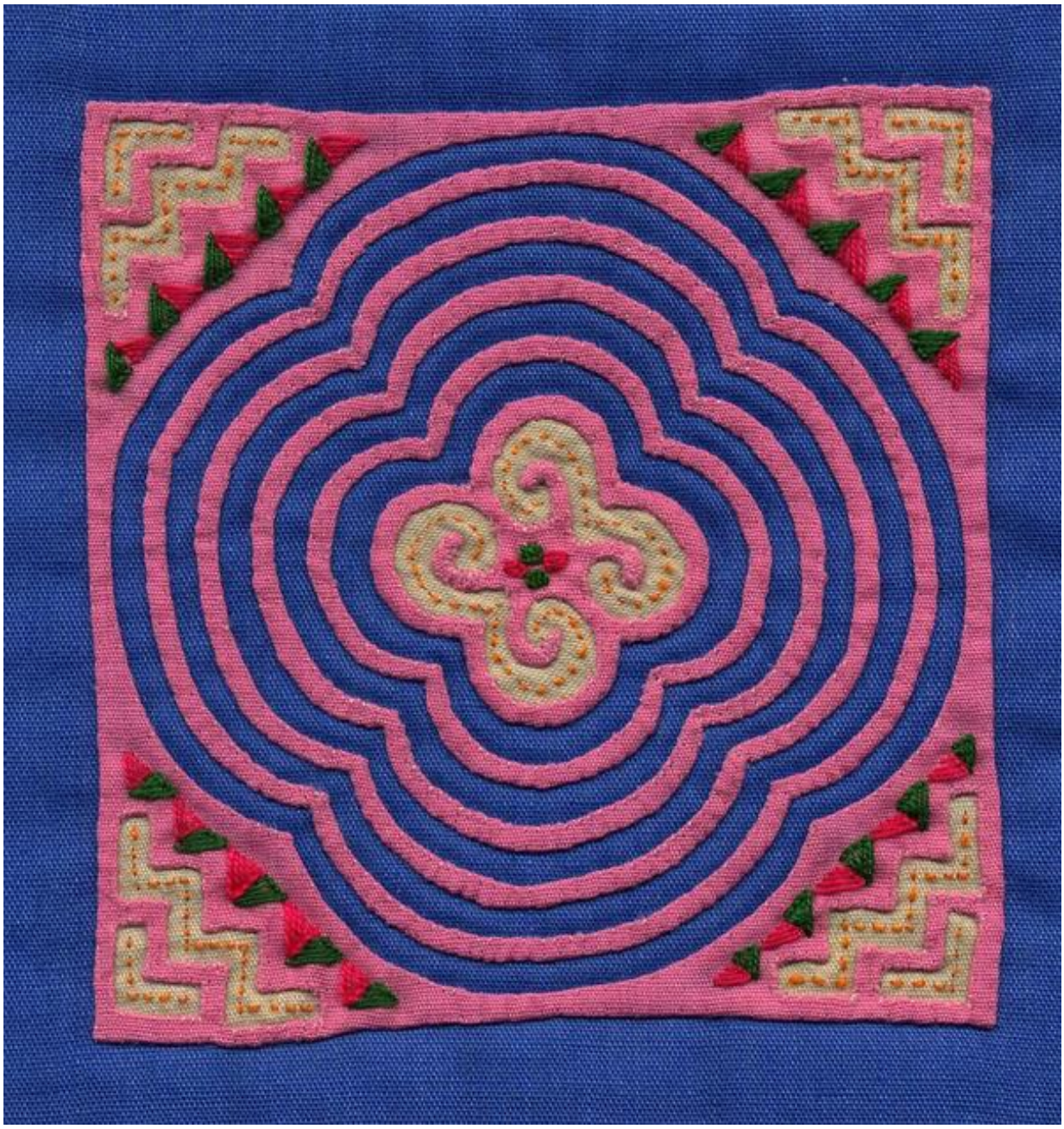

Fig. 1.

Chee Vang, Elephant Foot *Paj Ntaub*, 1980s, 11x11cm

Photo by Noah Vang, item at Hmong Archives, St. Paul, MN

the desired square size, removing the empty space from the upper cloth to create the image and allowing the background to show through the appliquéd design. As the upper fabric is cut away to reveal the base fabric, the primary or main textile element is considered the design cloth, with the base fabric viewed through windows of empty space between the reverse appliquéd chosen motif. The artist would then fold the edges of the design under, in order to create a bubbled seam and hide the stitching between the two layers of fabric. This creates a three-dimensional effect as well, with the design appearing as though it is rising up or being lifted out of the base fabric color.

As fig. 1 is an example of *paj ntaub* made with reverse appliqué technique, the colors are applied in layers. Fig. 1 presents three layers, with a base and design layer, and a small and contained detail layer in between. The first layer is the blue background, with the white accents as the second layer, and finally the main pink design overlayed on top. This creates the impression for the viewer that the pink design is a window to the white accents, floating above the blue base fabric. The reverse appliqué technique also emphasizes clean divisions between color, and with the contrast between the pink and blue fabric lines creates an almost hypnotic effect.

Another significant form of embroidery in Hmong textile vernacular is appliqué, which is also used to make *paj ntaub* and Story Cloth borders.[19] While the reverse appliqué technique is made from the upper layer moving down, with the border often being made of the background cloth and the primary design also being the primary fabric, appliqué is made from the base cloth moving up. Appliqué technique often moves outward from the center of the cloth, with the outer edges and borders appliquéd onto and lifted above the background cloth. Appliqué, before the

[19] See Chapter 2 for more information, page 23

mixing of Hmong groups due to migration, was more widely practiced among all Hmong groups, while reverse appliqué was unique to the White Hmong.

Today, the entirety of Hmong diaspora in the United States utilizes the reverse appliqué technique broadly, and many surviving Hmong textiles, the majority being made in refugee camps and within the United States, showcase the unique embroidery style. Viewer access of pre-war Hmong textiles is few and far between, and scholarship of Hmong textiles focuses on traditional techniques rather than observations of individual objects and artists.[20] The widespread use of appliqué within the Hmong textile culture historically versus the practically sole use and teaching of reverse appliqué beginning in the late twentieth century diaspora reflects the ways that Hmong communities found community within the diaspora. The blending of Green, White and Striped Hmong cultures to preserve Hmong identity within a new global and Western environment is a story of both perseverance and tenacity through the trauma of war and migration.

The primary use of the *paj ntaub* is in Hmong traditional clothing, being used to make sashes, skirt panels, aprons and jackets. For White Hmong, *paj ntaub* have also been incorporated into bags, wall hangings and pillows, as well as left as decorative squares for souvenir consumption. The frequency of the squares' production as an art object has dramatically increased within the Hmong diaspora, specifically as a tool to teach embroidery to the next generation of Hmong girls and women. In the past, *paj ntaub* was made by Hmong women only, for the purposes of community use and with specific rituals and values attached to them. The art

[20]Jane Mallison, Nancy Donnelly and Ly Hang, *H'mong Batik: A Textile Technique from Laos*, (University of Washington Press, 1988); This is only of the few books I have found that talks specifically about Hmong textile traditions pre-war, as most find context of pre war, but then talk about the diaspora

form was rooted in tradition and continuation, with the expectations that the use and meaning of Hmong embroidery would remain.

While Hmong textiles today such as fig. 1 and fig. 6 present bright colors and machine made fabrics, traditionally Green Hmong batik was done on hemp fabric, a hand spun, natural textile. Indigo batik dyeing was an important signifier of Hmong group for the Green Hmong, sometimes called Blue Hmong, with their name deriving from the blue-indigo coloring of the handmade clothing. In a similar vein to *paj ntaub*, the designs and aesthetic styles presented Hmong Indigo batik persist within the Hmong diasporic community today, translated into different, industrially dyed colors. However, *paj ntaub* has survived as a technique, transcending place, while indigo batik has remained a visual aesthetic whose technical skill can no longer be practiced. As access to indigo has faded, the teachings of indigo batik have waned as well, leaving a generational gap between makers of batik dyeing and the desire for their brightly colored derivatives. Indigo dyeing was a skill taught to young Green Hmong girls in the same way that embroidery was emphasized as a cultural learning practice. Using local indigo plants, which have been used throughout the mountainous Southeast and South Asian regions, including in India and Northern Thailand, Hmong women made ceremonial and everyday fabrics using their Indigo Batik dyeing technique.

The Indigo Batik dyeing process starts with a white hemp cloth, over which dye resistant designs are drawn with a black ink, made of indigo dye and beeswax. Indigo Batik designs are often symmetrical, and the hand drawn nature makes the practice a detail oriented and time consuming task. Designs in the fabric represent natural motifs in a geometric pattern, using small straight lines to create diamonds, crosses, squares and zig-zags to mimic plants, foliage and small

animals[21]. The cloth is then dyed indigo, which begins with the process of making the dye. Hmong indigo dyeing begins by soaking indigo leaves in a dyeing vat for four days, then removing the leaves and allowing the dye to ferment for about a week. Once the dye vat is prepared, the hemp fabric with batik designs is dipped many times in the vat, over the course of several weeks, with time in and out of the dye vat allowing for a darker blue color to be achieved. The cloth is then boiled so the wax melts away, leaving a blue base with white designs, protected by the black wax.

While people living in the Hmong diaspora do not practice indigo batik dyeing themselves due to lack of local resources and living within a consumerist economy, there have been efforts for a resurgence of indigo dyeing and Hmong indigo batik in Thailand with organizations such as Philip Huang in Sakon Nakhon, Isaan region. The preparation of the indigo dye is done in the same process as in traditional Hmong indigo dyeing, beginning with soaking the indigo leaves in vats. The dye is then fermented, being fed with sugar and ash to create the "deepest and warmest blue colour."[22] Indigo dye needs to oxidize to achieve a blue color, and the long period of time needed to create the dye vats allows for full exposure to the air, turning the dye from bright green to blue. Indigo leaves begin long, oval and flat, with a light, fresh spring green color. Some indigo plants also have a purple flower, which can be used in creating the indigo pigment as well.[23] The maintenance of Southeast Asian and Hmong indigo batik dyeing, despite not being practiced within American Hmong diaspora, speaks to the resilience of the craft, and the efforts of both Hmong and Southeast Asian artists in reinvigorating art styles that have become less accessible within the modern textile industry.

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[21] Cursory information from Magali An Berthon, "Zu Xiong, Master of Hmong Batik, Laos," The Textile Atlas, https://www.thetextileatlas.com/craft-stories/zu-xiong-master-of-hmong-batik-laos. Confirmed and expanded from Jane Mallison, Nancy Donnelly and Ly Hang, *H'mong Batik: A Textile Technique from Laos*, (University of Washington Press, 1988), 57

[22] "About," Philip Huang, https://www.philiphuang.com/pages/about

[23] "Indigo- Natural Dyes," Natural Dyes CA, https://naturaldyes.ca/indigo

Before the introduction of artificial dyes and machine made textiles, indigo was the main color source in Green Hmong clothing. As Hmong people did not engage significantly with the global economy before the Laos and Vietnam Wars, most of their art was made with locally woven, dyed, sewn and embroidered materials. This is true of all Hmong groups, as one of the traditional garments for White Hmong is a natural or white hemp skirt, one of the crops cultivated in highland Hmong farms.

Hmong people, before having significant interaction with outside cultural practices, would make their own textiles, often out of Hemp materials. Due to their agricultural practices, Hmong people lived in highlands, isolated from outside traffic and trade by mountains. As hemp was grown on Hmong farms in Laos, it was therefore the most accessible product for the process of cloth production. Threads were made from hemp fibers, following being removed from dried and peeled hemp stalks. The fibers were then bundled and carried with the weavers, so that the women could weave threads while walking between the fields and the residential part of their villages, consistently and constantly laboring. The weaving technique was done by hand using their fingers, and completed threads could hang off the backs of the women's hands. Hemp threads, before processing, were the light green of hemp bark, and were bleached to white by an practice of boiling in water with wood ash, then washing and beating the fibers clean of ash, and allowing the threads to be dried in the sun. The process would be repeated in succession until the fibers achieved a white color.[24] The threads would then be woven into cloth which would be dyed, embroidered or made into clothing.

The techniques and materials used to make hemp cloth and go through the indigo batik process were both easily accessible to the Hmong people, representing their work and self-sufficiency, but also their environment. As Hmong people processed every aspect of their

[24] Jane Mallison, *Hmong Batik: A textile technique from Laos,* (1988), 57

clothing, it became an identifier of cultural endurance and of skill and pride for a maker. Hmong women created intricate, beautiful garments and embroideries, which allowed them to communicate with other clans, as well as participate in the tapestries of their home landscapes. Hmong homelands were translated into patterns that could seamlessly blend with their environment, emphasizing the importance of land and the appreciation Hmong people have for place. As indigo batik dyeing and hemp fabric weaving were both inherently tied to the land Hmong people stewarded, they were not able to be adapted into the Hmong textile diaspora as literally as *paj ntaub*. However, the emphasis on time and craftsmanship, as well as the handmade value and care placed within an object is still an important part of cultural textile making and memory. Site specific pre-migratory fabrics show their influence translated into modern colors, but also in the development of new artisanal styles by Hmong-American fashion designers.

The figures 2, 3, and 4 present images of a mid-length Green Hmong skirt, made using the indigo batik dyeing technique, as well as *paj ntaub* appliquéd motifs, bringing together both textile traditions. This skirt is very similar to the styles that Green Hmong women would have worn while living in Laos, as it is made using indigo batik with black and white dye resistant designs and a natural white or cream colored cloth, without significant additions of artificial, bright colors. This skirt contains a large section of red dyed fabric, which would have been less common to find as red was not a color typically used before the introduction of machine made fabrics. The skirt was fabricated using plain weave cotton with wax resistant indigo batik dyeing, decorated with appliqué and embroidery elements. The garment is an off-white color at the top and bottom, with dark blue, red, black and white designs in the middle section of the skirt. The fabric has a sharp and small pleat beginning under the waistband, which is smooth fabric. As the

fabric is dyed multiple colors, and there are several seams visible through the skirt, it can be presumed that the white band at the top is attached to the batik after the dyeing process. This also gives the illusion of a tiered skirt, however, I believe the majority of the white at the top would be covered up if worn as a full ensemble, leaving a white border of a few inches similar to the bottom of the skirt.

