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ASIAN TEXTILES

THE OXFORD ASIAN TEXTILE GROUP

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OATG AGM and Show & Tell

Monday 28 January 2017, 1 – 4 pm. Education Centre at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

OATG Annual General Meeting followed by a Show & Tell.

Please bring items to share for discussion or identification.

An urgent reminder

OATG is still looking for a member of the group who would like to join the committee in the role of Membership Secretary.

We depend on our membership subscriptions for the bulk of our income. Last year this brought in about £2,780 of which £1,747 was spent on printing and mailing out three editions of *Asian Textiles* (£795 on printing and £952 on postage).

We have had to pay a database manager commercial rates this year which puts a strain on our finances and limits the activities we can put on. After her costs of £500 there is only about £500 to cover room hire, speakers' expenses, refreshment costs, etc.

We have in the past invited speakers from overseas and contributed to their expenses and have organised trips to collections outside Oxford, but at the moment we feel rather restricted about what we can do.

Please do consider putting yourself forward for the role of membership secretary. The committee is friendly and welcoming and would give any support needed. If you are interested please contact me by email: nick_allen98@hotmail.com.

Sheila Allen
Treasurer

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Front cover Striped Hmong sisters peer out from their hut in their mountaintop village, Ban Ta, Phongsali, in Laos.

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Hmong Threads of Life

Traditional Hmong textiles from the Golden Triangle

by Victoria Voreitter

The Hmong, one of the major ethnic groups inhabiting China and Southeast Asia, have developed an astonishingly rich culture over the millennia. They migrated from Mongolia and Siberia, moving from mountain to mountain along the great rivers of China, to the foothills of Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar.

An agrarian people keenly attuned to the cycle of seasons and the wheel of life, the Hmong have created a complex, all-encompassing belief rooted in animism, where everything in nature possesses a soul and the universe is organised by supernatural powers. Frequent rituals, ceremonies, and festivals are performed throughout the year to maintain harmony between the world of man and the realm of spirits, be they benevolent or malevolent.

Left *Striped Hmong villagers and their pack ponies climb steep mountain paths to return home, Ban Ta, Phongsali Province, Laos.* **Right** *White Hmong shaman Tswb Vaj, carries out her daily chores in Ban Sayua, Luang Nam Tha, Laos.*

The Hmong of the Golden Triangle – Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar – are composed of numerous subgroups that display diverse customs and speak a range of regional languages. The four major Hmong dialects correspond to the largest of these subgroups, named by the primary colour of their garments: the White Hmong, *Hmoob Dawb* [pronounced Hmong Dau], the Blue or Green Hmong, *Hmoob Ntsuab* [Hmong Njua], the Striped Hmong, *Hmoob Txaij* [Hmong Tsai], and the Black Hmong, *Hmoob Dub* [Hmong Du]. In spite of such diversity, the Hmong have commonality in shared tenets that permeate their way of life, their worldview, and their ritual practices, stories, and music.

Of all the characteristics that distinguish the various Hmong subcultures, none

is more striking than the variations in their clothing. As there is a profusion of smaller groups within each subgroup, the number of variations multiply. So while it is true that a common thread runs through untold generations of Hmong, and throughout the vast Hmong diaspora, these threads are woven, dyed, tailored, embroidered and embellished in spectacularly distinctive ways – ways that not only identify the group itself but also display the unique artistry of the Hmong seamstresses who meticulously fashion every piece for their families.


White Hmong


Blue Hmong


Striped Hmong


Black Hmong

Hmong groups and subgroups, displaying a wide diversity of clothing styles and symbols, inhabit the mountains of SE Asia.

Role of Hmong textiles

The textiles that the Hmong either wear on a daily basis or use in their social and ceremonial enactments have a multitude of purposes and are both functional and decorative.

As in all societies, clothing primarily gives physical protection, keeping the wearer safe from the ever-changing, sometimes harsh, elements of environment, weather, temperature, and seasons. For a self-sufficient people who live close to the earth as they tend livestock and crops, and who, until recently, migrated regularly through rugged terrain to new hamlets on mountain summits, clothing that is durable and flexible is fundamental.

Clothing is also the outward manifestation of the Hmongs' deeply rooted sense of distinctiveness both to the outer world and to their inner identities. The identity of the subgroup of a Hmong villager ascending a distant mountain trail is instantly recognisable, even from afar, just by the colours and style of clothing. When a girl marries, she moves into her husband's familial home and changes her clan affiliation. As she adapts to her new social and cultural milieu, she may also adapt the clothing style and patterns she learned during her childhood, combining textile designs and techniques into a new hybrid that reveals both her roots and her new life.

The oral tradition, tenets of faith, and cultural practices that members of a community share, give each person a subliminal sense of grounding and bonding with others in the group and a sense of belonging. The traditional textiles are a vital manifestation of this. By embracing the clothing styles and systems that are little changed, every Hmong is a vital link in the cultural bloodline that connects untold past generations with current and future generations.

Clothing for daily wear

As every garment is made by hand, and requires many months and has several stages in its fabrication, Hmong women, men, and children have very few changes of clothes. One or two sets, relatively unadorned, are for daily use: cultivating crops, feeding animals, hunting, cutting wood, building houses, and cooking, as well as conducting frequent rites at the central door and family altar.

This basic clothing worn by Hmong women and girls for everyday use consists of a jacket, skirt or trousers, apron, sash, turban or simple headdress, and, on occasion, leggings worn to protect their legs in the field or forest. For men, daily wear includes a jacket, trousers, belt or sash, and a cap.

This Striped Hmong matriarch from Ban Ta, Laos, feeds her livestock.

Jackets

Once woven by hand, Hmong jackets are now made of black cotton or velvet purchased from the local market. Women's jackets are designed in a loose, short-waisted style. The bottom edge is left unfinished as it is secured at the waist with an apron and a red sash that hangs down the back.

Chib Lor, from the White Hmong village Ban Nam La, Luang Nam Tha, Laos, has skilfully sewn the many layers of garments for herself and every member of her family.

