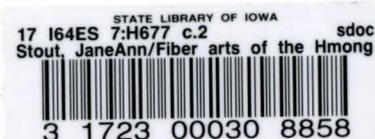


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## Fiber Arts of the Hmong

The textile folk art, especially the needlework, of the Hmong tribes is a colorful and exciting addition for American admirers of fine stitching. As with all folk art, the impetus for this art form is linked to a culture—in this case the Hmong.

### Hmong—"Free People"

For more than 4,000 years the Hmong have been on the move steadily southward from Northern China.

Traditionally farmers, they converted woodlands to croplands and stayed until the depleted soil or neighbors' attempts to control the Hmong forced them onto new areas of virgin forest.

Through their moves, the Hmong developed distinctive customs as well as strong family and clan ties. Their belief that the tribe would cease to exist if members lost contact with each other encouraged the growth of strong family networks where family members tried to live as close to each other as possible.

Many small groups continue to live in China, Thailand, Laos, and North Vietnam. Many are still in refugee camps awaiting resettlement. Between 40 and 50 thousand have immigrated to the United States since 1970. About 1,300 live in Iowa, mostly in and around Des Moines, Davenport, and Ottumwa.

Although the Hmong are only one of many tribes forced to move by the Southeast Asian wars, they are both culturally and politically unique.

"Their role as highly respected military allies has guaranteed them a special place among the (American) military men with whom they worked. Their adaptability and personal integrity also ensures them a special place among their new American friends." (Virginia White, writing in *PA NDAU: The Needlework of the Hmong*).



This characteristic for adaptability has enabled them to remain the Hmong or "free people."

Another characteristic that has helped them move successfully is the high value they put on education. Their traditional language is totally oral, so they had no experience in either reading or writing, but they are learning written and spoken English.

### Fiber Arts Reflect Culture

The nomadic lifestyle of the Hmong encouraged the development of crafts that are easily produced and transported, such as fiber art, silver-working, and wood-carving.

Like other nomadic societies, the Hmong have traditionally shown their wealth and social position through their clothing and accessories, rather than through furniture and household goods as do Americans and other more settled societies.

With their move to the United States, many of the Hmong have adapted the western style of dress and reserve their traditional costumes for special occasions.

Much of the responsibility for upholding these costume traditions has been given to the women charged with teaching their daughters the decorative stitches and designs. So important were these skills, that the wise young man sought a talented seamstress for a wife since her work with needle and thread would be a visible reflection on him and their family at all important tribal functions.

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Traditionally, the fabrics used were hand-loomed cotton or dyed hemp cloth, with the deep blue-black of indigo dye a favorite color. Today, fabric is usually purchased.

Costume as a part of the culture starts at birth with the making of a baby-carrier, used to hold the infant closely strapped to the mother's back. A rectangle approximately 16" by 23" supports baby's back while a smaller one supports the head. The carrier often features a batik pattern with appliques of geometric designs. Several colors may be used for the borders, as well as the sashes. Intricate hand stitching is often added. Bright yarn pom-poms may also be attached.

As in many Eastern world cultures, both boys and girls wear hats until they are 6 to 10 years old. These black fabric caps are decorated with hand stitching, beads, coins, or applique plus yarn pom-poms, tassels, or fringes.



One explanation for this hat-wearing custom is the belief that hats will disguise the children and fool the spirits that would otherwise take the children from the earth. For the Hmong, the hat disguise takes the form of a flower. In America, these hats may not be worn daily but are generally seen at annual New Year's celebrations.

With the exception of special occasions, Hmong clothing is traditionally plain. Children's clothing mirrors their parents' that, although simple in design, is elegantly styled and beautifully decorated. Black skirts or pants and shirts are common with the only decoration on shirt fronts.

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Differences are evident between groups, however. The White Hmong favor a plain white finely pleated skirt for festive days, while the Blue Hmong wear a finely pleated indigo-dyed batik skirt with applique and embroidery on the hem. These wrap skirts open at the front middle and are covered by an apron-type panel that may be quite plain or intricately decorated.

All clothes were originally designed to allow easy movement over the rough terrain of the Hmong's mountainous homeland. Today, traditional garments are still big and roomy. This allows air to circulate during hot sunny days and provides extra fabric to wrap close for warmth on windy days and cool nights.

Sashes are an important part of the Hmong costume. They vary in width from 10 to 30 inches and are used not only as belts, but also as decorative scarves and as totes to carry heavy loads from the shoulder or on the head.

Intricately needleworked shoulder bags and belt purses add further decoration, although they may not be functional.

Special funeral garments are the final costume. Usually these are basic clothing pieces that have been elaborately decorated with embroidery and applique by the family wives and mothers.

These traditional clothing styles and customs may become less evident, however, as the Hmong adapt to new lifestyles. This is especially true where the Hmong are encouraged to sew to meet buyers' tastes for pillows, quilts, and other items oriented to the western market. As the Hmong spend more time producing marketable goods, they have less time to devote to making clothing for themselves and other family members.

### **Interpreting Needlework Designs**

Originally, each of the Hmong designs probably had some particular meaning.

But in years of moving and adapting, specific definitions have been lost. Many variations are evident.

It is possible, however, to separate Hmong needlework into categories by technique. These include cross-stitch, applique, reverse applique, batik, and decorative stitches.

Some of the most striking designs are the cross-stitch items. Dark fabric sets off the bright thread combinations of reds, blues, purples, yellows, greens, and white. A 100 percent cotton even weave is preferred for the background, but the thread may be cotton, silk, or imported synthetic. Stitch size tends to be very small and time consuming. Designs are usually solidly worked patterns with little background showing, although spot motifs are being adapted.

Applique pieces are another favorite. Typically, these have a stylized, geometric motif. Applique may be done by cutting the desired shape, then folding under the edges and stitching to a background fabric. Or, it may be reverse applique, where the fabric is folded into fourths and lines cut into the fabric to form a design. This is basted to a contrasting color of background fabric. The cut edges are then turned under and stitched, revealing the bottom layer.

Surface stitching may be added as a further accent to applique pieces. Commonly used stitches include the tiny running stitch, split stitch, chain stitch, satin stitch, buttonhole stitch, and heringbone stitch. One of the more interesting is the very fine chain stitch.

Traditionally, the background fabric was a subdued color, such as a naturally dyed dark indigo, red, green, or orange. The influence of imported Indian and lowland Thai fabrics has led to a preference for bright backgrounds, such as pink and green. Cotton or polyester-cotton blends are most often used. Printed fabrics, especially in red, yellow, green, or blue are also being used more often.

Since cloth is so easily purchased now, few Hmong still weave or dye their own. However, indigo-colored batiks in intricate patterns continue to be done. Often these are used as background for applique work or for baby carriers.

A less frequently used form of surface stitching is the counted satin stitch panel. Done in intricate repeat patterns, this time-consuming craft is not practiced by all Hmong. It is most often seen on the funeral costume and may also appear on collars, belts, and skirt edgings.

Another use of decorative stitching is in the pictorial representations done on fabric panels. These contain arrangements of people, buildings, plants, and animals. Although not truly Hmong in origin, the pieces are being seen more often and are another indication of the adaptability and talent of Hmong artisans.

Such adaptations are typical of folk art and reflect changes in the lifestyle of the people. It is inevitable that the textile arts practiced by the Hmong in America will show more changes than those of cultures still in Asia and Southeast Asia. Although some may lament this breaking of tradition, others view it as an opportunity to watch a culture expand and adapt to social change.

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