The dyed fabric is divided into three sections, the first is blue indigo batik with red detailing, the second with red, blue and white stripes, and the third being red with red and black detailing. The blue indigo batik, when stretched, displays a delicate square pattern circling the skirt, with every other square divided by red and white diamond appliqué. Within the larger square, the batik traces the coin motif, created using small octagons, bordered by the pumpkin flower motif, represented by miniature squares with centered dye resistant dots. The pumpkin flower squares alternate with the coins, each one created by sharing the sides of four octagons. The appliqé overlays the original white batik resistance design on the indigo, presenting every other large square design adorned by red fabric. The pattern creates a kind of flower, with the

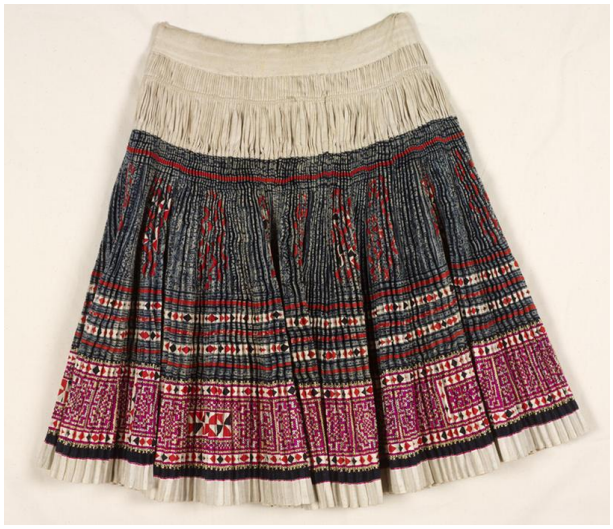

Fig. 2

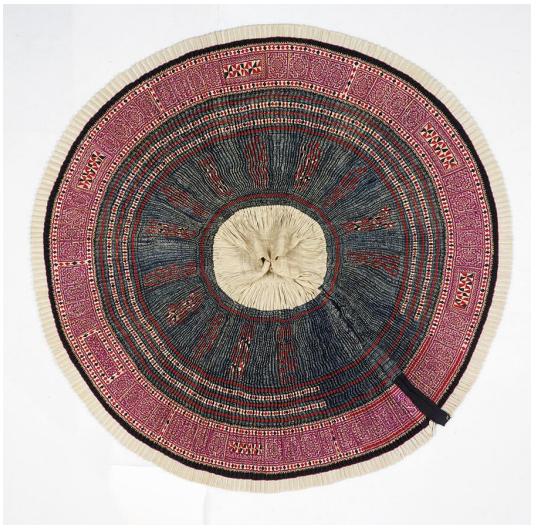

Fig. 3

square as the center and the four octagonal shapes as petals. The floral connection is not immediately visible, however, as the brain first recognizes it as mathematical and then searches for something natural, like a plant or a face. This fosters a sense of excitement and intrigue while viewing the fabric, as the eyes trace differing scenarios across the textile, creating an interactive experience with the cloth, especially when considering its movement while being worn.

The second section presents stripes of the three colors– red, white and blue– organized as a striped transition between the red and blue square designs. The red stripes are bright and solid, the indigo batik showcasing a dark blue with black and white resistance dyed, geometric designs blending into the soft fabric. The white stripes showcase a red and white connecting diamond pattern applied by appliqué embroidery, moving horizontally around the skirt in a single line. The contrast of the white coupled with the opposition from the black diamonds shift the appearance and mood of the skirt from dark, blue black, and quiet, to bright and celebratory as it moves into the skirt's final section.

The third section appears to be red and white *paj ntaub* squares, showcasing the step, chicken tail and vegetable blossom motifs. The step motif presents as a rising and falling staircase, creating a border for the central vegetable blossom checkered design. The chicken tail motif forms four corners, with points facing outwards and a zig-zag base mirroring the steps, directing the eyes towards the next flower square. There squares circumambulate the base of the skirt, creating the effect of horizontal a *paj ntaub* chain. The red and white lines coloring the squares define a clear division and strengthen clean lines within the section. This contrasts with the soft blend and bleeding of colors present in the dyeing of indigo batik, and further helps emote joy and celebration as the viewer's eyes move down the cloth. At the bottom and top of the skirt, the white border emulates the effect of borders around *paj ntaub*, and later the story

cloth, drawing the eyes inward and creating a strong delineation where the focus of the viewer should be on the craft in front of them. The direction of gaze further highlights the technique and delicacy of the textiles used, and intensifies the significance of attention to detail and time spent by the women making the cloth.

When viewed from above, the skirt can be laid out in a circle, the edges of the circle fanned out flat with the pleats creating waves and ripples in the motifs the closer to the center of the skirt the eyes draw. Because of the nature of the fabrics, the red section would likely be thicker, adorned with layered *paj ntaub* appliqué, and therefore would hold the pleats of the skirt less stiffly than the thinner indigo batik fabric.[25] The difference in textiles allows for the fabric from the bottom of the skirt to provide some weight to the garment, creating a smoother flow of the skirt when interacting with wind, walking, and other forms of movement. I believe this skirt is made to be danced in as well, as the large amount of small pleats suggests that the skirt can be swung and spun around but still offer coverage and modesty to the wearer.

The relationship between indigo batik and *paj ntaub* is one of perseverance and remembrance, as Hmong women protected and enforced their abilities to create cultural textiles within their communities in Laos, from the earth to the completion of a garment. The time taken to learn and longevity of these techniques are forever embedded within the story of the women making and teaching Hmong textile histories, and the Hmong community as a whole. The examples of *paj ntaub* and indigo batik are significant as they speak to the separation and reconnection of the White and Green Hmong groups, as well as the importance of place versus knowledge when it comes to textile production. *Paj ntaub* and indigo batik mark the beginning of Hmong textiles, and will continue to inform the development of the craft, remaining a language Hmong artists can utilize no matter the distance from their ancestral homelands.

[25] As I have not touched the fabric of this skirt, this is speculation

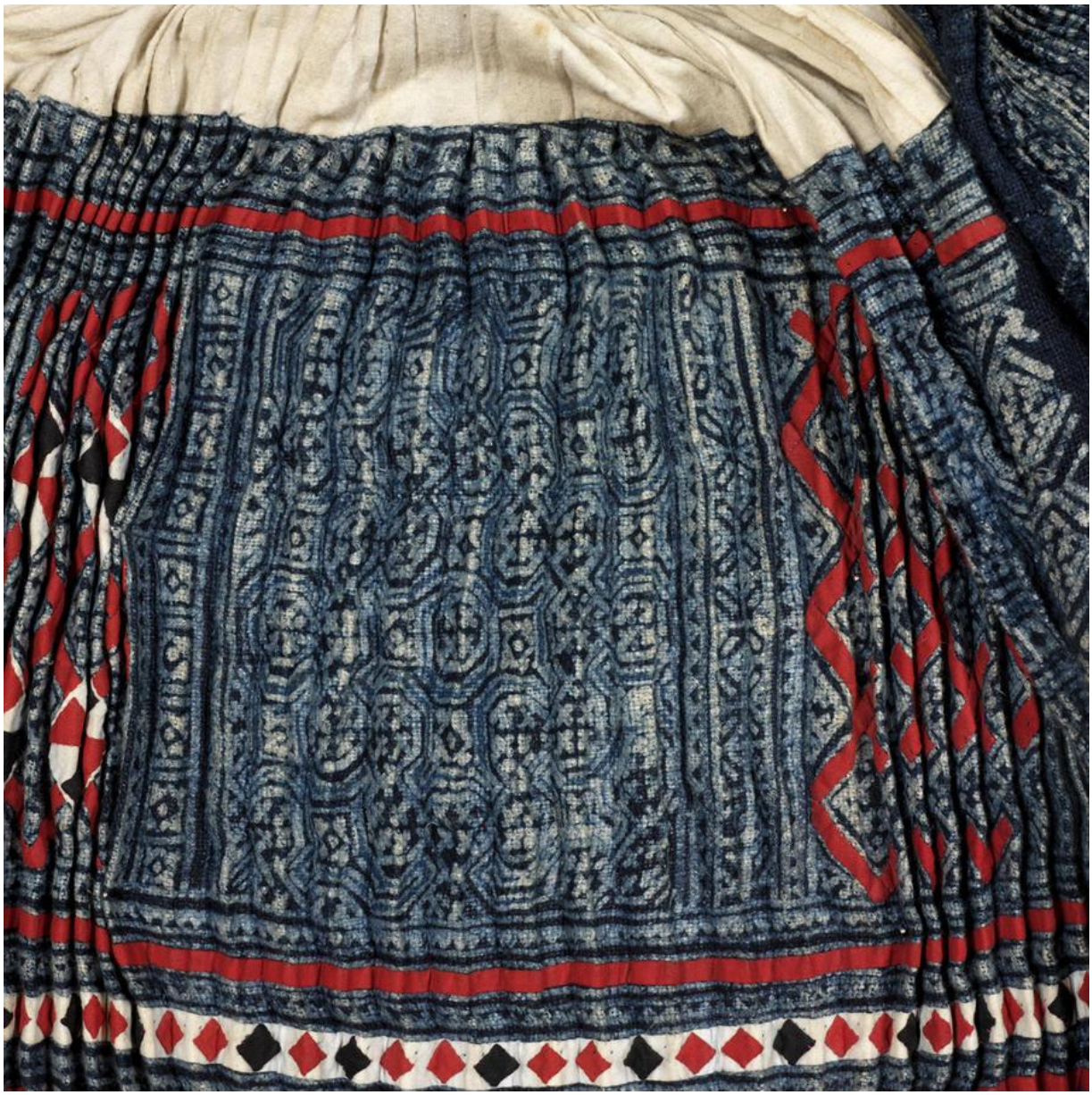

Fig. 4

Hmong Laotian, Laos, Ceremonial skirt, mid 1900s - late 1900s

Located at RISD, Providence, RI

Chapter 2

The Story Cloth: Adaptation through Trauma

Stitched into a blue-gray cloth, an explosion of shapes and motifs build a storytelling map (Fig. 1). A scene of tactile trees, animals, and people, embroidered into the cloth, unfolds in the long fabric scroll. Brightly colored flowers cross the cloth, strewn between the standing and fallen bodies of Hmong men and women. They are fleeing the Secret War in Laos and crossing the Mekong River into Thailand.[26] On the left, an airplane and soldiers are visible, identified by their solid green dress and the guns in their hands. The soldiers are occupying the only buildings on the top left corner, leaving a large group of people in black clothes with their backs facing towards the houses. The people appear to be carrying heavy baskets and walking in the opposite direction. They represent the Hmong people, indicated by the colorful and intricate calf-length skirts worn by the women, and the brightly colored belts and hems on the men's clothing. The long white stitches in the river and the movement of the people towards the right side create a great sense of direction and movement. The flow of people is constant, with every section of the cloth occupied with a person stepping towards the right, as if moving out of the image boundaries. The river cuts through the center of the fabric, carrying Hmong people in boats and on rafts down its waters. In the bottom right corner of the cloth, the Hmong people, still carrying baskets, meet and face soldiers wearing brown, in a seemingly friendly and conversational

[26] For more information about the war, with oral interviews from Hmong asylum seekers, see the documentary *Minnesota Remembers Vietnam: America's Secret War*, Lisa Blackstone, 2017, https://www.mnvietnam.org/story/the-cia-the-hmong-and-the-secret-war/

manner. These soldiers welcome the Hmong people with open arms, in contrast to the weapons depicted at the start of the path.

This embroidery can be divided into a beginning, middle and end as a way of setting up time: the top section depicts the beginning and reasoning behind the Hmong people's migration out of Laos, the middle being the physical act of walking to another country, and the end as arrival in a safer situation. While the top left corner feels chaotic, emphasized by the guns and the wind or rain around the airplane, the bottom right corner presents as the opposite, with calm interactions between people and roads moving out of frame, suggesting positive development and further distance from the previous danger.

The embroidery is an example of the Story Cloth, a Hmong art form blending traditional Hmong embroidery practices and the human experiences and memories of war. The story cloth takes verbal histories from Hmong cultural communities and reflects them into a visual format through the method of embroidery. In so doing, the story cloth provides an engaging and colorful image with which to better understand the stories of the Hmong people, from migration, to exile, to the creation of new homes. This chapter will discuss themes of migration presented by Hmong artists, and explain the history of the Hmong people as they transitioned to the diaspora. Movement and trauma are present in the development of the story cloth, but it is also a form of resilience.