TRADITIONAL HMONG TEXTILES

The jacket's long sleeves are decorated in various ways that distinguish one group from another. Blue and White Hmong women cap their sleeves in blue-banded or embroidered cuffs. Black and Striped women demonstrate their meticulous needlecraft by marking their sleeves along their length with multiple bands of bright colour, equally spaced – the Black Hmong with up to thirty slender bands of blue and the Striped Hmong with wider, fewer bands of green or blue.




White Hmong *Blue Hmong* *Striped Hmong* *Black Hmong*
Men's clothing consists of a jacket that takes different forms, distinctive loose trousers, and a red or green sash belt.

From left to right
Nyiaj Huas Lis, a White Hmong master musician from Ban Sayua, Laos
Blue Hmong brothers Ntsum Nkaub Haam and Ntxhw Zeb Haam from Ban Khun Huay Mae Pao, Chiang Rai, Thailand
Nyiaj Vaj from Ban Ta, Phongsali, Laos
Tub Teeb Tswb Xyooj (right) and his friend from Ban Natao, Houaphanh Province, Laos.


Hmong subgroups are clearly identifiable by the contours of their lapels.

Left *A Blue Hmong woman from Ban Khun Huay Mae Pao, Chiang Rai, Thailand, has embroidered her jacket lapel with three points.*

Right *Tsav Theeb Muas (centre) and his White Hmong friends from Ban Nam La, Luang Nam Tha, Laos, don jackets with a raised collar and straight front lapels.*

Hmong groups are clearly identifiable by the contours of their lapels, which take various forms. In Striped, White, and certain Blue Hmong communities, women's lapels are designed as wide embroidered bands that follow the straight front edges of their jackets. This is also true for men's jackets in some White Hmong groups, although they fall below the waist and are marked with a raised collar and slits along the side seams. Young boys may wear tight, cropped vests.

Another lapel style can be seen in other Hmong groups. Men's jackets are long-sleeved, collarless and cropped short. The lapel is an elegantly embroidered diagonal panel sewn on the right front edge, which crosses over the left chest and is fastened by a number of small bells. There are two design variations for this diagonal panel in Blue Hmong men's and women's jackets: either overlapping panels with three large zigzag points or panels with up to seventeen small jagged zigzag points, both edged in red. Black Hmong men's jackets are similarly tailored, although with a small, square lapel panel banded in blue to match the striped sleeves, and which crosses over the right breast. Revealing a Hmong man's torso and accentuating his chest in such a way highlights his virility.

Hmong women's jackets are especially distinguishable from those of any other ethnic group in the Golden Triangle by the ornate rectangular 'collars' that hang down the back. At one time, these collars were raised and fully encircled the neck for protection against the cold. As the Hmong migrated south and temperatures rose, the collars fell and became purely decorative pieces. For this reason, women embroider the concealed underside of their collars more elaborately than the visible, comparatively plain side that once protected the neck.

Skirts

Of all the garments that Hmong women wear, the most distinctive is the voluminous, knee-length pleated skirt made of hemp or cotton, which sways attractively with every step. Following their ancestors, Hmong women carry out every part in the making of this garment: from planting the seeds, ginning, carding, separating, rolling, spinning, winding, and weaving the threads, to dyeing, cutting, piecing, sewing, and embroidering the cloth. This is an intensive process requiring both time and effort. As one skirt may take up to a year to produce, the garment is dearly treasured.

Once the skeins of hemp have been prepared and her loom has been threaded, a Hmong weaver controls the tension of the weft with a back strap and shifts the warps with a foot treadle. As she periodically brushes the threads to remove loose fibres and dust, she uses the *raj nqaw* [pronounced traa ngaw], a wooden tool unique to the Hmong that ingeniously acts as both a shuttle and a beater, to weave a narrow hemp panel. In width this is between 35 and 60 cm, and it has an astonishing length of between eight and nine metres.

In the White and Striped Hmong traditions, after a white panel has been washed and ironed with a stone roller to produce a relatively smooth, supple texture, a woman folds the cloth tightly in thin accordion pleats held in place by running threads. The threads keep the pleats crisp and are removed only before a skirt is worn. As a final step, another hemp panel, tacked to a waistband, is sewn to the skirt top.

In stark contrast to the white skirts of the White and Striped Hmong groups, other Hmong subgroups in the Hmong diaspora embellish their hemp skirts with intricate indigo-dyed patterns using batik. It is notable that the Hmong are the only

ethnic group in Southeast Asia skilled in this age-old resist technique, where designs are created by applying wax so as to prevent dye penetrating the cloth.

Hmong women perform all aspects of fabricating a family's clothes.

Top *In Ban Ta, Laos, a Striped Hmong woman separates hemp threads that will be rolled into skeins.*

Right *In Ban Pa Nok Kok, Chiang Mai, Thailand, Kauj Ntsaug Xeeb Vwj prepares hemp threads.*

Below *White Hmong Kiab Vaj, from Ban Khun Chang Kian, Chiang Mai, weaves hemp using a* raj nqaw*, a tool that serves as both shuttle and beater.*

The white hemp skirts worn by White and Striped Hmong are tightly pleated.

In past generations, women of every Blue, Green, and Black Hmong household practised batik to clothe their families. This is a long, complex process.

There are many phases in making a batik skirt:

Above left *Soaking and fermenting indigo leaves.*

Above centre *Creating a thick blue paste using white lime and herbs.*

Above right and right *Applying hot wax with special batik tools to create geometric designs on cloth that will be soaked in the indigo dye.*

TRADITIONAL HMONG TEXTILES

Production of the indigo dye is the first stage, blending a number of substances. The leafy branches of an indigo plant are soaked, fermented in water, and lifted into the air for oxygenation until the liquid reaches a dark blue colour. When the plants have been discarded, the solution is mixed with a sediment of limestone, a soft, chalky bluish stone that has been heated and doused in cold water until it is a fine powdery consistency. Wood ash is added to the blend for thickness, and medicinal herbs for personal protection against misfortune. The residual liquid is drained, producing a midnight-blue paste which is stored to dye other garments in the future.

