

PAAJ/PAJ NTAUB: MEMORY, IDENTITY, and BELONGING

[PANEL 1]

Paaj/ Paj Ntaub Has Cultural Significance

Paaj ntaub pulls us together to support and teach one another to make high-quality creations. It is how we tell our story.

—Kazoua Xiong

November 5, 2025, marks the 50th anniversary of the arrival of HMong people in Minnesota. This small selection of paaj/paj ntaub from MNHS collections highlights the exquisite artistic skills and ingenuity of HMong women. For generations, women provided clothing, household items, and income while preserving and passing on cultural symbols and stories to younger generations.

Paaj/paj ntaub is a vital thread in the HMong journey, from China to Laos to the United States. Women are true culture bearers who use their sewing skills to preserve and innovate indigenous forms of embroidery, appliqué, and textile-making. Paaj/paj ntaub is not only art—it is memory, identity, and belonging. When we see these symbols and styles, we recognize ourselves and our shared history.

What is paaj/paj ntaub?

For centuries, HMong people cultivated hemp. They wove this versatile fiber into textiles used for clothing, blankets, ropes, household items, and funerary garments. Women embroidered these textiles with paaj/paj ntaub techniques passed down through generations, including cross-stitching, appliqué, and reverse appliqué.

From a young age, HMong girls learned to sew and copy motifs from their mothers and grandmothers. Each motif and design carries meaning, reflecting cultural knowledge, family representation, and community traditions.



[Photo]

Women sewing at Ban Vinai refugee camp, Thailand

Photo by Marlin Leroy Heise, about 1980

GV5.9 p35

Women have gathered for generations to create paaj/paj ntaub. This age-old tradition provided income for families living in refugee camps after they were displaced by the Secret War.



[Photo]

Women sewing at Lao Family Community Center, St. Paul

Photo by Elizabeth Wehrwein, 1983

HV1.42 p19

New technology, such as sewing machines and other tools, streamlines certain steps. But artists continue to carry on traditions by creating most paaj/paj ntaub designs by hand.

[PANEL 2]

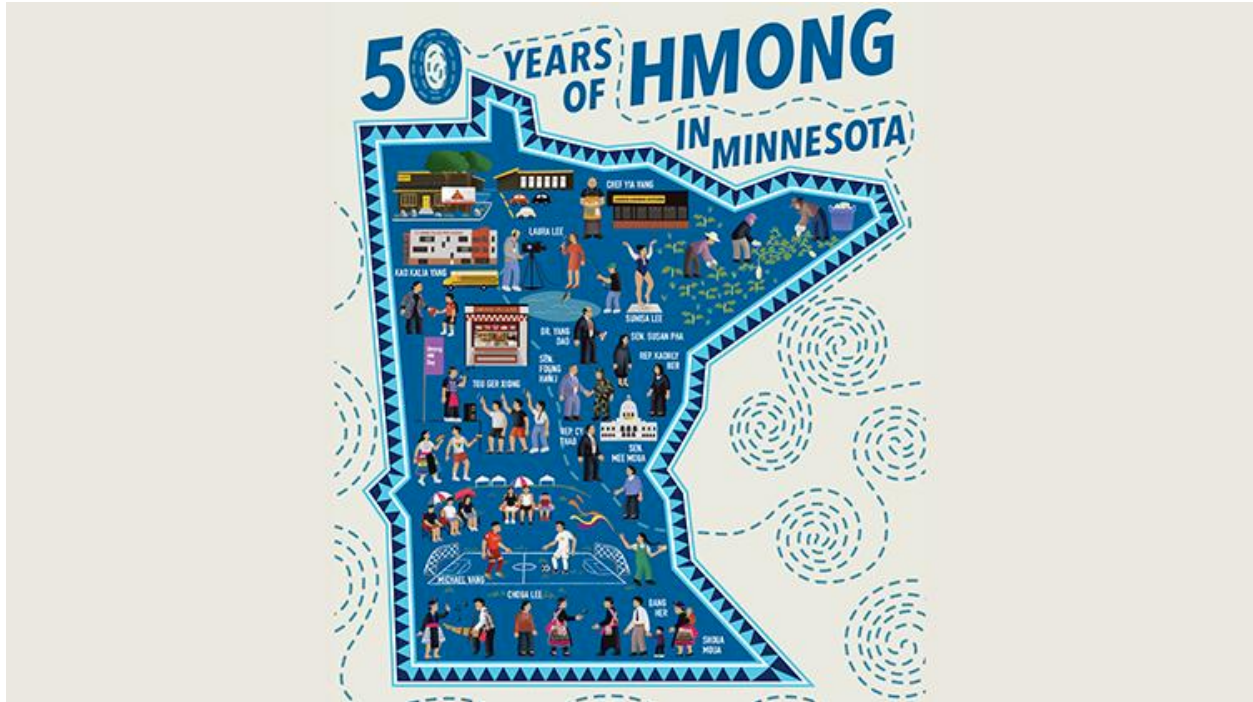
Titles in this exhibit are in Green HMong, White HMong, and English.