By following the story cloth, the viewer can begin to piece together the histories and folklore of the Hmong people. Before the start of the Vietnam War (1955-1975), there was a large population of Hmong people living as a minority ethnic group in Laos. At the start of the Vietnam War, the majority of the Hmong population was split into two groups, on the same side of the war. There were those who supported the Laotian Government, formerly called the

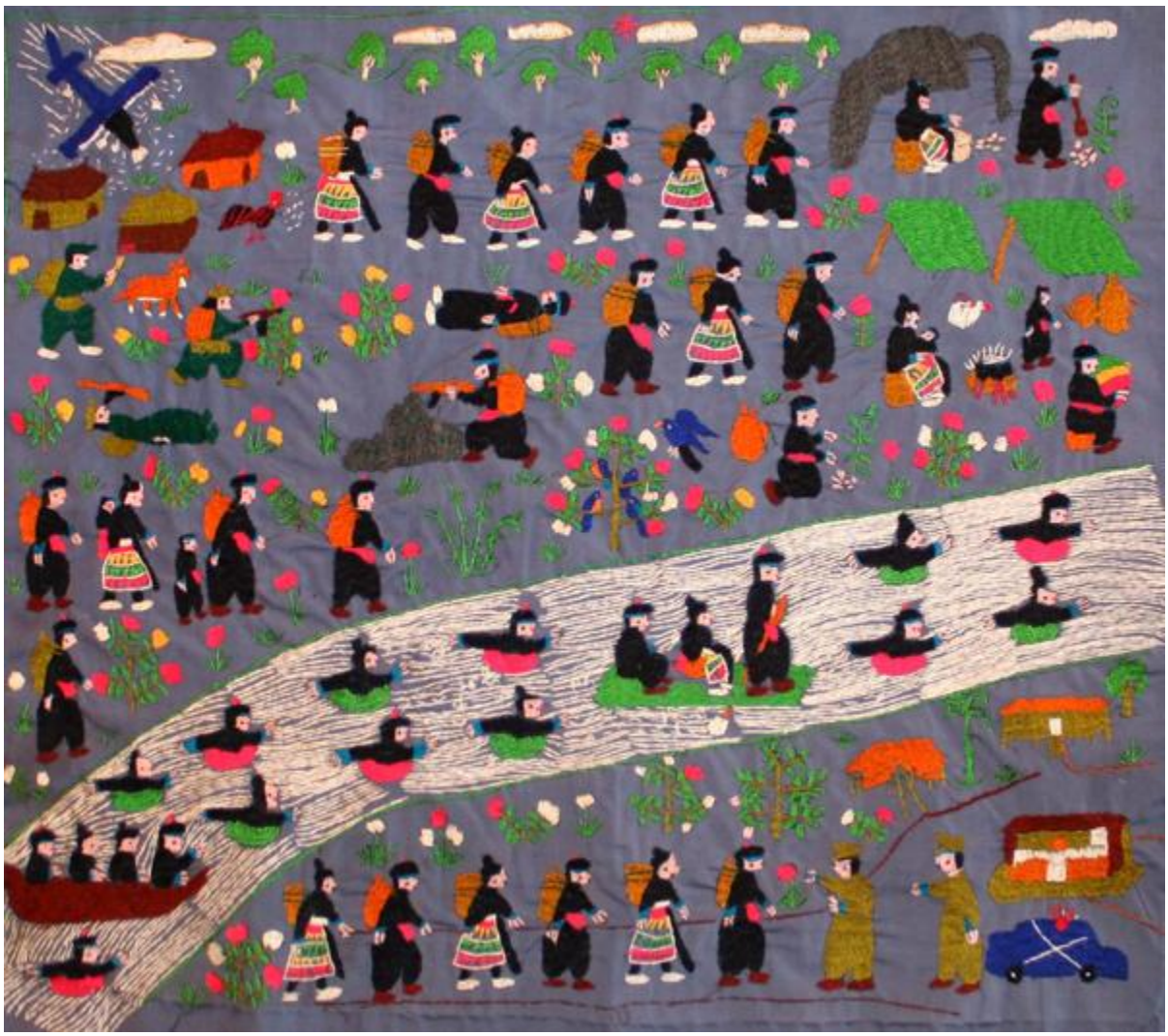

Fig. 5

Unknown artist, Story Cloth, 1980s-1990s, 46x54 cm

Photo by Noah Vang, item currently located at the Hmong Archives in St. Paul, MN

Kingdom of Laos, and enlisted in their Royal Army. The other large group of Hmong people who enlisted to fight in the war fought with an American CIA secret operation, in so-called Special Guerrilla Units. These Special Guerrilla Units fought in what is now known as the Secret War. The Secret War was an American backed defense of Laos from the Northern Vietnamese Army. The CIA recruited people from minority ethnic groups, such as the Hmong, Mien and Khmu people, to fight against the Vietnamese and the communist Pathet Laos. Laos was seen as the gateway to the rest of Southeast Asia falling to communism. During the Red Scare, Laos was also seen as communism's pathway to India, and therefore prevention of the rise of the Pathet Lao became a priority for the American government. As Laos was supposed to be a neutral state during the war, the support of the Americans was hidden, whereas the war in Vietnam was highly televised and reported upon.[27]

Around 19,000 Hmong men enlisted with the CIA backed military at the beginning, with the numbers growing to 40,000 men by 1969. However, by the end of the 1960s, 18,000 of them had been killed.[28] As the Secret War continued into the 1970s, the toll on the Hmong population expanded, with 3,000 people being killed and 6,000 wounded in 1971 alone. This included Hmong civilians, many of whom lived on military bases near the border with Vietnam. When a ceasefire was signed in 1973, forcing the Americans to withdraw support from Laos. Pathet Lao continued to gain control of the country, and became the newly globally recognized government

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[27] For a more detailed timeline, including a history of the Laotian government and American direct involvement in SGUs, see Chia Youyee Vang, *Hmong America: Reconstructing Community in Diaspora*. (Chicago, IL. University of Illinois Press, 2010) 17-43

[28]Numbers and dates for the whole historical section from museum timelines, "Hmong timeline", Minnesota Historical Society, https://www.mnhs.org/hmong/hmong-timeline, "The Foreign-Born Hmong in the United States" Migration Policy Institute, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/foreign-born-hmong-united-states#:~:text=By%20December%201975%2C%20when%20the,led%20army%20and%20their%20families, and "Hmong History", Hmong American Center: A Community Center, https://www.hmongamericancenter.org/hmong-history/#:~:text=The%20Hmong%20migrated%20from%20southern,the%20victory%20of%20the%20communists

in 1975, when the Royal Laotian Government fell and the final American troops were forced to evacuate Northern Laos. As a result, over 120,000 people within the Hmong population became refugees, no longer recognized as Laos citizens. The Hmong people had lost a quarter of their male population, and around 70,000 people in total. Much of the remaining Hmong population in Laos migrated to refugee camps in Thailand, either by airlift or by walking. There was a split in the population of Lao Hmong at this point, as some of those who did not back the CIA were not forced to leave the country, or were able to be repatriated. This means that there is still a strong population of Hmong people in Laos to this day. However, many Hmong people were forced to migrate regardless of their involvement in the war, and the permanent population of Hmong people in Vietnam, Myanmar and Thailand grew. The most significant migration was of over 40,000 Hmong people to Thailand refugee camps by 1975, and an estimated 200,000 over the course of the following years.

Between 1975 and 2004, when the final Thai Hmong refugee camp closed, the United States accepted Hmong refugees coming from camps in Thailand, with the first family settling in Minnesota in 1975. Refugees also settled in other countries, including Australia, France, Canada and Germany, while some remained in Thailand, Southern China and Vietnam as well. There are also Hmong people still waiting to return to Laos, living in Thailand and Vietnam and working for repatriation. Today, over 250,000 Hmong people live in the United States, with populations concentrated in California, Minnesota and Wisconsin. In St. Paul, Minnesota, the Hmong community has a Museum and Cultural Center, serving both as a community space and an archive for objects and art, including many story cloths. The story cloth and *Paj Ntaub* archive in Minnesota is also the home of two embroideries I have cited, and is one of the most significant online databases for Hmong embroidery as well.

The embroidered story cloth is a product of Hmong history of migration and exile. As the Hmong people were moved from place to place, they adapted their cultural practices in order to carry stories and techniques with them. The story cloth is believed to have origins in the early 1980s, but there are some who suggest it could have been the late 1970s as well, as scholarship is widely based on word of mouth from this time period.[29] Due to the story cloth being first developed in refugee camps, the resources for exact dates rely heavily on former refugees, and therefore cannot be exacted. I also believe that the limited dates are not necessarily unfortunate, and the importance of the story cloth innovation far outweighs the lack of paperwork from the time period.

A typical story cloth is a solid colored fabric adorned by brightly colored embroidery, depicting stories of the Hmong people's homelands, lifestyles and their process of displacement and immigration. Its composition is generally centered around a form of movement or direction, visualized by a river, walking pathways, or the figure's gaze. The movement in story cloths can also be shown through text, although it is less common to see written language as opposed to highly intricate images. Many story cloths follow a passage of time within the embroidery narrative, especially in the cloths centered around human figures. However, there are cloths which place their focus on animals, plants, and landscape as well, and these maintain a central feeling of movement by centering the image around a water source or tree as a gathering point. Story cloths also present a condensed and fluid sense of scale, which aids in the visual sense of movement and time. As the embroidered scenes do not have an illusionistic space divided into

[29] Linda Gerdner, *Hmong Story Cloths: Preserving Historical & Cultural Treasures* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing Limited, 2015), 8-9. This text has a very comprehensive and extensive collection of story cloths shown, but is less specific when it comes to historical facts. Gerdner speaks with different individuals who said their story cloth contributions were made in the late 1970s. There are not usually dates or signatures included on the cloths, so proving this is a challenge. Hmong Embroidery, https://hmongembroidery.org/, a Hmong run online archive also cites the 1980s, which backs up the claim that Hmong scholars have made. Vincent K. Her et al., "Hmong American Studies: Bringing New Voices into Multicultural Studies", *Hmong and American: From Refugees to Citizens*, (St. Paul, MN. Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2012) 13. The origins of story cloth are cited as the 1970s and 80s

foreground, middle and background, they allow the story cloth to condense and manipulate space and time to best tell the history the artist is working with. It is important to note that while the story cloth is a visual product of migration and trauma, artists do not normally create images of their new homes following settling into a different country, such as the United States. The cloth is reserved for Hmong history within and surrounding Laos, or for folklore set in their native homelands.[30]

Hmong artists tell Hmong history through embroidery, as the art form is significant to the visual culture and identification of Hmongness.[31] By using embroidery to reflect Hmong history in the story cloth, it is a continuation and also an evolution of communication within Hmong visual vernacular. A story cloth begins with the fabric base, most commonly a piece of cotton blend fabric, with the most popular color being blue, but also showing red, yellow, dark green or off-white. The artist then draws the story outline onto the cloth, in preparation for the embroidery process. The making of the cloth can take several months, so the sketch is important for maintaining the intention of the story progression. Cloths are then embroidered by one or more people: larger pieces often tend to be communal and collaborative. This means that the artist or artists can often be left unnamed, as the final product takes priority over name recognition.

Long, straight satin stitches are used to fill in the initial drawing, followed by smaller, intricate satin stitches to add details. A satin stitch is intended to fill an area completely, without any of the background fabric showing. The satin stitch needs to maintain an even edge and pressure, so as to not warp the fabric and create a smooth finish. The stitch is done by moving

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[30] I have only found one exception to this rule, and it is a story cloth commissioned in 1990 by the Science Museum of Minnesota. Image here: Linda Gerdner, *Hmong Story Cloths: Preserving Historical & Cultural Treasures* (Schiffer Publishing Limited, 2015), 30-31

[31] Discussion on Hmong women as artists and identity in art practice. Geraldine Craig "Stitching Hmongness into Cloth: Pliable Identity and Cultural Agency", *Claiming Place: On the Agency of Hmong Women*, edited by Chia Youyee Vang et al. JSTOR (Minneapolis, MN. University of Minnesota Press, 2016) 195–219. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt1b4cx58.11

from one side of a space to another, in a straight line one after the other. If the fabric were removed, the stitch would create a perfect tube of embroidery thread. The teaching and continuation of the Hmong embroidery tradition is essential to maintaining a Hmong specific cultural lens, especially within the diaspora.

Pre-Vietnam and Secret War, Hmong embroidery was almost exclusively integrated into Hmong clothing, in geometric flower cloths called *Paj Ntaub*, as discussed in Chapter 1. The story cloth marked the first large-scale innovation in Hmong embroidery, as well as the Hmong art forms' first significant interaction with other cultural art styles. Hmong artists were in conversation with Western missionaries, a global art market, and Thai and Lao textile differences, allowing for the development of a demand for Hmong embroidery as it moved away from being solely a cultural form of communication. This is not to discount the work of previous Hmong artists, however, as pre-war Hmong embroidery also had variations and subtle innovations within the traditional style, by clan and by artist.

The history of the story cloth might raise questions of authenticity.[32] However, I would argue that it is a story of innovation and adaptation. The development of the story cloth marked a huge shift in the Hmong visual vocabulary, and brought about the first figural art in Hmong communities. The development of the figure within the story cloth is tied to the Hmong experience of migration and the Thai refugee camps. Following Hmong arrival at refugee camps, there were missionaries from CAMA-Craft (Christian and Missionary Alliance), who worked to promote standardized teaching of Hmong embroidery skills.[33] CAMA-Craft also facilitated the

[32] On the question of authenticity in Native American craft created after the "European Contact," see Ruth Phillips, *Trading Identities: The Souvenir in Native North American Art from the Northeast, 1700-1900*, (United Kingdom, University of Washington Press, 1998)

[33] From article. Dewhurst, C. Kurt et al. "Michigan Hmong Textiles", *Michigan Hmong arts: textiles in transition*, (Grand Rapids, MI. Michigan State University, December 1983) 19. This does not specify which camps, and while this text is from 1983, CAMA website states it did not begin working with Hmong people until 1990. Missionaries also mentioned in "Hmong Story Cloth", Kansas Historical Society, https://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/hmong-story-cloth/10367

sale of Hmong embroidery in Japan and Western Europe to stimulate economic growth in the camp communities.[34] There are also records of the Hmong textile souvenir market during the refugee camp time period, as talked about in "Hmong Commercialized Refugee Art" by Erik Cohen. Cohen cites "several relief organizations" involvement in helping create an outside demand for Hmong refugee art and artists, hoping to create a source of income for people stuck in refugee camps. (footnote here) There are discrepancies in sources surrounding this claim, as some state the involvement of missionaries as a fact, while others relate it as speculation, with some irregularities in dates as well. In either case, Hmong women continued the traditional practice of embroidery at the refugee camps, and exported some of their products for sale. This allowed Hmong artists to create a source of income out of something familiar during an unstable time in their history, and also allowed for a wider recognition of Hmong handicraft styles moving out of the local scale. Hmong artisans shifted to making bedspreads, coasters and wall hangings for these exports, as Hmong clothing and *Paj Ntaub* was not as marketable abroad to a non Hmong audience. Story cloths were bought as souvenirs by visitors to the refugee camps, and also exported to provide some financial stability to Hmong refugee families.[35] The story cloth provided visual interest for the visitors of the camps, and was a way for Hmong women to contribute positively to the image of Hmong refugee camps.

The story cloth is an embroidered wall hanging (stitching hmongness into cloth, p198). As the story cloth is inherently for decorative purposes, this also shifts the style of Hmong textiles pre-Vietnam war. Before the war, textiles were both practical and beautiful, made as

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[34] The scholarship around souvenir art and cultural art as exports is discussed in Ruth Phillips, *Trading Identities: The Souvenir in Native North American Art from the Northeast, 1700-1900*, (United Kingdom, University of Washington Press, 1998). The stimulation of economic growth by women is also written about by Pika Ghosh, *Making Kantha, Making Home: Women at Work in Colonial Bengal*, (Seattle, WA. University of Washington Press, 2020).