Once a long roll of white hemp has been woven, a woman lays it out in small sections, moving along its length, meticulously delineating a grid and a blueprint of abstract and geometric motifs with a lead or indigo marking tool. She traces the designs on the cloth by dipping hot liquid wax, *kua tswm ciab* [koua cheu chia] from fine copper tools *diav nrab tiab* [dia dra tia]. While it is customary for a woman to own three different batik tools, master craftswomen use up to ten, each with a specific width, function and effect, to adorn skirts and baby carriers with elaborate patterns.

The skirt is then doused repeatedly in a cool indigo solution that uses the paste as a starter until the cloth takes on the desired tone. The process may be repeated again and again, each time adding new wax motifs. What results, when the skirt has dried and all the wax has been peeled off, is an elaborate constellation of intricate patterns in a spectrum of hues from white to various shades of blue, all set on a field of deep, dark indigo.

To the bottom border of their dyed skirt, Blue, Green, and Black Hmong women add a band of hemp, measuring 14 to 20 cm, which they have embroidered with a dazzling mélange of intricate designs and bold appliquéd rectangles, squares, diamonds, and triangles in bright colours – red, pink, blue, yellow, green, and white. Only at this point are the skirts folded in slender pleats.

Batik and embroidered symbols spring from a common repository of age-old designs that serve a number of functions – identifying each group, adorning the wearer, and, importantly, forming a maze-like barrier that staves off evil spirits and adversity. Yet, while batik and needlecraft designs follow the traditional norms of ancestral protocol, they may be combined in unique ways which clearly allow each woman's artistry and creativity in devising a unique schema of patterns within patterns within patterns.

Trousers, aprons, and sashes

Hmong men wear trousers that are loose fitting and full, a style distinctive among the mountain tribes. Two large rectangles are cut from cotton and sewn so the crotch hangs low, midway between calves and ankles. The trousers fold across the waist, where they are tucked in and secured by a cloth or leather belt. For most groups, the trousers are black, though White Hmong men also wear trousers of blue or green.

White and Striped Hmong women also wear loose trousers of black or blue for their daily tasks, as their long hemp skirts are heavy and the light colour easily soiled. For festivals and special occasions, however, the white skirts come out en masse, the better to show off the glorious splash of colour lavished on all other garments.

Aprons worn over the front of the skirt are an essential and ubiquitous part of a Hmong woman's clothing. Skirts close in the front but, as there is no seam, a cloth tie, sewn onto the top waistband, attaches the left and right edges. These overlap by about

Hmong skirts show both the identity of the subgroup and the mastery of the craftswomen.

Top *Blue Hmong skirt from Nan Province, Thailand*

Middle *Black Hmong skirt from Huaphanh Province, Laos*

Bottom *Blue Hmong skirt from Phongsali Province, Laos.*

ten centimetres because they have been ingeniously designed without pleats, but in spite of this overlap they may swing open at the hem whenever a woman moves, works, or sits. The apron conveniently conceals the opening and weighs down the skirt's front sides in all situations.

Aprons for everyday use are typically black and reversible, with one side left plain and the other adorned simply in the style of the Hmong subgroup. In the White and Striped Hmong tradition, women wear aprons on both the front and the back of their skirts or trousers. To a woman's apron have been sewn two red sashes that encircle the body several times and, in contrast with men's sashes, hang down the back.

Clothing for celebration

Besides garments for daily wear, Hmong women especially prepare sets of clothes for celebratory occasions, for courting, weddings, cycle-of-life rites, and annual ancestor, clan, or village observances. Every item has been sumptuously decorated and carefully stored until the day of the gathering.

Women prepare special clothes for celebratory events, most notably for the New Year Festival, the season of courting. **Left** *Nav Vaj (centre) in the New Year ball toss* (pov pob), *with her friends in Ban Sayua, Laos.* **Right** *Sua Teeb (centre) and friends from Ban Natao, Houaphanh Province, Laos, at a village ceremony.*

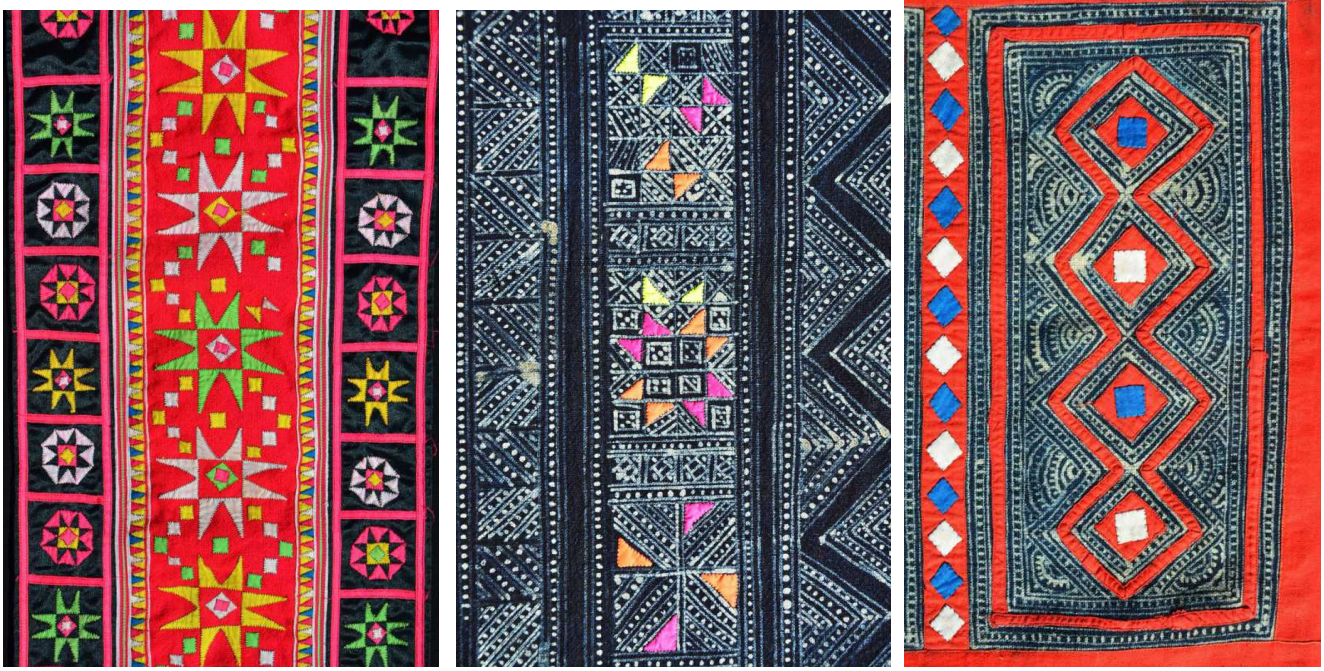
The most important cultural and social Hmong celebration takes place during the Hmong New Year Festival, traditionally held between the end of the twelfth lunar cycle of the old year and the beginning of the first cycle of the coming year. A time when all Hmong return to their home village from far and wide, this reunion renews shared identity, values, faith, family relations and friendships. It is also a time to perform annual ancestor rites, showing gratitude to spirits in the unseen world for past blessings and seeking future abundance and protection.