The spoken language of HMong people from Laos has at least two main dialects: Moob Leeg/Green HMong and Hmoob Dawb/White HMong. The H is aspirated when spoken in White HMoob. It is unaspirated in Green Moob. To be inclusive of both dialects, the spellings HMoob and HMong are used in this exhibit, and are being used more frequently in other settings.

Historically, HMong is an oral language. Hear text from this exhibit spoken in both Green and White HMong at mnhs.org/hmong.

Visit mnhs.org/hmong for resources related to the HMong experience in Minnesota.

Look for a paaj/paj ntaub that tells the story of one HMong family's journey to St. Paul in the History Center exhibit *Then Now Wow*.



[Photo]

November 5, 2025, marks the 50th anniversary of the arrival of HMong people in Minnesota, Art by Alex Yang, 2025.

[PANEL 3]

Young women wearing “striped HMong” designs

Houaphan Province, Laos

Photo by Ernest Kuhn, January 1975

Courtesy The Ernest and Phaythoune Kuhn Image Collection

The Southeast Asian Images & Texts Project

University of Wisconsin Digital Collections



These young women are wearing traditional clothing from Houaphan Province. Many commercialized forms of paaj/paj ntaub, especially the qaab qwj/qab qwj (snail swirl) in reverse appliqué, draw inspiration from these original motifs. The striped sleeves and paaj/paj ntaub vests identify these women as HMoob txaij (“striped HMong”). The paaj ntaub mog/paj ntaub mos (reverse appliqué) on their vests, the unique motifs, and the embroidered collars are exquisitely crafted.

These women are adorned in silver coins and necklaces. The jingle of silver announces the arrival of a fully dressed HMong person. With limited access to markets, wealth was often preserved as silver bars or passed down as heirlooms. French colonial coins adorning clothing demonstrated a family’s wealth. Necklaces, rings, bracelets, and earrings combined beauty with cultural and economic significance.

[PANEL 4]

Paaj/Paj Ntaub Means Survival

Making paj ntaub takes time and patience. Each product reveals much about the individual who made it—that they have the temperament and balance to create it.

—Suzanne Thao

In refugee camps in Thailand, women created a new form of embroidery called paaj ntaub tshab/paj ntaub tshiab, or story cloths. This new art form emerged out of necessity, allowing HMong families to support themselves after surviving the Secret War. HMong women, children, and men worked together to turn oral traditions into visual stories.

Christian missionary organizations and HMong Thai small business owners sold paaj ntaub tshab/paj ntaub tshiab to Western buyers, and eventually to HMong Americans. This new form of storytelling recorded folktales and legends, as well as contemporary stories of war, violence, resistance, and escape. As markets developed in the United States, Europe, and Australia, HMong families preserved their heritage while creating new forms of survival and resilience.



[Photo]

Green HMong village story cloth depicting textile and paaj/paj ntaub production

Made in Ban Vinai, Thailand

Makers Once Known

about 1989

2013.25.10

The highly skilled makers of this paaj/paj ntaub drew on memories of village life in Laos. These scenes evoke a time of abundance, when HMong people were self-sufficient and lived in harmony with their natural surroundings.

Look for these traditional village activities:

- Clearing trees before planting crops
- Harvesting and drying hemp
- Stripping hemp bark
- Weaving hemp cloth on a loom
- Dyeing and drying hemp cloth
- Making clothes and stitching paaj/paj ntaub
- Harvesting and preparing food
- Stockpiling food in a storage shed
- Grinding corn by hand on a millstone



[Photo]

This is a detail of a couple washing and drying hemp threads and a woman weaving hemp cloth on a loom. The small, even stitches and balanced composition of the scene showcase the skills of the artists who made this paaj/paj ntaub.