[35] Artist Niam Song Leng talks about her story cloth and sale of embroidered goods while in the camps on Kare11 News. "The art, origins of Hmong story cloths and why it shows the resiliency of Hmong women", Kare11, Feb 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OUM-kxKJW68.

clothing, household textiles (blankets, pillows), and were not made to be “art”. The story cloth, on the other hand, was developed as an art textile, to be beautiful rather than practical. The interaction with different art forms created a need for cultural production to become art, so that Hmong visual culture could be viewed as valuable in the way it contributed to global visual culture. While a textile or beautiful embroidery does not necessarily have to be considered “art” to be considered a signifier of culture, creating a style or more “fine art” allowed for a more diverse audience for Hmong textiles.

Despite the interaction with new audiences, the change in Hmong embroidery styles is still autonomous, based in Hmong cultural needs rather than outside demands. While the innovation of the story cloth moved Hmong artists into figural embroidery, the geometric patterns of *Paj Ntaub* did not disappear within the new art style. Story Cloths are usually finished with an outlining border, or picture frame of fabric around the edges of embroidery. The border is geometric, often made with triangles or diamonds of fabric applied by applique or reverse appliqué, repurposing embroidery stitchings used in the making of *Paj Ntaub*. Whether prompted by missionaries or of their own volition, I believe the profitability and interest of the human figure in art was one of the catalyzers for the shift to include figural embroideries in the Hmong embroidery vernacular.

Refugee camps brought about another change within the development of the story cloth, as Hmong artists had access to brighter colors and embroidery threads, creating a new level of excitement and interest within the textiles. While in the past Hmong artists often used reds from (insert here), blacks, blues from indigo and a hemp white or cream, at the refugee camps Hmong artists could begin experimenting with industrially made and dyed threads, with the blues, pinks, greens and yellows still being staples to this day. The bright colors could have been to cater to a

souvenir audience, but also to a Hmong community that was living in a very different landscape to bring about more vivid memories of home.

Another catalyzer for the figural story cloth could be trauma from the war, and the need for cultural documentation. Embroidery is a visual indicator of Hmongness, and the maintenance of this tradition allowed Hmong people to retain their Hmong identity throughout the experience of being forcefully removed from their homes and moved from impermanent settlement to impermanent settlement. The war trauma and uncertainty of future cultural preservation could have encouraged Hmong artists to find a new way of storytelling, not reliant on the presence of oral traditions. The introduction of figures creates an image to which the Hmong viewer can attach themselves, and follow as if writing their own diary. In addition, as the Hmong people lost a significant portion of their population, the generational tradition of verbally handing down folktales and history may have felt insufficient. The story cloth not only transcends language barriers, death of community archivists and the loss of culturally significant objects, it also provides an explanation for the holes in Hmong verbally disseminated history. Capturing the verbal aspect of Hmong history within embroidery brings together two large parts of Hmong identity into one object, preserving not only cultural heritage and understanding, but allowing the physical textile of the story cloth to become a book, a new form of storyteller, for the next generations of Hmong people. The art object becomes a diary articulating community memory. Hmong embroidery artists were able to preserve their experiences and their folklore in cloth, knowing their textiles may travel to different parts of the world, with themselves, their family, or with outsiders to the Hmong communities. This ensured that no matter the outcome of the refugee experience, Hmong history would be passed down globally through the story cloth. There could constantly be new viewers and opportunities for interest and study of Hmong

stories, as story cloths were sold or recovered into Hmong communities. The story cloth is an archive of Hmong history, from their early migration from China to their arrival at refugee camps in Thailand, but also an archive of Hmong migration to the United States and other countries, being an object that Hmong people carried with them.

The introduction of figural images prompted the development of a new canon of symbols for Hmong artists. Several images stand as a representation of migration in Hmong Story Cloths, but none are as prevalent as the river, which carries the Hmong people through their history. The river is an important image both in the literal sense and in a human sense. The Mekong river separates Laos from Thailand, and was the location of migration for the Hmong people who walked from their homes in the Laos highlands to the Northern and Isaan Thai border regions. The river also ties into the traditional Hmong embroidery style, *Paj Ntaub*, with its focus on nature and life, translating the visual world surrounding the community. In the Story Cloth, the river is embroidered in white thread, emphasizing swiftness and danger. The stitches are close together, but unlike the people, animals and buildings depicted, the river is not embroidered using a silk stitch. While the silk stitch creates an illusion of one solid color block, without showing the background cloth, the river is sewn with small gaps in between, allowing the background cloth to show through. As the color of the background cloth is most commonly blue, when the white stitches of the river are applied, it creates a blended, rippling effect. The viewer can imagine that water is moving swiftly, with the surface water being agitated into a white foam, while the undercurrent remains the dark, deep blue of the river water.

A story cloth by the artist Ge Yang (Fig. 6) exemplifies the use of the river to guide Hmong people along their migration path. Yang's embroidery travels from Hmong people's ancient roots in China, to the Laos Secret War, and ending with their arrival at Thai Refugee

Camps. As the image condenses geographical space, it also blurs the Hmong people's migration timeline, with the late 1800s from China into Southeast Asia, and the 1960s and 70s from Laos into Thailand, all along one embroidered river. In the top left corner of the cloth, red clothed warriors on horseback are shown fighting black clothed warriors on foot outside of a walled city. The city buildings have elements of well known Chinese architecture, with curved roof edges and a multi-leveled, pyramid or pagoda style shape. The buildings lead back into dark green mountains, where the river begins, suggesting this is the origin and ancestral home of the Hmong people. Across the river, in the top right corner, Hmong people, identified by black shirts and colorful embroidered skirts, are shown walking a foot path away from a village, carrying brown baskets filled to the brim on their backs. The village is also set back within the green mountains, and I believe that these mountains have a double significance, first as the Hmong people's ancestral homeland, and then as their adopted homeland in the highlands of Laos.

The river in this cloth occupies several facets of the Hmong Story, within the historical context presented in the story cloth and the tradition behind its fabrication. In the story cloth, the river represents two or more different rivers. First, the Mekong river, which flows from the Myanmar-China border until it reaches the sea, traveling through Laos, and creating part of the Laotian-Thai border, the Viet-Laotian border, and moving through Cambodia and Vietnam. The river could also represent a number of rivers in China that the Hmong people lived alongside, thought likely to be the Yellow or Yangtze rivers.[36]

[36] This is an extremely helpful timeline, especially considering the oral nature of Hmong history. "Hmong timeline", Minnesota Historical Society, https://www.mnhs.org/hmong/hmong-timeline. Also see this short website, "Hmong Culture: Origin of the Hmong people", University of Washington, https://depts.washington.edu/triolive/quest/2007/TTQ07085/pages/origin.htm

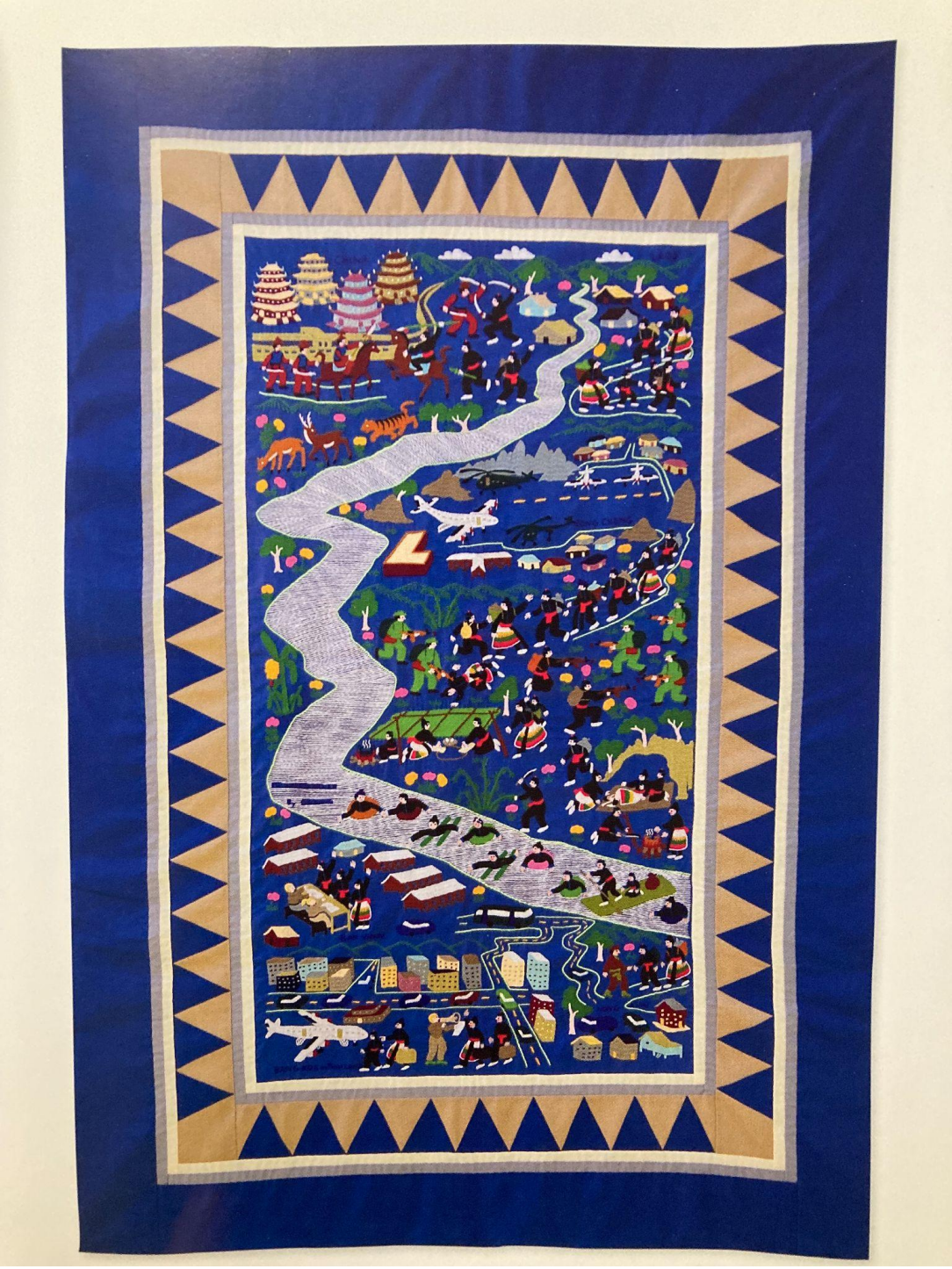

Fig. 6

Ge Yang, Story Cloth, 2003, 57x37 in

Sister piece currently located at Davidson College, NC

The image of the river also interprets the historical path of the Hmong people, even holding them in its waters as they finish their migration into Thailand across the bottom on the embroidery. I believe the river could also be a symbol for the Hmong people, as it does not follow an exact replica of the path traveled, but rather a general sense of movement and change, being more vague the further up in the image and back in history it goes, and becoming more specific and it comes closer to the bottom and present day. This reflects the way human history and memory works, both within an individual and within a cultural group. The most recent memories are easy to relay to another person, but the specific details fade with time, leaving landmarks and points of reference upon which new memories can be built. Movement in history is also not unidirectional, and the river reflects this push and pull. Straight white stitches over the dark blue cloth are used to create the rippling effect, and the illusion carries the eyes of the viewer up and down the image. This makes room for a cyclical viewing of the cloth, enhancing the presence of the many Hmong people who followed this path, and the continual process of migration.

From the top right corner, the footpath path leads the figures to an airfield, where several military helicopters and commercial planes await. This airfield is identified in the image with text as Long Cheng, commonly romanized as Long Tieng airfield, the site of the first evacuation of Hmong refugees to Udon Thani Thai province. Thirty thousand Hmong people came to the airfield hoping to be evacuated to Thailand, but only a fraction of the people were able to get onto the airplanes, around 2,500 people.[37]

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[37]Numbers and dates for the whole historical section from museum timelines, "Hmong timeline", Minnesota Historical Society, https://www.mnhs.org/hmong/hmong-timeline; Chia Youyee Vang, *Hmong America: Reconstructing Community in Diaspora*, (Chicago, IL. University of Illinois Press, 2010) xx-xxii; and "Hmong History", Hmong American Center: A Community Center, https://www.hmongamericancenter.org/hmong-history/#:~:text=The%20Hmong%20migrated%20from%20southern,the%20victory%20of%20the%20communists