To witness a large New Year gathering of Hmong men, women, and children is a feast for the senses: visual, tactile, and aural. Every person assembles a kaleidoscopic mix of garments that are resplendently decorated and layered in an explosion of patterns and colours. The final embellishment comes when cascades of shimmering silver jewellery are draped over the clothing, creating a clear, bright jingling with every move the wearer makes. During social occasions when great numbers amass, this sound multiplies and surrounds, creating an ethereal tintinnabulation that continues to resonate in one's memory long after the festival has ended.

Embroidery themes and techniques

Hmong women are renowned for their consummate needlework skills, both by hand and using a machine, learned from mothers and grandmothers, beginning in youth and lasting as long as eyes can see and fingers are nimble. Until the early 20th century, women used threads dyed with natural plant-based materials, creating a palette of rich but muted tones. Now, with the accessibility of synthetically dyed threads, the colours that decorate Hmong clothing are strikingly bright.

Hmong women dip into a reservoir of ancestral embroidery symbols that suggest the natural world surrounding them – mountains; landscapes; houses; sun; vegetable blossoms; mustard green flowers; cucumber seeds; tiger faces; spider webs; fish scales; chicken tails, feet and eyes, as well as peacock eyes, among others. A seamstress will combine these in ways that display a dynamic collision of multi-coloured patterns, but all the while revealing a unifying sense of rhythm and harmony.



Hmong women embellish every surface of their clothing with intricate designs of ancestral importance.
Left to right *Details of a Blue Hmong apron, skirt, and baby carrier.*

Blue Hmong groups focus on stylised curvilinear and geometric patterns, with an emphasis on starbursts that take many forms – eight pointed stars sewn in cross-stitch needlework, stars embroidered with innumerable beams radiating from the centre, and multi-pointed stars within stars that have been appliquéd on a circular

panel. Black Hmong women also embroider abstract designs that primarily appear on jacket sleeves in a series of small linear bands in subtle, varicoloured tones. To their stylised motifs, White Hmong women add small pompoms and sew figurative designs such as butterflies, plants, and flowers using tiny cross-stitches in contrasting colours.

An embroidery practice synonymous with the White Hmong is *paj ntaub* [pronounced pa ndau], 'flower cloth', a technique combining intricate embroidery with reverse appliqué. Layering two vividly coloured cloths, women cut a design on the upper fabric to expose the cloth below, sewing the pieces together with seemingly invisible stitches. The most common motif is based on a swirl design, *qwj* [pronounced geu], which is combined in various ways to form different symbols with ancestral significance – a snail, cockerel combs, flowers, and, most common, an elephant's foot, *ko taw ntxhw* [pronounced ko ter ntzeu].

Left *Nplias Xyooj, from the White Hmong village, Ban Than Thong, in Chiang Saen District, Thailand, is a master seamstress of* paj ntaub, *'flower cloth', a technique combining intricate embroidery with reverse appliqué, seen here on her decorative panels* (**centre**) *and women's collars and sashes* (**right**).

Festive garments

Whether as a means to celebrate with relatives and friends, enhance one's beauty, beguile a mate, exhibit prosperity, or honour one's heritage, the New Year gathering is the singular event for which Hmong women and girls have laboured over the past year to complete special clothing for themselves and their families. Every garment – jackets, trousers, collars, skirts, aprons, sashes, coin purses, hats, and baby carriers – is lavished with *paj ntaub* patterns. Even Hmong pack ponies are festooned with saddle covers and cruppers that have been finely embroidered.

The edges of front lapels and overlapping panels on men's, women's and children's jackets are trimmed in thin bands of red/pink, black, green/blue, yellow, and white; five elemental colours favoured in Hmong tradition, and filled in with a patchwork-like fusion of minute, vividly-coloured swirls, triangles, pinwheels, and

Hmong women sew paj ntaub *motifs on the saddle covers and cruppers of their pack ponies.*

floral designs. The seamstress may continue to cover every possible surface of the jacket, or she may choose to design a simpler scheme, for example by embroidering only a jacket's borders to better highlight the single large motif she has sewn on the back in the centre, a symbol that offers the wearer 'charm' in both senses of the word.

During festive occasions, men's trousers are decorated with multi-coloured designs on the narrow openings at the ankles, along the side seams, or, in the case of the White Hmong, on the entire trouser cloth. Men cinch their trousers and cover their torso with a colourful sash that encircles the body two or more times and hangs down the front. These may take the form of either a red cotton cloth that ends in elaborate needlework or a wide hemp sash whose triangular tips meet in a point when aligned at the front of the body.

Men wear a colourful sash with embroidered ends that encircles the body two or more times and hangs down the front.

TRADITIONAL HMONG TEXTILES

For women and girls, the simple, unadorned skirts, collars, aprons, and sashes of everyday are magnificently transformed, following the maxim 'more and brighter'. Embroidered and appliquéd motifs are emblazoned on the skirts' bottom band as well the batik panel. Collars and aprons are outlined with ornate borders, stitched in multi-coloured lines or designs, which surround an inner rectangle of contrasting patterns and hues.

Women's aprons and collars are outlined with ornate borders that surround a spectacular inner rectangle of contrasting patterns, colours, and stitches.

