

"The Hmong (pronounced mung) are an ancient tribe of mountain people who migrated from China in the mid-nineteenth century in search of freedom and a land of their own. Indeed, the word Hmong means "free." The freedom they cherish is an all-encompassing liberty that means far more than their independence from a political government or a system of economics. It is a freedom of the spirit, a freedom to be their own people, and it is the very essence of their being." ¹ Carla J. Hassel

Hmong History: Both Ancient and Recent



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The history of Hmong needlework involves both ancient traditions and more recent adaptations made during long years of survival in refugee camps. From China many of the Hmong had moved into the mountainous regions of Laos, Thailand and Vietnam.

The Hmong were strong supporters of the United States during the Vietnam war and were in grave danger both during and after the war. The war and its aftermath forced many Hmong into refugee camps in Thailand until they could immigrate to the United States and other supportive countries.

For centuries the Hmong people had lived a simple agrarian life with no written language but many traditional ways. It is hard to imagine what it must have been like for these people. First they had to adjust to living long years in refugee camps. Then they had to adapt to the modern world of the United States, a life so different from their simple, close-knit traditional life. Their folk art including their highly skilled needlework has helped them keep their identity and traditions.

Hmong Needlework Traditions

Fine needlework has always been a source of great pride to Hmong women. Bright colored embellishments, often on black fabric, created traditional clothing for celebrations including their New Year, marriages, births and other important events. Cross stitch, needle weaving and other techniques were used to create these wearable works of art.



Possibly the most difficult of all was the reverse appliqué called "Pa nDau" (sometimes spelled "paj ntaub") meaning flower cloth. Making one of these lovely appliquéd pieces is painstaking. It takes years of practice to develop the skills needed to do this intricate reverse appliqué. Often these pieces included other embroidery embellishment in addition to the appliqué.



Vaired Meanings: Symbols in Needlework

Buyers are often interested in the symbolism of the different appliquéd patterns. There is no doubt that these forms originally had symbolic meaning to the women making them. Our desire as Americans to know just what they mean may have encouraged some distortion of these meanings. We must remember that the Hmong included many isolated tribal groups so patterns and meanings varied. It is too simplistic to give each pattern a single interpretation.

One of the common patterns seen on this blue pillow cover is often called "elephant's foot". It is said to be a symbol of family. The pattern names given by the Hmong are usually names of things found in nature like "ram's head", "snail house", "mountains", "spider web", "dragon's tail" and "water lily".

Adaptions to Westerners' Taste

Traditionally Hmong needle work was done in bright colors but during the time they lived in refugee camps needlework sold to tourists was a major source of much needed income. In order to make their work more appealing to Westerners they began to use softer tones for the items they made to sell. Items as varied as aprons, pillow covers, bed coverings and wall hangings were sold and still are today. You can find lovely Hmong needlework for sale in the United States at fairs and other events.



The Wonderful Story of Story Cloth



[click to view entire the tiger story cloth](#)

Perhaps the best known form of Hmong needle art is "Paj Ntaub Tib Neeg" also called "story cloth" These lovely pictorial embroideries developed very recently in Hmong history. It appears that Hmong men began to draw elements of traditional Hmong stories to help make sure they would be remembered during the times of change. While in the refugee camps, if not sooner, women began to have the men draw on fabric so that they could stitch the stories on cloth.

These remarkable embroidered cloths include not only the stories and daily life of Hmong culture but also record their experiences during the Vietnam war and their escape to Thailand. These "story cloths" have been made extensively in refugee camps to sell to foreigners who visit the camps. Many were sent to relatives in America and other countries where they could be sold in a broader market.



The Hmong Begin to Make Quilts

A few Hmong women have begun to combine their traditional needlework with American style appliqué. In some cases Amish and Hmong women have shared their techniques. It will be interesting to see how Hmong needlework and quilting will evolve as the old traditions blend with those of their new home in America.

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(Thanks to those from the Quilt History List who have shared the pictures on this page so all of you can see examples of Hmong needlework.)

References:

¹ p6 "[Creating Pa nDau Appliqué: A New Approach to an Ancient Art Form](#)", by Carly J. Hassel

["Stories in Thread: Hmong Pictorial Embroidery"](#), by Marsha McDowell