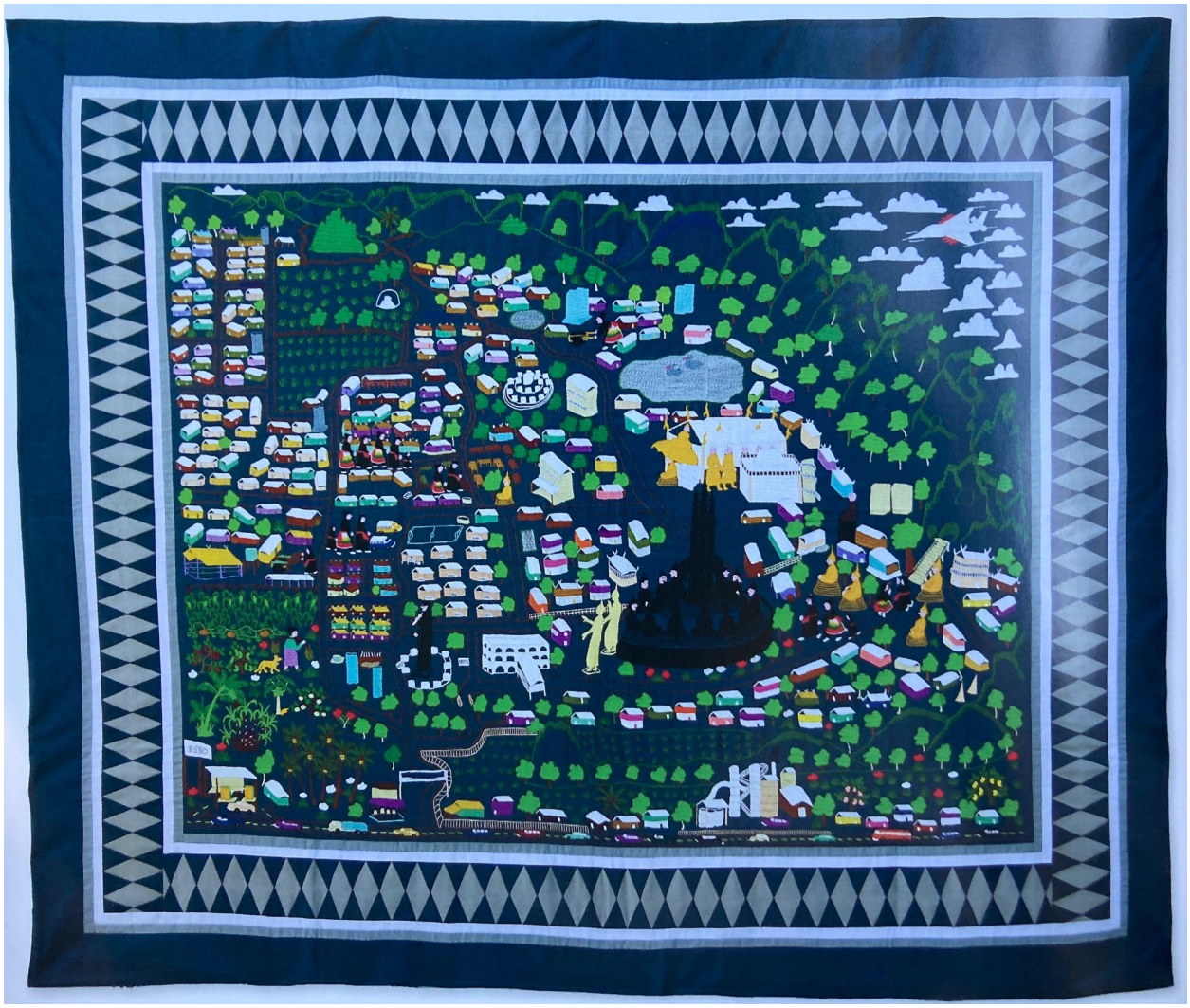

Fig. 7

Unknown Artist, Wat Thamkrabok, 75x63 in

Made by an artist who lived at Wat Thamkrabok refugee camp, Thailand. Location of work unknown.

The story cloth then shows the path continuing past the airfield, depicting the most traveled migration route of the Hmong people. On the middle right of the images, the refugees meet with green clad soldiers carrying large brown guns. Some of the refugees are depicted holding guns as well, and a woman's body lies on the ground at the feet of the soldiers. In the center of the image, at the edge of the river, the refugees are shown resting under temporary shelter and cooking makeshift meals. In this story cloth, there is no differentiation between time and space during the middle transit periods, which allows the viewer to see the migration as continuous. Thousands of refugees poured out of Laos and into Thailand over the course of over 30 years, many following the same path. The migration depicted in the story cloth can be interpreted as one small group's journey, or, like the river, can represent the constant flow of people, and in turn, the constant death they faced on their way to safety.

As the Hmong figures cross the river into Thailand, the artist shows a strong separation between the lush greens and vegetation of the transitory jungle in Laos to the entrance into the industrialized, dense refugee camps. Filling the bottom left corner of the cloth, apartment buildings, single family homes, roads and long red buildings, presumably for storage or mass housing, are scaled down in comparison to the human figures, creating a feeling of busyness and claustrophobia. The larger than life nature of the Hmong figures in the city create a disjointed sense of belonging in the urban setting. This gives the viewer the impression that although the refugee camps do not have the violence and fear of death present as the war did, it is still not familiar or comfortable for the new Hmong residents.

The transition from river to road within the story cloth as the system for migration is also significant. The Hmong people, before living in refugee camps, had a rural, agricultural, trading and hunting based lifestyle. Therefore, the migration transition from river to road also reflects the

shift of Hmong culture into an urban and more globalized setting. Hmong people had interacted with Western and other Southeast Asian cultures before immigration, but had mostly remained on their own lands, and in one type of landscape: mountainous and green, tropical jungle environments. The refugee camps in Northeast Thailand were the opposite of this, lowland rice fields open to airflow, with fewer trees and limited mountains. There were also Thai military and missionary presences, such as CAMA-Craft, in the refugee camps, emphasizing the impermanence of the Hmong people's situation.

Such impermanence is reflected in the story cloth depicting the Wat Thamkrabok refugee camp (Fig. 4) in Thailand, which gives an example of an embroidery based entirely within the refugee camp. Scattered across the center and left of the image, tightly knit pastel houses are protected by a dark green mountain range on the right. The Wat Thamkrabok and refugee camp are also contained by the mountains, as if being held in or blocked, emphasized by the density of the houses. The central building is a tall black pagoda, the Thai Buddhist temple monument in view from all corners of the camp, creating a hierarchy of religion over living space. There are fewer people present in the image, and there is a sense of slowness without the river rushing through the central composition. Hmong figures, identified by black shifts and Hmong embroidered skirts, tower over the tens of tiny buildings, each figure being double or triple the size of a house. In combination, the story cloth gives the viewer a sense of safety, due to the beauty and leisurely pace of the imagery, but then follows with suffocation and discomfort, as if the figures do not belong in the environment in which they are placed. The only part of the cloth where a figure accurately and comfortably reflects the size of their surroundings is in the bottom left corner, where one woman is tending a garden, fitting into the Hmong agricultural identity.

Despite the Hmong people's lack of agency within their own physical placement, the story cloth provides visual evidence of a resilience within the Hmong community and culture. The continued viewership and preservation of story cloths by Hmong communities in the United States, as well as the physical travel of Hmong embroidered works, whether as personal items or souvenirs, is a testament to the ingenuity and adaptability of the Hmong people. In general, story cloths are no longer found in production today, as Hmong embroidery teachers focus on maintaining traditional *Paj Ntaub* techniques for future generations. Even so, past makers of story cloths are still living in Hmong diasporic communities, and story cloths are collected and archived by the Hmong community. One such archive, the Hmong Embroidery Archive, contains not only many story cloths, but also shows the way the tradition has built on itself over time. While some cloths were sold, some were kept as keepsakes, but their themes built onto each other, creating a flow of time, storytelling and setting.[38] The story cloth holds the resilient history of the Hmong people, and passes it down for the generations to come.

[38] Themes of Story Cloths include narratives of moving from Laos into Thailand over the Mekong river, village life of farming and peaceful natural settings. Folktales often have written words along with pictures. Some cloths have larger global context of neighboring communities, in Thailand and in Laos

Chapter 3

Hmong Clothing: Unity of Past and Present

Centered within the Hmong visual language lie Hmong garments, a portable, wearable form of Hmong textile art. While *paj ntaub* (as discussed in chapter one) on their own can be used to make wall hangings, home textiles or can even be sold as souvenirs, their primary purpose was to be worn, and used to embellish aprons, waist sashes, skirts and jackets. They are both the primary object but also an element in the larger Hmong textile tradition. The Story Cloth, on the other hand, is located at a specific moment in Hmong history, in relation to trauma and change. Hmong clothing, however, remains as a constant, a completed art form that will remain significant through changes in place and time, due to its practicality and need, and its ability to communicate cultural meaning. To understand the significance of Hmong clothing today, I will first examine different traditional Hmong clothing styles, to create a base context for the viewing of modern Hmong textile and garment interpretations. In Hmong culture, clothing serves both the purpose of maintaining warmth and as protection from the elements, but also to distinguish between different sects of the Hmong ethnicity, therefore holding life and community in the stitches of the fabric. In the Hmong diaspora, Hmong garments and Western garments have blended to create a new style of Hmong clothing to fit the adapting culture. Green, White and Striped Hmong cultures have merged certain textile styles as well, emphasizing the solidarity and resilience of Hmong people within a formerly unfamiliar environment. The Hmong people have developed a new Hmong-American identity, aided by the community's support for the reconstruction of their embroidery and garment traditions.

The next three image figures present examples of the three main Hmong groups' female garment styles, White, Striped and Green Hmong dress. The images all come from the Hmong Cultural Center and Museum in St. Paul, Minnesota, and therefore have been curated, at least in part, by Hmong community historians. The garments are displayed on dolls, marking a present curation of pre-migratory textile identities, contextualizing the past within a diasporic space. The miniature sizing and fabrication of the garments is significant, as the Cultural Center either had them specifically made for the museum, or a Hmong child re-dressed their doll to have clothing that represented their personal background and cultural history.[39] Full sized clothing was likely made for a person, and had a lifespan as a practical garment. In a museum space, on the other hand, a full size garment that has already been worn for a significant amount of time may not be in good condition, or clothing may not have been able to travel throughout the many migrations of the Hmong people. The use of the miniature ensures the vision of the curators, and limits the amount of wear the garment may encounter, being affected only by light and time, without factors of weathering and deterioration due to movement.

The use of miniature dolls gives the viewer the ability to see the garments as a whole, and also as something distant. They are complete, a full body shown wearing the clothing, with mutable arms and legs, as well as a facial expression. Despite the overexaggerated features and glassy eyes, the use of the doll allows the viewer to see an ideal version of Hmong costumes, the positions and dress of the dolls creating a story and giving it a form of life. On the other hand, on a mannequin, the garments are displayed without heads, arms and legs, creating a more static exhibition style.

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[39] For more information on the miniature, see Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, 37-69 (Duke University Press, 1993). I found her discussions on the miniature in relation to the dollhouse, as the doll represents a completeness, to be apt to the relationship between intersections on modern and traditional Hmong clothing as presented on the dolls

It is significant to note that each outfit is worn not by an Asian doll, but instead a blonde or brunette, white skinned, blue eyed doll. The presence of the blonde, blue eyed figure is both interesting and off putting, as its presence can be both comforting and childlike, being plastic dolls that Hmong community members could have played with growing up, or representative of underlying internalized colorism within the Hmong and Southeast Asian beauty standards. The use of the white dolls brings up a question of access, as the dolls were made in the United States, and likely chosen for their use as miniature models within Hmong scholarship and archives. A question can be posed here: were the dolls chosen for their whiteness, or because there was only the option of Western-caucasian figures? A hybrid cultural experience is formed when viewing the dolls, bringing together Western and Hmong fashion, but using elements of people versus garments, rather than finding compromise and interpretations within the designs of fabric and clothing.

Each miniature dress draws upon the specific garment styles among different Hmong communities, in an attempt to preserve the traditional identities of distinct Hmong groups. In fig. 8, a doll is garbed in traditional Xieng Khuang White Hmong women's attire.[40] Beginning with the head, the doll is wearing a wrapped headpiece, which covers the crown of the head down to the nape of the neck, allowing her hair to peek out and go down her back. The hat is dark blue, with a white embroidered border framing the face, then traveling up to create an X shape crossing above the forehead and moving down to the back of the head. The doll is wearing a black blouse with dark blue cuffs on the sleeves, and a pink bow or collar covering the top of the neck. The front of the blouse is decorated by rows and rows of necklaces, silver and gold jewelry

[40] It is important to note that in other provinces, White Hmong women wear black skirts, but the name is defined by the white pleated skirts of the Xieng Khuang White Hmong and their shared language.

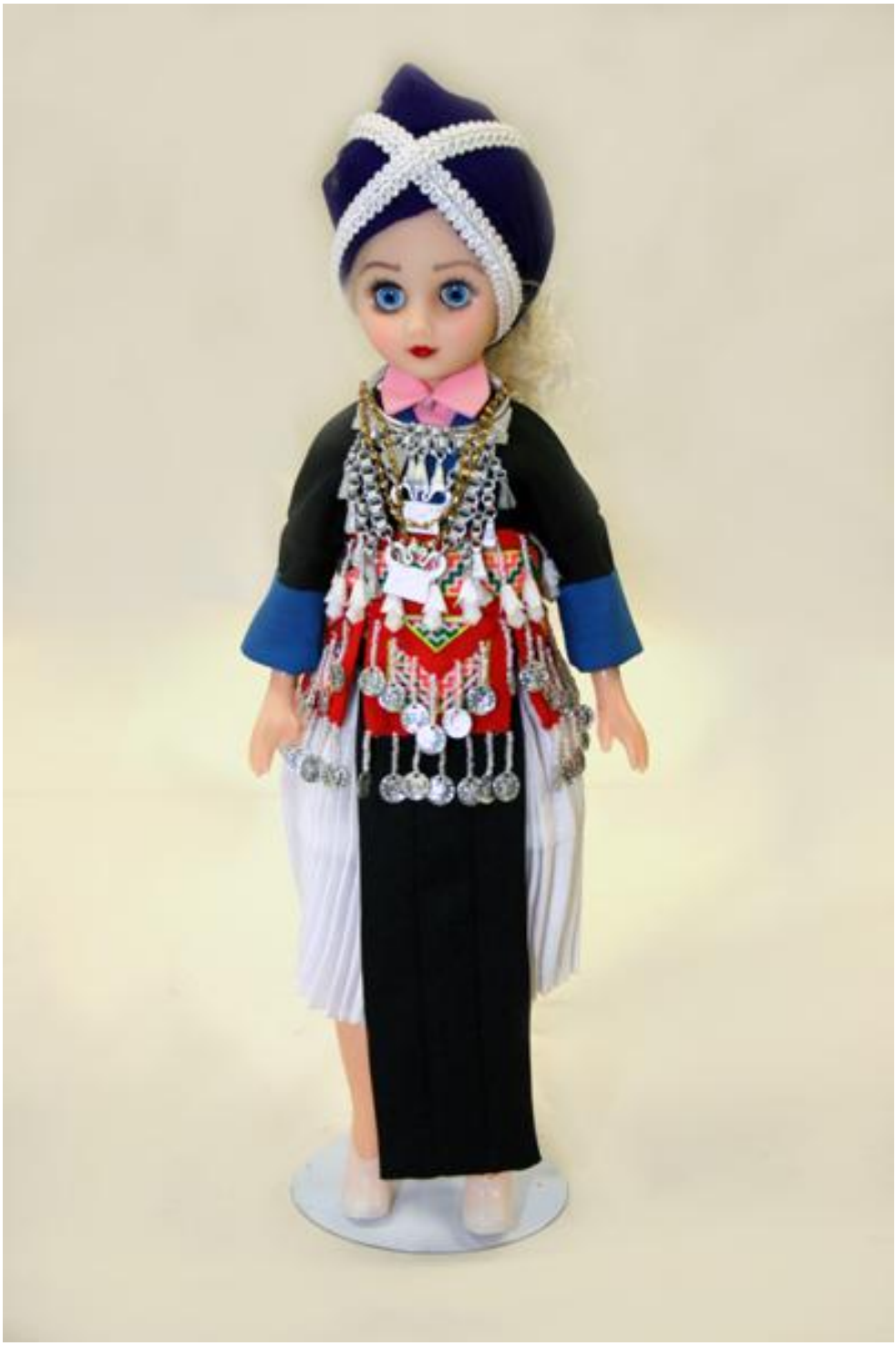

Fig. 8

Unknown Artist, White Hmong Clothing

Photo by Xai S. Lor, item at the Hmong Cultural Center

with layering chains lengthened by rows of hanging pendants or coins. Hmong attire is often adorned with necklaces, called *xauv nyiaj*, which translates to necklace in Hmong. More specifically, *xauv nyiaj* are layers of circular silver chain links, either in thinner strands holding coins and decorative metal plates, or bound together to create an armor-like breastplate effect. The base of the necklace is held by a thick, heavy silver band, much like a bangle, that can be hung around the neck. Some necklaces are connected in the front of the chest, while others hang down like two metal tassels draping down from the collarbones.