Perhaps the pièce de résistance of a woman's attire, one that truly demonstrates her needlework prowess, is her sashes, especially those of White Hmong women who embellish the red, pink, or orange cloth with the finest of designs set in alternating blocks. In many Hmong groups, the apron sashes end in long red or multi-coloured tassels of yarn or threads. To complement the apron and sash, a second, separate red sash is tied many times high around a woman's waist above her skirt so as not to conceal the deft needlework of her apron sashes.

Special to the New Year and courting season are the decorative coin purses that Hmong men, women, and children wear in pairs, slung over each shoulder and crossing the chest. Because these square bags are so small, they require the finest of embroidery, most notably seen in the *paj ntaub* elephant's foot designs found on White Hmong purses. Girls may accompany them with a third purse, either square or triangular, that hangs around their necks on a short strap. Every edge of these bags, including the front flaps and straps, is strung with rows of overlapping coins that dangle on beaded threads, a visual and sonic sign to attract wealth.

Hmong men, women, and children wear decorative coin purses in pairs during the New Year and courting season.

Jewellery

During the New Year Festival and courtship season, Hmong men, women, and children enhance their attire with dazzling displays of silver jewellery. These are multiple or concentric neck rings, *xauv ncais* [pronounced sau njai], with chains, grooming tools, and pendants of varied shapes and sizes; engraved bracelets, *kauj tooj npab* [pronounced kau tong npa]; hoop earrings, with or without dangles, or elongated S-shaped hook earrings, *qhws ntsej* [pronounced keu njae]; and row upon row of overlapping coins hanging from strands of multi-coloured beads.

Such an abundance of glistening silver demonstrates beauty, status, wealth, identity, and seduction, as well as the artistry of the silversmith.

Throughout time, jewellery made from silver has also served a sacred purpose, as it is believed that the precious metal has the magical, restorative power to dispel evil and attract prosperity. Protective rings of silver – worn as necklaces, bracelets, and anklets, *paug taw* [pau ter] – bind souls to their host, keeping them in the body.

Hmong silversmiths may suspend silver adornments from the neck rings to create a formidable barrier that blocks disease and destruction. Such pendants include hefty linked chains, menacing tweezers, club-shaped dangles that represent the fangs and claws of wild animals, and intricately engraved lock-shaped pendants, known as 'soul locks', *phiaj xauv* [pronounced pia sau].

A number of pendants charms complement this 'chain mail' to attract good fortune and health. These are large, finely inscribed silver figures of butterflies, fish, and solar discs, which may be adorned with multicoloured enamel cloisonné.

TRADITIONAL HMONG TEXTILES

The Hmong wear silver jewellery for health, wealth, and beauty.

Jewellery, particularly on show during the New Year Festival, takes many forms: silver hair pins, coins on belts, earrings, bracelets, neck rings with long front or back chains from which hang a variety of pendants, including the protective 'soul lock.'

Clothing for the Passages of Life

A number of Hmong textiles mark distinct transformations during the passages of life, from a baby in the womb to a deceased person whose souls are travelling to the ancestor world.

Baby carriers

Hmong parents traditionally have many children, in part so they give helping hands to support the entire household throughout their lives. For each newborn, a mother meticulously fabricates a baby carrier, *nyias ev me nyuam* [nyia ae mae nyoua], which allows her to perform her daily chores as she keeps her feeding child

close. Yet baby carriers also provide protection, both physical and spiritual. Indeed, formerly, Hmong women wore these textiles as aprons during pregnancy as well as using them as carriers after birth, so safeguarding the baby in both phases of life.

Hmong baby carriers are T-shaped in design. A horizontal upper panel made of a decorative cloth supports the infant's head. A second, longer and larger panel also highly ornate, is sewn below. Two long, unadorned sashes attached to the upper cloth circle the mother's chest, and then wrap around crossing the baby's body underneath, then tied in front binding the two together like a back sling.

Hmong mothers lovingly fashion baby carriers, nyias ev me nyuam, *to support their infants as they perform their daily chores.*

Left *A Black Hmong mother and baby in Ban Natao, Huaphanh Province, Laos.*

Right *A White Hmong mother and child from Ban Sayua, Luang Nam Tha, Laos.*

In the baby carriers of the Hmong in China, known as the Miao, figurative designs – animals, plants, and elements in nature – dominate the embroidery. Not so for those found in Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, and Vietnam. The Hmong women of Southeast Asia layer embroidery, appliqué, and, in the case of the Blue and Black Hmong, indigo batik to create baby carriers with a myriad of vividly coloured geometric shapes. When taken together the patterns create a labyrinth of interlocking rectangles, squares, triangles, zigzags, crosses, X's, diamonds, swirls, and stars. Because evil spirits favour straight lines, this complex fusion of motifs is an impenetrable armour that confuses them. Besides guarding the baby from harm in both human and spirit worlds, these magnificent Hmong baby carriers also please the eye.

TRADITIONAL HMONG TEXTILES

Blue Hmong baby carriers are embellished with vividly coloured geometric designs using embroidery, appliqué, and indigo batik.

Headwear

In the wilds of nature the headwear of all mountain people protects the wearer from the elements. Following in the tradition of their forebears, Hmong hats, caps, and turbans also identify the various groups, subgroup divisions, regions, and even villages from where a person comes. And as with the baby carriers, mothers lovingly embroider colourful caps for newborns and young children – replete with small pompoms, good luck talismans of silver coins, shells, and herbal pouches that dangle from multi-coloured beads which are meant to attract fortune and thwart misfortune.

Richly decorated caps shield a child from the elements and evil.

Left to right

A Blue Hmong baby's New Year hat

A cockerel hat with beak worn by a White Hmong girl

A Blue Hmong boy's skull cap.