[PANEL 5]

Paaj/Paj Ntaub is Always Evolving

Paaj ntaub demands focus and ambition, urging us to create our best work. It teaches us how to live: Our parents placed a needle and thread in our hands, but it is up to us to follow the pattern with accuracy from beginning to end.

In this way, paaj ntaub becomes more than art—it is a lesson in living well, earning respect, and honoring the teachings of our parents.

—Houa Yang

To earn money while in refugee camps, HMong women and their families adapted traditional paaj/paj ntaub symbols to embellish objects designed for Western markets: tablecloths, wall hangings, bedspreads, coasters, coin purses, and more.

Motifs and symbols drawn from both the spiritual and human-made worlds appear in traditional paaj/paj ntaub. The embroidered patterns, colors, and designs on HMong clothing carry layered meanings, offering protection from evil spirits, signaling regional identity, and showcasing makers' talents. The patterns also preserve family crests or characters from a lost written language carried by the HMong people during their perilous journey out of China several hundred years ago.



[Photo]

Dlaim hlaab nias/Daim hlab nyias (baby carrier)

1975–1995

2015.4.1

This baby carrier features traditional motifs and colors, including red, black, green, and yellow. The top section, or ncauj (mouth) nya/nyia, is filled with red and green ntaub teeb on yellow appliqué. The bottom section combines indigo-dyed batik in symmetrical designs, with red ribbon appliqué sewn on top. Mothers and fathers carry their children on their backs, wrapped in these carriers.



[Photo]

Tab Moob Leeg/ Tiab Hmoob Lees (Green HMong skirt)

1981–1988

2013.25.81

Before women had access to markets, they made all clothing from hemp cloth. Notice the indigo-dyed batik, which requires great skill and patience, below the waist of this traditional pleated skirt. Embroidery in traditional colors of green, white, red/pink, and yellow builds on this demanding foundation. Bright appliqué and cross-stitch are layered in the lower section. The nplai ntaub (triangle appliqué) is sometimes interpreted as mountains—perhaps evoking journeys across mountain ranges. A row of ntaub teeb appears on white ribbon, along with many colorful appliqué ribbons.



[Photo]

Young Green HMong women at a New Year's celebration

About 2002–2003

Photo by Wing Young Huie, from the series *Federal Reserve Bank: Between Two Worlds*
AV2024.41

These outfits reflect changes that resulted from migration and new surroundings. While the women's skirts are mostly traditional, their velvet shirts feature floral designs, and their aprons glitter with neon-colored appliqués. Through displacement, HMong women gained access to new materials, including silks, nylons, polyester, beads, and shiny ornaments. Everything remains distinctly HMong—just brighter and more abundant.

When HMong villages were in remote areas, each region had unique clothing, headdresses, jewelry, and paaj/paj ntaub designs. During the war, many families were forcibly relocated to areas with large concentrations of HMong. Women adopted and combined regional styles. White HMong paaj ntaub mog/paj ntaub mos (reverse appliqué) and paaj/paj ntaub tawm laug (cross-stitching) blended with Green HMong appliqué, also incorporating nplai ntaub.

The evolution continued in Thai refugee camps, where pieces were crafted for sale. Today, younger generations in the United States often struggle to distinguish stylistic origins. But those who spent years in the camps recognize the history carried in every stitch.



These traditional motifs from various regions were later incorporated into commercial paaj / paj ntaub.

LUB NTAUB TEEB

Small squares overlapped with smaller, inset squares

QAAB QWJ/QAB QWJ

Snail swirls motifs

NPLAI NTAUB

Triangle designs/mountains



[Photo]

Paaj ntaub qaab qwj, ntaub teeb hab nplai ntaub/Paj ntaub qab qwj, ntaub teeb thiab ntaub nplai

Made by Xay Chou Lee, 1981-1988

2013.25.67

This piece reflects a traditional red/green palette. Red appears in clothing and shamanic tools to ward off evil spirits. Two square panels featuring the White HMong txaij qaab qwj/qab qwj (appliqué snail swirl) motif are framed by Green HMong lub ntaub teeb (small squares overlapped with smaller, inset squares) and two rows of triangular nplai ntaub (sometimes interpreted as mountains by HMong Americans). These motifs are often found on Green HMong funerary pillows or robes, as well as on baby carriers and women's shirt collars.