The waist area of the doll is wrapped by a red cloth sash, embroidered with pink, white and green geometric patterns, creating a rising and falling step motif. The red cloth wraps a band around the waist, and then creates three small panels to cover the stomach and the hips, almost like an apron, allowing the fabric of the skirt to be visible as well. Attached to the bottom of the waist sash are small, flat, circular beads, like silver coins which create a whimsical tassel effect. Finally, the doll is wearing a white, calf length skirt with very small pleats, creating volume and movement around the legs. The skirt creates a bubble-like shape going out from the hip area and back in underneath the knees. The white skirt is covered in the front by an ankle length strip of black fabric, which appears to almost be an extension of the black coloring from the top of the blouse.

The doll is positioned stiffly, making the clothing appear as though it does not have any movement. The garment displays heavy layering of sashes, shirts, skirt waistbands and belts around the waist area, covering the stomach section very thickly. A viewer could assume the clothes and layers would be stiff on a human body as well, limiting range of motion, but the reality is the opposite. In videos of young Hmong girls wearing modified White Hmong clothing, with the bottom of the skirt hitting just above rather than directly below the knee area, the

textiles flow smoothly and there is enough range of motion to dance.[41] Even without the modified length, White Hmong skirts have a significant range of motion due to their many small pleats, meaning the actual area of fabric moving out from the waist is much larger and more fluid than the initial straight silhouette. The costume leaves the legs free to move, perhaps providing modesty and warmth while remaining a practical and workable garment.

While the miniature size of the garments limits the ability to explore details of White Hmong costume, fig. 8 presents the viewer with signifiers of traditional dress, identifying the clothing as White Hmong due to the headpiece and white skirt. These larger indicators make the doll appear more as an idea of Hmong traditional dress, inhibited due to the intention of the garment. Rather than using traditional textiles and techniques, the museum has created an industrial prototype, leaving the garment to become an educational tool rather than a viable historical costume example. However, the garment is still an example of White Hmong dress, with the makers inadvertently designing a miniature of modern-traditional White Hmong clothing, rooted in cultural memories of designs and motifs rather than tactile fabrics.

The dolls present the shillouettes and motifs used in pre-migratory traditions of Hmong textiles, which then would be adopted and adapted in modern Hmong dress. Fig. 9 presents an example of female Striped Hmong attire, in which pants are worn by women, subverting expectations of traditional clothing, especially in rural or agricultural communities. Striped Hmong clothing is identified by the blue bands, or stripes, encircling the sleeves of the garment. Despite the similarities between the White and Striped Hmong languages, their garments show a significant difference in style and construction, beginning with the headpiece, and continuing

[41] Hmong Children's dance group, see *Venus, 3rd Place, dance competition round 2 Group A at Hmong La Crosse New year Sep, 2022*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WRLXv7Tn8Tk

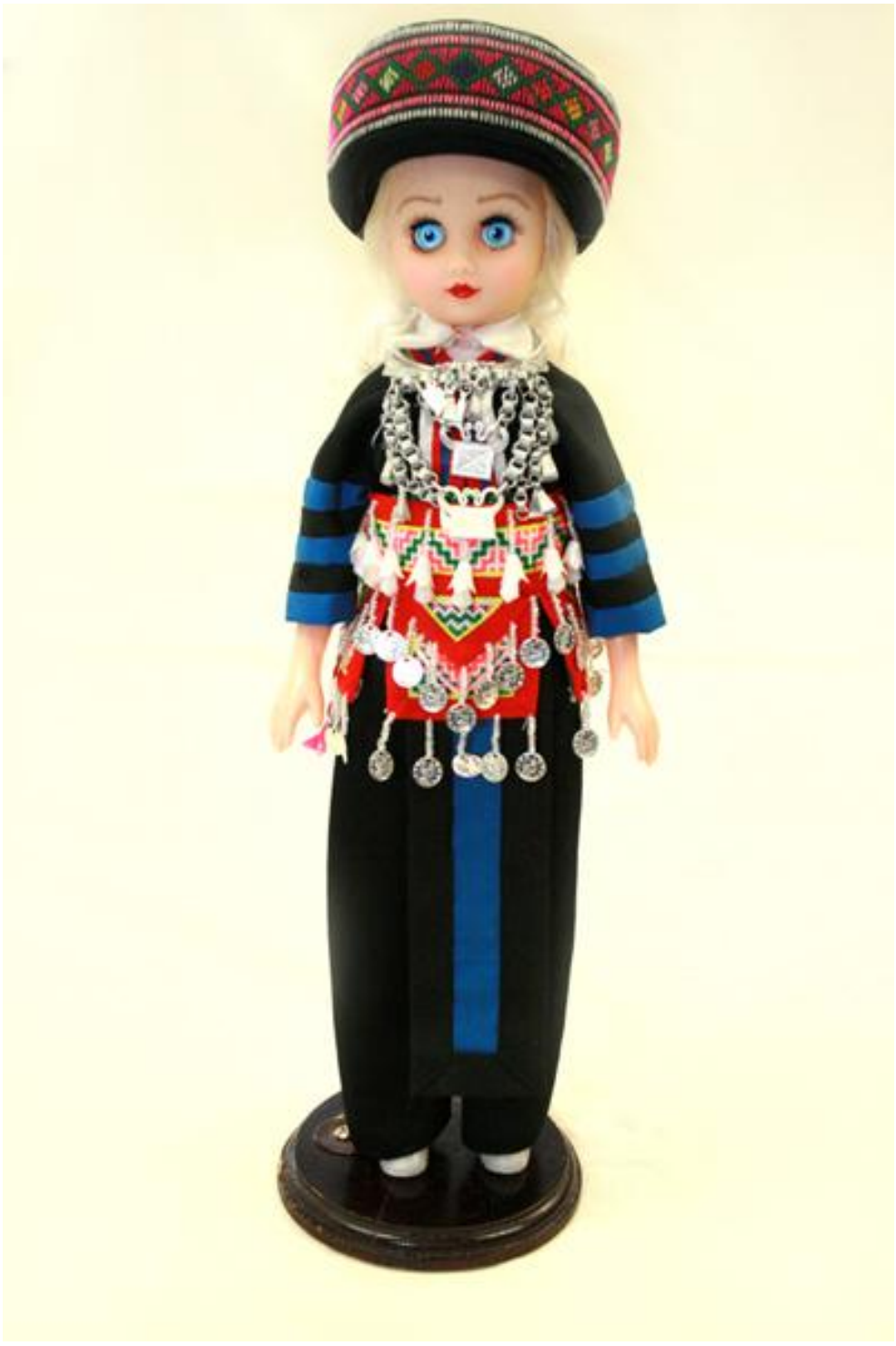

Fig. 9

Unknown Artist, Striped Hmong Clothing

Photo by Xai S. Lor, item at the Hmong Cultural Center

into the bottoms. The headpiece is wrapped around the doll's head in a cylindrical shape, with a flat top and rounded edges. To form the cylindrical shape around the head, the fabric is wrapped around the head moving from right to left. The headdress is made of black fabric with an embroidered red band encircling the widest part of the headpiece. The embroidery is accented by a green diamond pattern, creating a chain that encircles the headdress along with the red band, and a white and pink border embroidered around the circumference as well.

Moving down to the blouse, the doll appears to be wearing a black, quarter sleeved top with blue fabric bands moving up the sleeves of the garment, creating three thick stripes. At the neck, two small triangles of white fabric create the effect of a collar, seeming to form a support for several rows of heavy silver necklaces, or *xauv nyiaj*, made of circular linked chains. Visible under the necklaces are red, green and white stripes traveling down the front of the blouse. These are covered by two red embroidered sashes or aprons moving around the chest and the waist area, with a pink, green and white steps motif embedded into the fabric. The three costumes made for the dolls all contain the same embroidery, fabric color, and applique elements, suggesting they were made by the same artist, or following a specific plan. If the embroidery was on a full sized garment, it would likely be made using the reverse appliqué embroidery technique specific to the Hmong *paj ntaub* textile vernacular. The use of the same textiles for examples of different Hmong groups' examples speaks to the relationship of the Hmong groups becoming a communal Hmong diaspora. While in the past White, Striped and Green Hmong would have commonly employed different embroidery techniques, colors and motifs, the doll figures are all dressed using a brightly colored step motif, more often made of industrial dyed fabric and used in Modern Hmong clothing.

The red aprons are embellished with small hanging silver coins and tassels, creating a sense of movement and noise or musicality within the clothing. The aprons are called *hlab nyiaj*, or money belts, due to the addition of the coins, and used to indicate the courting age of young Hmong men and women.[42] Coins attached to Hmong celebratory garments were traditionally real coins, with surviving examples and images using the French Indochina coin (fig. 10). In present day, play money or fake coins are often used, allowing Hmong girls and boys to wear *hlab nyiaj* without indicating their marrying age. When worn, belts and sashes adorned with coins create an illusion of sparkling and glittering stars, as movement shakes the coins and constantly illuminates the shifts in light reflections.[43] The coins also make noise as they hit against one another, creating both a light and sound exhibition within the garment. The clinking of the coins would likely draw attention to the location or the dancing of the wearer by other community members or people from a different family clan.

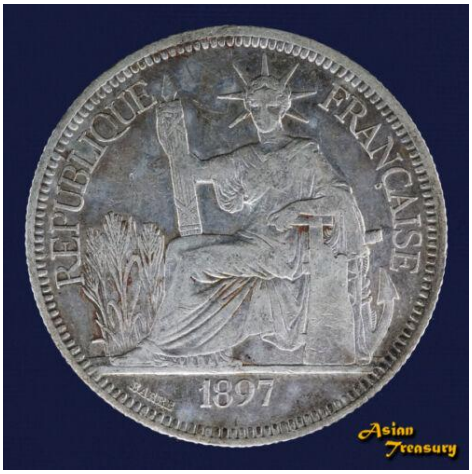

Fig. 10

One of the most significant differences between the White Hmong and Striped Hmong clothing styles in the presented examples is the transition from a white, flowing, pleated mid-length skirt to a straight, slim, ankle length black pants. The pants are covered in the front and back by a long, straight, black panel panel of fabric decorated with a vertical blue stripe, creating the illusion of a skirt as it covers the split of the doll's legs. Pants are traditionally common for both men and women in Striped Hmong culture, but rather than the slim style, pants had a wide leg silhouette, perhaps altered by the miniature size of the doll model. With the wide

[42] Information from Hmong Embroidery Archive, https://www.hmongembroidery.org/hmongattire5.html
[43] For an example of dancing with coins, see *Serene Sun, Dance competition at Hmong Mn new year round 2* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mEXz7ve2dDM

leg silhouette and the long embroidered panels, Striped Hmong women's pants would maintain their practicality while allowing for an illusion of a full, feminine skirt, a larger silhouette than shown in fig. 9.

Changes in the tradition are further exemplified in fig. 11, which presents an example of Green (Blue) Hmong female attire, named for the indigo batik skirts traditionally worn by Green Hmong women. As explained in chapter 1, in the past there would be very little red or other colors present due to insufficient access to different color dyes. However, in the modern figure, vibrant colors are incorporated into the skirts as well, leading to indigo batik coupled with *paj ntaub* and embroidered transitions, as shown in the example fig. 2, with indigo batik and red embroidered sections of the skirt. In fig. 11, however, the representation of indigo batik is very slim, and bright reds and pinks are favored in its place.

The Green Hmong doll references a transition from Hmong people's access to indigo batik, moving toward modern textiles while still maintaining a traditional silhouette emphasizing the cultural maintenance of drawing on the Hmong garment canon. Unlike the examples of White and Striped Hmong costumes, fig. 11 embraces hybridity, calling back to traditional batik colors, but placing focus on modern techniques and desires of the Hmong wearers, perhaps signifying the relationship between the Hmong people and traditional textile practices. The design of the modern Green Hmong skirt, including the example worn by the doll, posits that it may be more significant to maintain the emotion and motifs of Hmong visual vernacular, rather than the colors and fabrics. The communicative properties of Hmong textiles lie within the story created by the images, maintaining the autonomy of Hmong designs and intentions despite a shift in visual effect.