Of equal importance, headwear also marks a person's stage and status in life. At the New Year, young girls and, in certain Hmong groups, women wear cockerel caps with 'beaks' filled with protective herbs. This may take form as a long side cap, a straight rectangular head covering with a creased crown, decorated with appliquéd and embroidered patterns, a long, arched padded beak, and a jagged cockerel comb which mimics the jagged sawtooth edging on certain Blue Hmong jacket lapels. Cockerel caps can also be found in White Hmong communities as a close-fitting cap with a small, protruding beak, a wide, ornately embroidered bottom band, earflaps, chin strap, and red pompoms or tassels cascading from the crown. Young Hmong boys sport a close-fitting cap made in triangular sections with a border that rides low over the forehead. Brightly embroidered, boys' caps are encircled by numerous red or crimson tassels and pompoms, the largest on top.

As the New Year Festival is the occasion for young couples to court, the lavishly decorated headdresses worn by adolescents serve as beacons to attract a mate. In the Black, Striped, and White Hmong tradition, women add ornamental embroidery stitched in vivid colours to their black turbans, which they wind so the decorative ends are centred on the front. To these, White Hmong women add a matrix of brilliant red and yellow pompoms to the front and beaded 'tails' to the back.

Hmong women's hats are as diverse and colourful as the rest of their garments.

Left *White Hmong Sua Muas, from Ban Nam La, Laos, wears an embroidered turban decorated with pompoms and coins.*

Centre *Blue Hmong women from Chiang Rai celebrate the New Year wearing headdresses of black and white chequered strips layered around the head.*

Right *A White Hmong matriarch from Ban Had Nag Sing, Laos, has created a cap that resembles a wound turban.*

For their festival headwear, Blue Hmong women create voluminous buns on the top of their heads by winding a supplemental tress of human hair or horsehair with their own. A long strand of coloured beads and a black and white chequered cloth encircle their chignon. To this women may further add fourteen more chequered strips that are folded and layered in concentric circles so the ends cross in the front, until the headdress is built up to a high point. No pins are required in this elaborate headdress as it is secured with a final chequered cloth.

TRADITIONAL HMONG TEXTILES

Striped, Black, and Blue Hmong men wear turbans of wide black hemp wound around the head in various styles, often tied with a decorative cloth. Blue and White Hmong adolescent boys and men often wear black skullcaps of cotton, silk, or velvet pieced with triangular sections that are bound by a wide band. These are topped with a single large red pompom on the crown.



Men's headwear readily identifies their group and region.

Left *Nyiaj Pov Lauj, a White Hmong master fiddle musician from Ban Than Thong, Thailand, wears a black cap with a red knotted cord on top.*

Centre *Ntxhw Zeb Haam, a Blue Hmong shaman from Ban Khun Huay Mae Pao, Thailand, arranges his turban from a length of hemp with decorative ends.*

Right *As Loos Ya, a skilled* qeej *musician from Ban Ta, Phongsali, Laos, wears a black cotton turban wound around his head.*

Funeral garments

At death, the Hmong are dressed in specially sewn clothes, so the soul destined for the ancestor world is properly attired. Hmong women prepare funeral clothes for their family members and themselves, a practice reflected in the ritual text of the healing ceremony, '*ntos tsuj ntos npaug*' [pronounced ndaw ju ndaw npau], 'weave hemp, weave cotton.' Funerary clothes manifest differently in autonomous Hmong groups.

The Blue Hmong are buried in a long hemp funeral robe, *tsho tshaj sab* [pronounced cho cha sha], which is dyed in indigo and embellished with finely embroidered *paj ntaub* panels: six panels sewn on the long, loose sleeves, a panel sewn on the robe front to cover the deceased's chest, a collar sewn on the back of the robe, a funeral apron specially set on a woman's skirt, and a panel that rests under the deceased's head as a pillow. These *paj ntaub* pieces are decorated with intricate geometric motifs that represent the landscape of the ancestors in the afterlife.

In the White Hmong tradition, when a dead person is laid on the bamboo bier, his or her body is adorned with multiple garments fashioned in the style they wore during life. A White Hmong woman will be buried with six exquisitely embroidered jackets, displaying six multi-coloured collars of different sizes and

styles. Six overlapping aprons, bound with a voluminous, vivid red sash, will be layered over her white pleated hemp skirt. She will be wearing bamboo and hemp 'bird shoes', *khau noog* [kau nong] so her soul may fly on the way to the ancestor world over a range of dangerous mountains inhabited by poisonous moth caterpillars. Finally her silver neck ring with 'soul locks' and chains will be secured around her neck.

At death, the Blue Hmong are buried in a long navy hemp funeral robe, embellished with specially embroidered paj ntaub *panels.*

Top left *A funeral collar* **Top right** *Chest panel* **Right** *One of six sleeve panels.*

Left *Rhiav Lis, a White Hmong shaman and the matriarch of a large family in Ban Nam La, Laos, wears the ornate clothing she has sewn for her own burial.*

Below *Bamboo and hemp 'bird shoes'* khau noog*, are placed on the feet of the deceased so their souls may safely fly to the ancestor world.*

TRADITIONAL HMONG TEXTILES

After thirteen days have elapsed following the death of a Hmong person, giving time for the reincarnating soul to ascend to the summit of the spirit world, a special soul release ceremony, *tso plig* [jo pblii], is performed. A ritual tray is prepared, laden with food, libations, and spirit money, and covered with the deceased's jacket. Grieving members of the family stroke this garment as they chant heartfelt lamentations to express their final farewell to their beloved relative.

Ntxawm Yaj (left) and Iab Thoj (right), from Ban Khun Chang Kian, Chiang Mai, Thailand, chant lamentations as they stroke the jacket of their beloved relative after his burial.

Textiles of ritual importance

Certain Hmong textiles play vitally important roles in ritual settings when dealing with unseen beings in the spirit world.

Shamanic textiles

During healing ceremonies, *ua neeb* [pronounced ua neng], shamans must cover their eyes with a veil, *phuam neeb* [pronounced pua neng]. This is in order to disengage physically and symbolically from the human world as they travel among spirits on their winged horse to retrieve the lost souls of an ailing patient. Shamans may wear either a black or red cloth, depending on the tradition of their training.