[Photo]

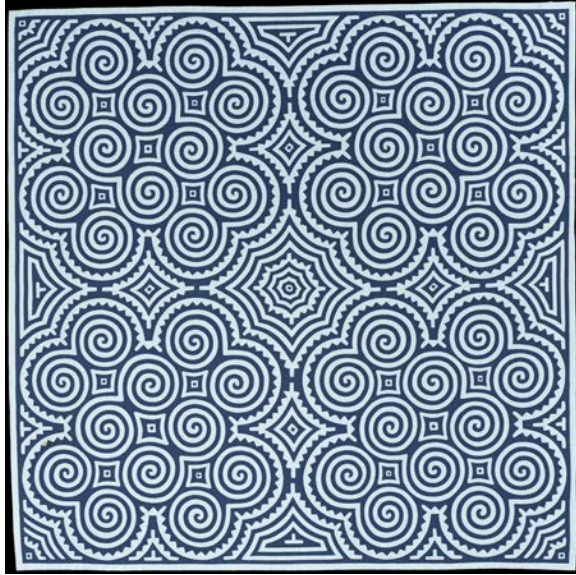
Paaj ntaub qaab qwj, ntaub teeb hab nplai ntaub/Paj ntaub qab qwj, ntaub teeb thiab ntaub nplai

Made by May Ying Xiong, 1981

2013.25.66

This vibrant piece features Green HMong motifs on a blue base with red and yellow borders. A center bouquet of ntaub teeb is encircled by two layers of “striped HMong” qaab qwj/qab qwj (snail swirls). Surrounding borders include red nplai ntaub triangle designs, a blue frame with white and red ntaub teeb, and an outer edge of red nplai ntaub.

The nplai ntaub are meticulously crafted—perfectly cut triangles, each side folded under with the tip of a needle and secured with tiny, nearly invisible stitches.



[Photo]

Paaj ntaub qaab qwj/paj ntaub qab qwj

Made by Cher Lee, St. Paul, 1981-1988

2013.25.64

This is an exquisite example of reverse appliqué by a gifted artist. Cher Lee cut qaab qwj/qab qwj (snail) designs and surrounding motifs from a single cloth with remarkable precision and skill. She then secured this appliqué to the bottom layer with tiny, nearly invisible stitches. The design combines White HMong and Green HMong style and technique, including a traditional pattern seen on Green HMong skirts and collars, with snail swirls of the HMoob txaij (“striped HMong”). Lee adapted the design for the American market by using two shades of blue.

[PANEL 6]



Paaj ntaub tsiv teb tsaws chaw/ Paj ntaub tsiv teb raws chaw

Makers once known, 1985

Full-size reproduction

1997.112.1

On the top left is Long Cheng, the secret CIA base where HMong who were recruited by the CIA to fight in the Secret War in Laos lived. This displacement uprooted thousands of HMong people from their villages, leaving them dependent on food and supplies dropped by the US government. The many houses and planes in the sky show the size and significance of Long Cheng. The majority of people of my generation were born here.

At the top right, the tapestry shows how daily life had already begun to shift. HMong were no longer farming their own land but purchasing food from local Lao markets.

Below are scenes from 1975, when families fled Long Cheng, boarding pick-up trucks headed south, while others tried to climb into the belly of USAID C-130 cargo airplanes, which provided emergency evacuation for those able to board to Thailand.

For those who could not be airlifted, the journey was long and dangerous. Families walked down mountainous jungles for months from Long Cheng toward Vientiane, bypassing the capital city, which is shown at the center of the tapestry, to cross the Mekong River and seek refuge in Thailand. In the river, you see people on inner tubes and makeshift rafts, risking everything to escape.

Across the river lie several refugee camps. In the bottom left, after months and years of uncertainty, families board buses to Bangkok and then planes bound for the United States. The tapestry does not depict America itself, only a single plane flying into the sky. This reflects how HMong people left without knowing what awaited them, leaving behind their homes and loved ones to step into the unknown, carrying heartbreak and hope.

—**KaYing Yang** was seven years old in 1976, when she came to the United States as a refugee. She is a tireless advocate for equity and justice, shaping policies that center refugee rights, gender justice, and inclusive leadership.

[PANEL 7]

The Minnesota Historical Society thanks our valued community partners for their collaboration on this exhibit and on the Fifty Years of HMong in Minnesota Commemoration Initiative.

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