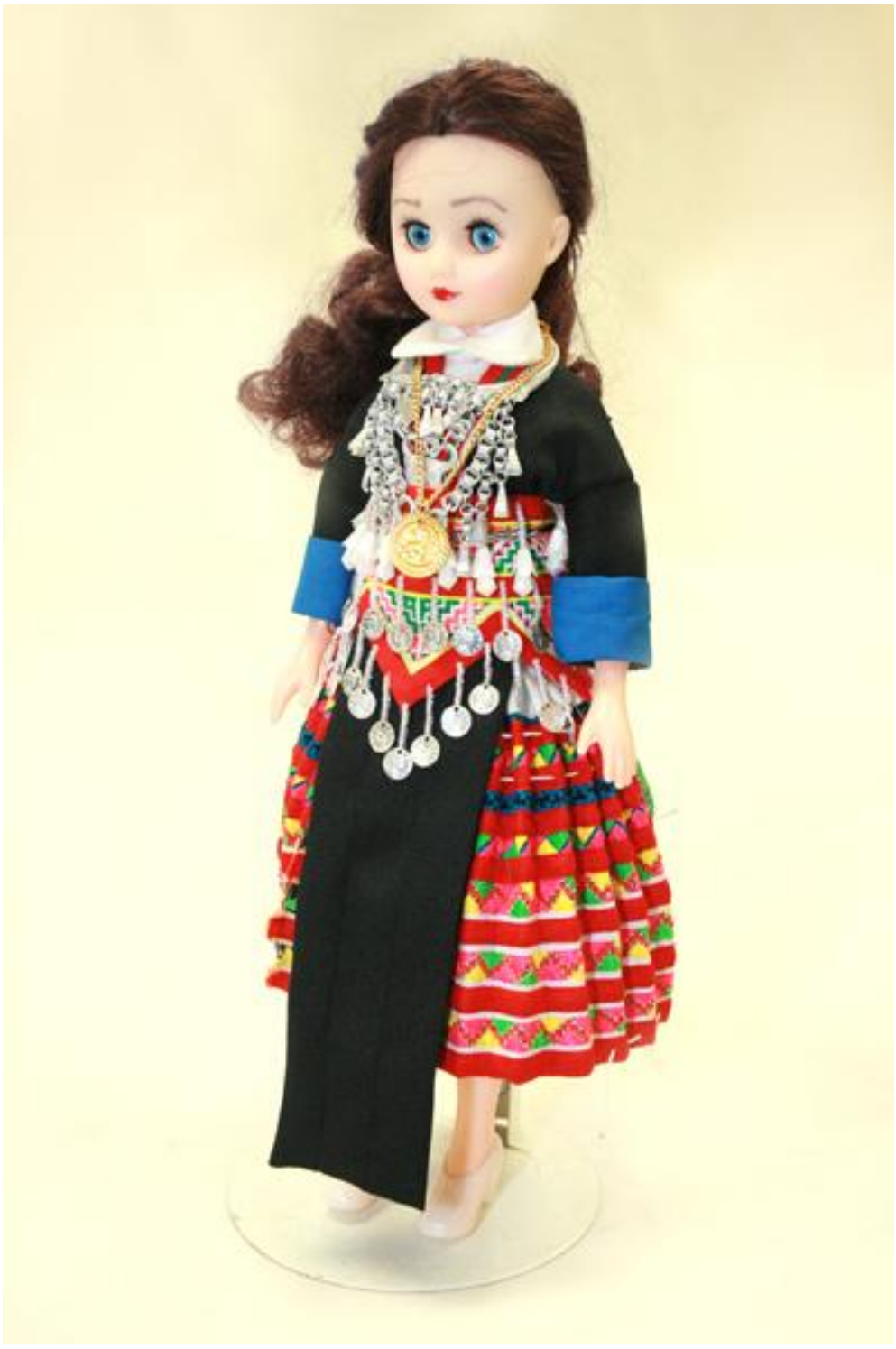

Fig. 11

Unknown Artist, Green Hmong Clothing

Photo by Xai S. Lor, item at the Hmong Cultural Center

In contrast to the White and Striped Hmong, the Green Hmong doll is not wearing a headdress, which is common in the Green Hmong costume. While Green Hmong headpieces do exist, they more often wear White Hmong headdresses today, in the turban or wrap styles with the X shaped applique border. The Green Hmong headpiece sometimes referenced is called a rooster's comb hat (fig.12), which emulates the shape of the rooster head comb, and is embellished by many hanging coins.

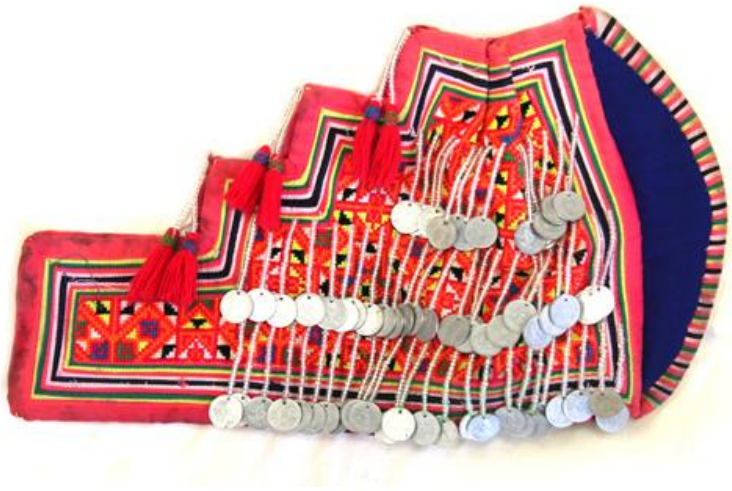

Fig. 12

The doll presents a black blouse with bright blue cuffed sleeves, and a white, green and red V shaped design moving vertically down the breastbone area. The chest is covered by a *xauv nyiaj* necklace similar to the white and striped Hmong examples, but also holds a large gold medallion necklace as well. There is a sash or apron which is placed directly under the bust area, in the same red fabric with white, green and yellow embroidered step motifs as the previous examples, embellished with small silver hanging coins. The largest difference in the Green Hmong ensemble lies in the skirt, a red base with brightly colored embroidery and indigo batik circumambulating the garment to create a striped effect. Laying down the front of the skirt is a long black panel, reaching all the way to the ankle area. On the skirt's fabric the designs are layered, stacking red, batik, red, and embroidery on top of eachother. Towards the waistband, the red is alternated with indigo batik, and reaching the hem brightly colored embroidery takes its place instead. The circling embroidery showcases a repetition of pink triangles perhaps layering the mountain embroidery motif. The pattern presents two mountain designs facing each other to

connect their peaks, both separated and accented with small red diamonds tracing their division. Green and yellow triangles are embedded into the pink design, making pops of springtime neons. The alternating colors bring a feeling of youth and energy to the garment, as if the skirt could be an exploration of the change from winter into spring.

In the past, Green (Blue) Hmong could be identified by indigo batik skirts, and White Hmong specialized in reverse appliqué *paj ntaub*. While the embroidery technique was initially practiced by White Hmong, Green and Striped Hmong adopted the reverse appliqué practice as well when migrating to the United States and other diasporas. In a similar vein, the White and Striped Hmong today wear adapted forms of Green Hmong skirts, showing off bright colors and layered patterned designs to compliment their *hlab nyiaj* money belts. The visual and tactile unity between the different Hmong groups formed by clothing could be due to a need to preserve Hmongness, in a culture where they are considered to be a singular group, a monolith, without considering the nuances within the Hmong ethnicity. This is true also within the broader Asian-American society, as Hmong and other Asian people are often seen as first Asian, without thought to their ethnic and cultural background. Textiles create a visual bond between the Hmong people, thus increasing their strength of numbers to protect their identities within the Hmong diaspora community and, more broadly, within the American society.

Moving away from the cultures of handmade craft and into globalized lifestyles, Hmong clothing today is often made by machines, with industrial technologies allowing for higher volume production and less intense manual labor. In the past, one garment could take several months, from the making and dyeing of the textiles to the embroidery and fabrication of the garment. With cheaper textiles such as polyester and heavier cotton blends, as well as access to

different materials outside of Southeast Asia, there is less incentive for young Hmong people to embroider their own clothes.

In Vietnam, Hmong souvenirs sold by Hmong vendors often come from Chinese factories, as mass production becomes easier and more affordable.[44] When interviewing Steve Thao of Center for Hmong Arts and Talent, or CHAT, he explained his most recent trip to Hmong villages in Vietnam, and their industrialized souvenir practices.[45] Rather than selling handmade embroidered items, Chinese factories fabricate Hmong designs machine embroidered onto clothing, bags, coin purses and jackets. These Chinese made items are then sold by Hmong souvenir vendors, who are able to save time, money and labor while still maintaining a sense of authenticity for people visiting the "Hill Tribe Villages." In Northern Thailand, cities like Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai have a large tourist population year round, creating an ideal situation in which Hmong and other ethnic minorities can market their art, goods and crafts as souvenirs for visitors to bring back from vacation. Hmong goods are not only marketed towards tourists, as Thai visitors from other parts of the country will purchase Hmong goods for fashion and style purposes, or to access a lifestyle more authentic to the countryside.[46] The business of selling souvenirs allows Hmong people to commodify their culture for the price of economic stability within their communities.

The Hmong souvenir market is present in the United States as well, at markets such as Hmong Village in St. Paul, Minnesota, and smaller Hmong dual grocery stores and markets in Southern California. At the Hmong Village in St. Paul, MN, an abundance of machine made

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[44] Interview with Steve Thao, 2023

[45] For more information of the commodification of traditional practices by a minority group and the souvenir, see Ruth Phillips, *Trading Identities The Souvenir in Native North American Art from the Northeast, 1700-1900*, (University of Washington Press, 1998)

[46] For more information on minority ethnic groups using their art to support financially communities, look to Erik Cohen, *The Commercialized Crafts of Thailand*, (University of Hawaii Press, 2000)

Hmong clothing is sold, tailored and purchased by those in the Hmong community. The most common form of clothing sold is machine embroidered, with a few specific patterns being recognized and repeated throughout most of the garments. Some of the most common motifs include the step motif and the mountain motif, as well as bright, thinly striped Green Hmong derived skirts. Pinks, oranges, yellows and blues are repeated throughout the designs' colors, with an emphasis on warmer, bright, saturated tones. Flowers, stars and suns are also very prevalent throughout the market's clothing, with circular, triangular and zig-zag shapes forming most of the different designs. The limited shape elements suggest that machine embroidery has limitations in the number of motifs it can create, or that some motifs become more visually similar due to the common shape elements used. However, such limitations by machines speak to the ingenuity of the mass production designers today, as well as the mastery of Hmong women who have practiced and taught embroidery over the past decades.

The Hmong Village has other garments for sale including mini and midi skirts, with Hmong *paj ntaub* embroidery forms printed onto them, a plastic textile without the texture and tactility that embroidery brings. As Hmong girls have grown up in the United States, the desire for shorter skirt styles without pleats and aprons has expanded. The White Hmong skirt styles, while maintaining their pleats and color, have shortened significantly, as revealing styles become more popular within Western fashion. The people selling Hmong clothing then adapt to incorporate new cuts of clothing while still including elements of traditional Hmong dress, reimagined to be fast fashion and easy to wear. Despite the modernized versions of traditional garments, there are also traditional Lao and Thai dresses for sale, with Hmong people adopting the cultures of their past homes and long term residences. The blending of past and present is

evident within Hmong commercial garments, holding onto traditional visual values and motifs while adopting them into the faster pace of the Western globalized market.

Despite the access to industrial made garments, there are efforts to reinvigorate the Hmong hand embroidery traditions. Suzanne Thao in St. Paul, Minnesota is a Hmong artist who teaches classes on traditional *Paj Ntaub* embroidery techniques, passing down verbal culture of the past to the written and visual culture of the present generations.[47] The introduction of YouTube as a classroom has made it possible for Hmong stories to be disseminated across the globe, and provides an online database for young Hmong people hoping to practice traditional Hmong textile making. Relearning cultural practices can also provide a sense of home and identity for some young Hmong women in the United States who choose to learn embroidery and incorporate Hmong textile practices into art. The reconnection with ancestral teachines stands as a way to heal post-war culture loss and trauma.[48] There is a need to not only preserve memory, but to create or rediscover identity. Story cloths and *paj ntaub* provide a place to find identity without the need for communication within complex family relationships. The physical textiles can communicate the need for reconnection, even if the artist or their family have time or distance between them.

In my interview with Steve Thao of Center for Hmong Arts and Talent (CHAT), he discussed the art and fashion developments on both small and large scales within the Midwest and global Hmong communities. As part of an annual Hmong Fashion show in St. Paul, Hmong fashion designers develop a collection for an exhibition to engage and gather the Hmong community and audiences within the fashion industry. For the past sixteen years, CHAT has been

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[47]Information on Suzanne Thao and Project *Paj Ntaub*. "Project *Paj Ntaub*", Hmong Museum, https://hmongmuseummn.org/current/project-paj-ntaub/. Classes also taught in Long Beach, California, see Hmong Association of Long Beach https://www.hmongassociationoflongbeach.org/paj-ntaub.html

[48] Read about Maikue Vang in Geraldine Craig, "Stitching Hmongness into Cloth," in *Claiming Place: On the Agency of Hmong Women*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 196

putting on a Hmong fashion show, called “Fresh Traditions,” showcasing the innovations and personal interpretations of Hmong textile traditions within the Hmong diasporic community. Each year's show has a theme, and supports several Hmong designers, often between 5 and 10 different collections or artists. The theme of the show works to maintain visual cultural traditions, while still allowing for innovations in community expression.

The modern Hmong clothing showcased in the CHAT fashion show presents ideas of traditional Hmong garments, manipulated to create new silhouettes and to shift motifs for the present audience. The designs exhibited in the fashion show bring together elements of traditional Hmong and Southeast Asian clothing, including utilizing Hmong embroidery, Thai and Lao silks and *xauv nyiaj* necklaces, coupled with sheer fabrics, turtlenecks and exposed undergarments. In fig. 13, the model is shown dressed in a two piece set, a black jacket lined with neon green silk paired with bright green silk pants covered by a sheer black overlay. The waistband and hems of the pants present three stripes of different colors, blue, pink and green. The striped edges are reminiscent of both the Striped Hmong sleeve tradition, but also the striped effect often found in Green Hmong clothing, used to divide different sections of the skirt. As the silhouette of the pants is black and wide legged, they call back to the Striped Hmong pant tradition, maintaining their femininity and flow while still promoting movement. The jacket contains elements of traditional garments as well, with the black color reflecting black blouses worn by Hmong women from all groups. The green lining could be a call to the vertical stripes down the front of women’s chest area in modern Hmong blouses, which would often be covered by *xauv nyiaj* necklaces, but is instead open, exposing an embroidered bralette top. The top appears to have blue appliqué embroidery, as well as a striped embroidered hem, similar to the hems found on White Hmong headdresses.