Left *With eyes veiled by a red ritual cloth,* Txiaj Vwj, *a respected White Hmong shaman from Ban Nam La, Laos, invites spirits to his altar through ritual verse.*

Right *Ritual threads and hemp cloth,* sab neeb, *link a shaman's altar to the central door, creating a path for souls and spirits to return home.*

Additionally, shamans drape five white strands of hemp threads and cloth, *sab neeb* [pronounced sha neng], a 'sacred spider web', from the central door of their home to the top beam of their altar. In essence, the *sab neeb* forms a bridge, a conduit allowing a shaman to cross into the spirit world and for lost souls and benevolent spirits to reach the altar when invoked.

Healing

It is believed that a person's soul resides in the body, entering and departing primarily through the ears. As a result, rings of hemp or cotton string are secured around the neck, not only to prevent souls and good fortune from escaping but also to block evil spirits from entering. Some souls, however, are able to slip past this binding and break free through a person's hands and feet. Thus, these too must be bound in a special 'tying string' rite, *khi hlua* [pronounced ki hloua].

Above *After his healing ceremony in Ban Khun Chang Kian, Thailand, Qhua Neeb Yaj's wrists are tied with ceremonial string by shaman Txiaj Lis Yaj to unite his souls in his body.*

Left *The* moj zeej, *a white cloth or paper motif of a human figure, represents the soul of an ailing person.*

Right *It has found new form in the large square* paj ntaub *cloths embroidered by Hmong women in Muang Sing, Laos.*

TRADITIONAL HMONG TEXTILES

When a person falls ill, or is very old and there is a possibility that the souls have wandered away from the body, the Hmong fashion a soul motif, a simple, white human figure, called *moj zeej* [mau zheng] or *thiab zeej* [tia zheng] out of paper or cloth. As a cloth *paj ntaub*, the *moj zeej* may be sewn on the back of the invalid's jacket during a healing ceremony or a life extension rite for health, protection, and long life.

The *moj zeej* motif has found new form in the large square *paj ntaub* cloths that are now being embroidered by Hmong women in Muang Sing in Laos. Using two contrasting coloured fabrics, the women cut out the silhouettes of souls connected at hands and feet in rings or rows on the upper square. This is then appliquéd onto a translucent background fabric using thread in a third bright colour. When illuminated from behind, these soul *paj ntaub* cloths display an ethereal radiance.

Textiles of historical and social importance

Another textile that has recently evolved is the *paj ntaub tib neeg* [pa ndau ti neng], commonly known as Hmong story cloths.

With the mass Hmong exodus to refugee camps and foreign countries after the Laotian Civil War [1953-1975], which some call the Vietnam War, they felt a need to document their ancestral heritage, traditional lore, and history to ensure these would not be forgotten in the upheaval and displacement.

Hmong women embroider decorative paj ntaub *story cloths that depict different aspects of Hmong tradition: Hmong tales; activities of daily life; scenes of nature; and historical events.*

Oral tradition, the primary means the Hmong have used for generations to pass on everything they know and believe, could be supported by a new visual tradition using needle and thread to stitch narratives. *Paj ntaub* story cloths grew from this need.

Using charming, two-dimensional representations of people, flora, and fauna, Hmong women embroider brightly coloured fabric to produce scenes and stories, which are captioned in simple English for a foreign market in SE Asia and elsewhere. There are a number of different *paj ntaub* story cloths, which range in size from twenty centimetres to more than a metre, and are based on different themes. *Paj ntaub dab neeg* [pronounced pa ndau da neng] recount Hmong tales and myths. *Paj ntaub lub neej* [pa ndau lou neng] relate Hmong daily life. *Paj ntaub tsiaj* [pa ndau tsia] display scenes from nature, and *paj ntaub keeb kwm* [pa ndau keng keu] chronical historical events, from the Hmong migration from China, resistance during the Vietnam War, to their escape to Thailand.

Coda

Like other traditional cultures that have thrived for millennia in an unbroken continuum, the Hmong customs and rituals which harmonise the inner and outer life are being transformed, and are even vanishing, as wise elders pass on and the younger generations adapt to an ever-changing, modern world. There is no stopping this progression with all its advantages and disadvantages.

Awareness of this fleeting, fragile, intangible heritage allows us to appreciate more deeply the wisdom, mastery, integrity, and sheer beauty of the culture the Hmong have created and sustained since time immemorial.

Victoria Vorreiter

Victoria Vorreiter was trained as a classical violinist specialising in the Suzuki Method, which teaches young children through the *mother tongue method*, otherwise known as oral tradition. This led to positions at music schools and universities in England, France, and the United States. An active clinician and lecturer, she has presented at international conferences around the world. Her most recent appointment was on the faculty of the School of Music at DePaul University, in Chicago, Illinois.

In recent years, she has turned to documenting world music, best described as creating a 'cultural Noah's Ark.' Beginning in 1998, while exploring the wealth of music in Morocco's diverse tribal communities, she shot and produced her first ethnographic film, *The Music of Morocco and the Cycles of Life* (2002).

In 2005, she settled in Chiang Mai, Thailand, to continue this work, documenting the music of the Golden Triangle – Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand – a geographical and historical crossroads home to over 130 different groups and subgroups.

In the following decade, she trekked to remote mountain villages to collect the traditional songs and ceremonies of the indigenous peoples through the use of films, photographs, recordings, and journals, as well as comprehensive collections of instruments and textiles.

This large body of work has been woven into the *Songs of Memory Project*, which appears in a variety of forms: books, a compact disc, ethnographic films, photo exhibits, and the *Songs of Memory* multi-media museum exhibition.

Her newest work, *Hmong Songs of Memory*, a book and ethnographic film on traditional Hmong culture, will be launched during a multi-media exhibition of her photos, textiles, and artifacts from 16 December 2016 to 30 April 2017 in Chiang Mai. Welcome to all.

For more information, please visit: www.TribalMusicAsia

Letter from America, November 2016

By Ruth Barnes

Dear OATG Friends,

It has been a while since I last wrote to you. Some of you saw me last year, when I visited Oxford in August and gave an OATG talk in the Ashmolean. That was a very happy occasion – sharing time and good memories with old friends, and celebrating OATG's 20th anniversary. But today I want to bring you up to date on some of the activities I have been involved with on this side of the Atlantic.

It still is a real pleasure for me to work as curator of the Indo-Pacific Department at the Yale University Art Gallery.[1] This last year in particular has seen an astonishing growth of the collections, much of it directly or indirectly related to textiles. In my last letter I mentioned that the core of our outstanding textiles from Indonesia was collected by Robert (Jeff) Holmgren and his wife Anita Spertus. The collection was acquired by Thomas Jaffe, the department's generous founder and benefactor, explicitly to become part of the Indo-Pacific collection at Yale. This transaction took place in 2006, in preparation for the founding of the department. At the time, Jeff and Anita retained almost 300 textiles, including Indian trade textiles for the Indonesian market, as well as a small group of very fine and exceptionally early ikat cloths from South Sumatra. This last spring they decided that it was time to part with these treasures, and they invited Tom Jaffe and me to view the entire collection in their apartment in New York.

Figure 1 *Ceremonial cloth. Silk warp, cotton weft, weft ikat (detail). South Sumatra or Java, probably 15th century. The fine ikat pattern depicts birds, kneeling deer, and a mandala. The full cloth measures 240 cm x 93 cm.*

[1] The Gallery's website link is http://artgallery.yale.edu/

My expectations were high, but the reality surpassed them. The finest pieces in the collection are weft ikat textiles that are likely to be as early as the 14th or early 15th century; one related textile in the Kahlenberg collection was radiocarbon-dated to the 15th century, and a fragment in the Lloyd Cotsen collection in Los Angeles has a 13th -century date.[2] I knew both pieces and considered them unique, but now I was looking at three superb examples – one dyed blue, another red, and a third one polychrome, and all three with borders or fine stripes in gold thread [see Figure 1]. These textiles were obviously made for a wealthy clientele. In addition to these marvellous textiles, there were magnificent Indian trade textiles, mostly hand-painted chintz from the Coromandel Coast. Many of their patterns responded to, or possibly influenced, Javanese batik designs. Tom Jaffe saw the collection as a unique opportunity to make our textile collection even more remarkable than it already was, and he agreed to acquire it, to be presented to the Yale Art Gallery as a promised gift.

In addition to the textiles, the collection also included bronze and gold objects, many of prehistoric date. All of this, in total just under 400 objects, came to the Art Gallery in August, when Jeff and Anita made two trips in their old Volvo to our new, big storage facility at Yale's West Campus. Our registrars were more than a little alarmed when Jeff told them that he wanted to bring the collection himself, rather than hire a professional art handler… but they closed their eyes and hoped for the best. Once everything was here, I felt like a kid in a sweet shop! Every box brought to light more wonderful treasures.

Figure 2 *Shadow puppet of the Javanese hero Panji. Buffalo hide, painted. Surakarta (Solo), Java, c.1900.*

As though this was not enough of a surprise, an even bigger collection was about to come our way. In early August 2015, I visited Sir Henry Angest in London, who had just inherited his brother Walter Angst's collection of Indonesian puppets and was looking for a museum that would be a good home for it. Over several decades, Walter had collected shadow puppets (*wayang*) and related materials, especially from Java, Bali, and Lombok. By the time of his death in 2015, his collection included 166 complete sets, each set holding between 150 and 300 puppets - a total of more than 20,000 puppets! [see Figures 2 and 3] Walter Angst published a major book about the collection, and it provides a unique record of the diversity of one of Indonesia's main performance arts.[3]

Although at the time of our meeting Henry Angest was in negotiations with the V&A, I advocated a home at Yale. The finest sets could be exhibited at the Gallery, while other, sturdier sets could be made available to the Yale School of Music for gamelan performances, and to the School of Drama and the Council on Southeast Asian Studies. I also argued that Yale might share parts of the collection with other universities that

[2] See Barnes, Ruth and Mary Kahlenberg, *Five Centuries of Indonesian Textiles. The Mary Hunt Kahlenberg Collection.* Munich: Prestel (2010).
[3] Walter Angst, *Wayang Indonesia*. Konstanz: Stadler (2007).

have a declared interest in Southeast Asian performance arts, such as Wesleyan University or the University of Connecticut, which has a Puppet Arts programme. My outlines of plans for the collection must have been persuasive, as in early autumn of 2015 I had a phone call from Sir Henry: he promised the entire collection to the Gallery.

Figure 3 *Shadow puppet of one of the four dwarf servants. Buffalo hide, painted. Surakarta (Solo), Java, c.1930.*

Planning the relocation and accommodation of a donation of this size will be a major challenge to the department and to my colleagues involved with collections management and conservation. But it will also make Yale the major focus for Indonesian performance arts. In late April, a small team of us went to Überlingen in Germany where the collection was housed at the time, to conduct an initial survey and to plan the move. While I am writing this, two of my colleagues are back in Germany, overseeing the packing and shipment of the collection.

So it has been a busy time. I am also teaching a course in the Art History Department, very modestly (!) called *Textiles of Asia, 800 to 1800 CE* – a wonderful chance to bring out rarely seen pieces from East and West Asia, from India and, of course, Indonesia. The students seem to enjoy it, and they quickly realise how important textiles have been over the centuries as major transmitters of designs. Although fragile in the long term, they are initially far easier to transport than ceramics or glass.

Oxford is not forgotten, though. I recently attended the Textile Society of America's symposium in Savannah, Georgia, where I participated in a panel on Late Antique and Early Medieval textile trade. It gave me a chance to present some textile fragments from the Ashmolean's Newberry collection of Indian trade textiles that have a surprisingly early date. They have been radiocarbon-dated to the 8th century CE and may have been part of the maritime trade between India and Iraq. It was quite a treat to return to research that is so closely connected for me with the Ashmolean and its great collections.

All the best and happy greetings from New Haven, where we are still enjoying the last days of a glorious New England fall.

Ruth Barnes

Dr Ruth Barnes is the inaugural Thomas Jaffe Curator of Indo-Pacific Art at the Yale University Art Gallery and was previously Textile Curator, Department of Eastern Art, at the Ashmolean Museum.

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Sua Teeb and Tub Teeb Tswb Xyooj, Black Hmong cousins of the same clan, attend a village festival in Ban Natao, Houaphanh Province, Laos.

See article page 3.
Photograph Victoria Vorreiter