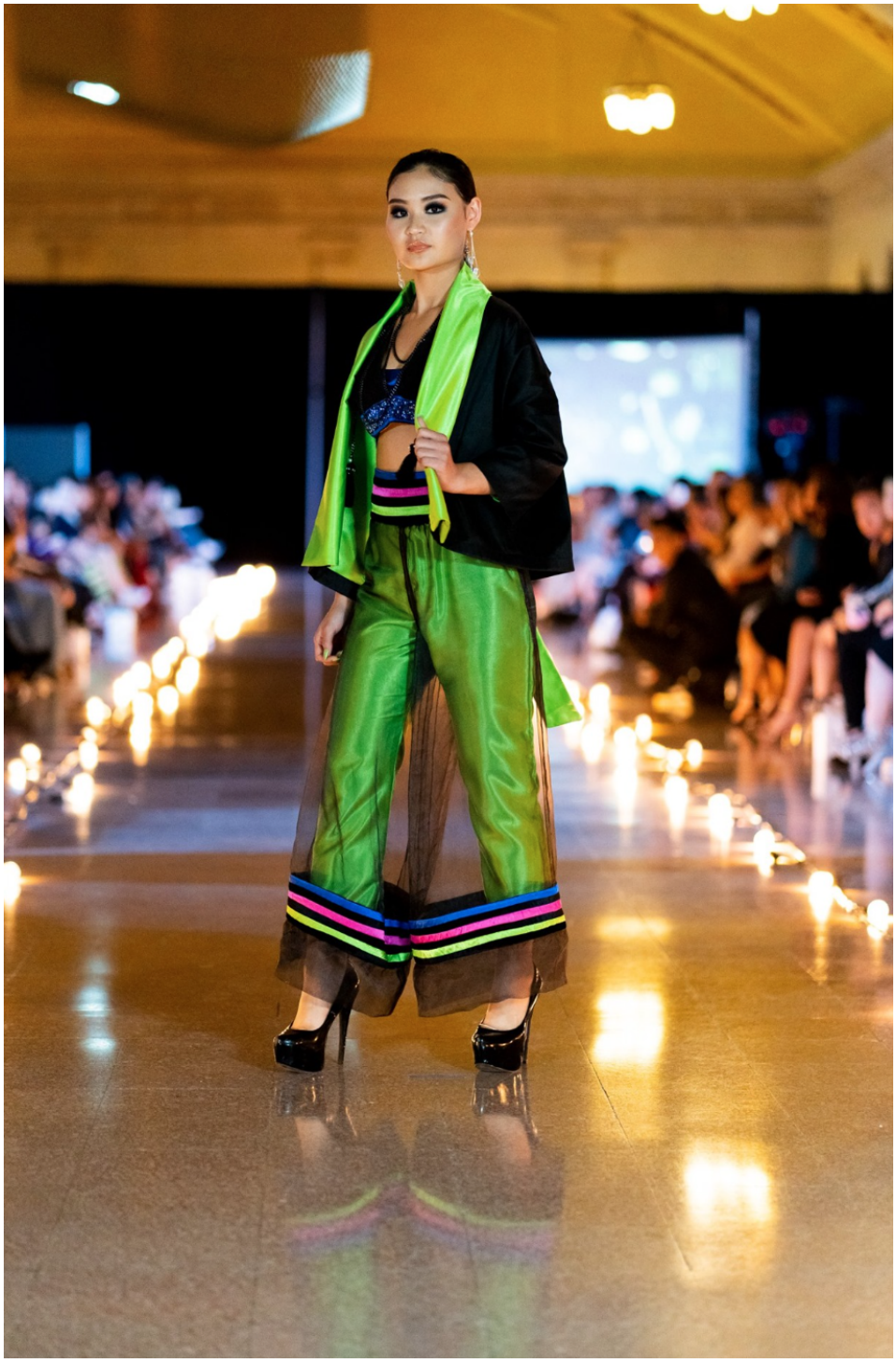

Fig. 13

Image from Fresh Traditions Fashion Show Facebook Page

The second example from the CHAT Fresh Traditions fashion show (fig. 14) presents a dramatic silhouette, a turtleneck tucked into a floor length, ball gown shaped skirt composed of strips of decorative, delicate silk, interspersed with bright hues of blue, green and red. On her head, the model wears a pointed embellished headpiece, adorned with small beads and embroidery, and possibly referencing the shape of the rooster comb hat. Encircling the neck is a *xauv nyiaj* necklace, laid over a mustard yellow turtleneck which is tucked seamlessly into the skirt. Flaring out from the waist, the skirt creates pleats from a dark black or navy silk, showcasing tiny repeating bell or water droplet shaped motifs. As the skirt moves toward the floor, the pleats are expanded by adding brightly colored cloth panels, allowing for the visual appearance of a fuller, heavier skirt. The waist is tied with three or more layers of cloth sashes, which hang down the front of the skirt, perhaps emulating the long black fabric panels which hang down the front of traditional Hmong costumes.

These two garments, along with the conception of the fashion show emphasize the importance of change and adaptation in Hmong fashion, encouraging the maintenance of cultural garments while understanding a new audience and access to materials. The Fresh Traditions fashion show also places the development and research of Hmong textiles into the hands of Hmong people, with the support of Hmong based scholarship and artistry backed by $20,000-$30,000 USD for each yearly fashion show. Not only does the fashion show support Hmong designers, it also supports Hmong textile stores, imports of textiles from Laos and Southeast Asia, and Hmong models. Hmong centered and supported academia, research and businesses are seen not only within the fashion industry, but throughout the Twin Cities, Minnesota and Wisconsin area.

One such example of Hmong based scholarship is the Hmong Cultural Center museum. Run by the Hmong community, the museum holds one of the largest archives of Hmong art and objects in the United States, a collection over which many immigrant cultures do not have autonomy.[49] In order to study Hmong visual culture, scholars look to these Hmong controlled cultural archives and teachers based in Minnesota communities. Many of the scholars who study Hmong culture come from within the communities. During my interview with Steve Thao of CHAT, he spoke to the central topic of disseminating and preserving Hmongness within United States diaspora communities. Alongside being a board member and organizer at CHAT, Thao is an Asian-American, Hmong-American filmmaker. When talking about the subject of Hmong artists, he said, "Lots of Hmong filmmakers just want to make films about being Hmong."[50] This becomes a question of what it means to be an artist, an Asian American artist and a Hmong American artist. In the case of Hmong fashion designers, they are not obligated to be one or the other, and can exist as both. While preserving Hmongness through cloth may be their medium, the implications behind an Asian artist celebrating and exploring culture through art means that the art is inherently grappling with being Asian, of a minority culture, and creating an identity within American society.

Hmong garments within the diaspora transcend generational gaps, bringing a sense of self and place to the wearers and makers, and creating a community around the production and use of embroidered textiles. The blending of Hmong traditional techniques, motifs, and embroidery, coupled with Western dress silhouettes, industrially made dyes and fabrics, and the ability to mass produce garments have created a costume culture rooted in community memory, but allowing itself to be a living archive of tradition and adaptation. Modern Hmong textile artists

[49] Hmong museum website provides resources for Hmong studies, virtual museum and texts. "Virtual Museum", Hmong Cultural Center Museum, https://www.hmonghistorycenter.org/virtual-museum.html.
[50] Interview with Steve Thao, 2023

and designers call on White, Green, and Striped Hmong garment histories in order to allow the traditional styles to find autonomy within the cultural need for both change and home.

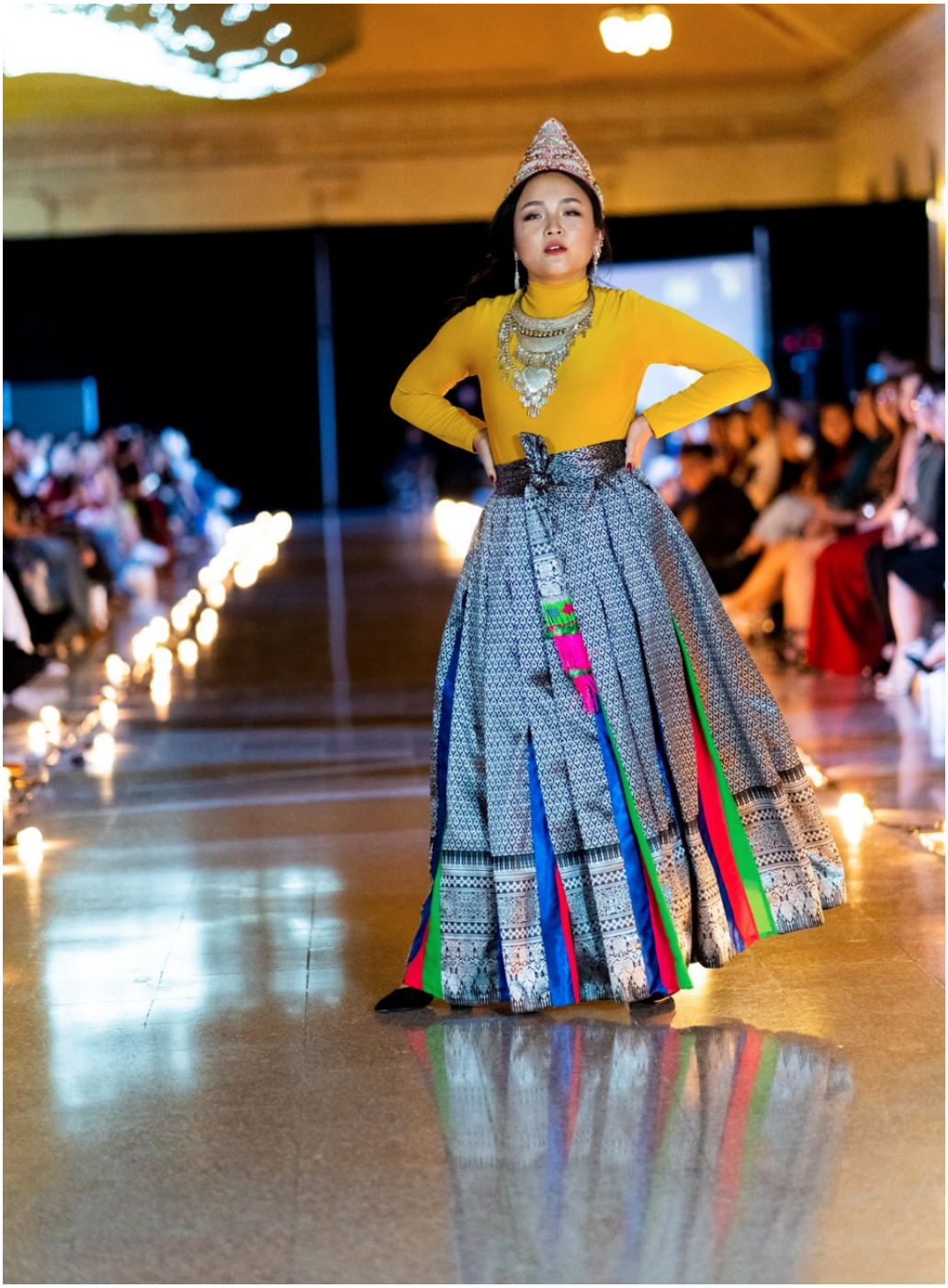

Fig. 14

Image from Fresh Traditions Fashion Show Facebook Page

Conclusion

As I combed through the Hmong Resource Library in St. Paul, I found that they had a record of hundreds of dissertations on Hmong culture, economics, politics, trauma, history, gender and family. Under the author's name, almost every writer was Hmong. Hmong scholarship in the Hmong community has flourished in the United States diaspora, and implies the importance young Hmong people place on centering their cultural histories within their personal, academic and professional lives. Organizations such as Center for Hmong Arts and Talent, the Hmong Cultural Center and Museum, Hmong Arts Books and Crafts, and the Hmong Archive are some of the primary resources for the study of Hmong culture in the United States, based in the Hmong diaspora community in Minnesota. Location is important. Location can trigger memory and track the history of a people. Location was important when Hmong people developed indigo batik dyeing techniques in the Laotian highlands, when they learned to hide their language into the folds of *paj ntaub* on their skirts in China. Location was important when the Hmong people migrated across the Mekong River from Laos into Thailand, and when they lived in refugee camps, recording their experiences with war into embroidered storybooks. Location is important for Hmong scholarship centers today, and for the direction and intention of the narrative forming Hmong history and culture. With Hmong stories being told from within the community and disseminated across wider outside platforms, Hmong people have the ability to share their personal experiences within a space that is curated from a familiar perspective.

The ancestral significance of Hmong textiles informs the energy, time and resources used to protect and maintain Hmong embroidery techniques and traditions within American diasporas,

as well as the Hmong textile preservation efforts outside of the United States. In April of 2023, Center for Hmong Arts and Talent put on a fashion show with Hmong Thai designers, who have connected with Hmong Americans to form a global discourse on sharing with and educating audiences about Hmong fashion. This includes efforts to make Hmong garments a part of "higher fashion" conversations, such as inclusion in Minnesota Fashion week. The connections between different parts of the Hmong diaspora reflect the relationships built between the different Hmong textile styles within the United States. Preserving Hmong identity through textiles allows the American Hmong diaspora to be an active contributor to a global Hmong culture.

As in the realm of textiles, Hmong communities in Minnesota and Wisconsin have maintained their roots as an agricultural and farming people, transplanting many traditional Hmong vegetables to be grown in Upper Midwest environments. The vegetables, coming from a much warmer, tropical environment, are able to survive and thrive in their new homes, perhaps reflecting their growers' tenacity, endurance and the support systems they have developed as a community. Likewise, Hmong textile traditions embody a form of support, taking on the burden of historian within the Hmong community. This gives people a reassurance that Hmong culture has a distinct visual voice, and therefore a tangible cultural impact on the world around them. Hmong embroidery preserves identity, allowing future generations to inform their sense of cultural heritage through the medium of textiles. Cultural understanding, rather than coming from the voice of a person, comes from thousands of Hmong women who have developed a collective Hmong identity surrounding embroidery and clothing.

From *paj ntaub* to story cloth, indigo batik to Hmong fashion design, the narratives held within Hmong textiles articulates community memory, from the highlands of Laos to the American diaspora. Hmong textiles have the ability to transcend war traumas, language barriers

and cultures of change, providing a window from the past into the present, and informing the life of Hmong visual culture as it develops and grows. Cultural histories are invaluable, and the Hmong people have formed a beautiful medium to preserve their stories, their identities, and their homes.

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