



Hmong Story Cloths. Preserving Historical and Cultural Treasures, by Linda A. Gerdner; Schiffer Publishing Ltd., Atglen PA: 2015. **Size:** 8 1/2" x 11"; hard cover; 266 color & 3 b/w images; 168pp incl. Index. **ISBN:** 978-0-7643-4859-4

Review by Maria Wronski-Friend, an anthropologist and museum curator with a special interest in Southeast Asian textiles.

The Hmong are tribal people of Southeast Asia who nowadays live in several parts of the world. During the Vietnam War that spilled into their homeland, Laos, the majority of them supported the US forces. In 1975, with the communist takeover of Laos,

thousands of them had to flee to neighbouring Thailand where several refugee camps were established. Here, some of the Hmong spent more than ten years before the USA accepted almost 200,000 of them as political refugees. Canada, France and Australia took much smaller numbers.

Hmong women are among the most accomplished textile artists of Southeast Asia. Various types of complex embroidery decorate even their everyday garments, while textile art has become the major form of their artistic expression. However, during the years spent in refugee camps in Thailand, the Hmong created a new genre of textile art: large, pictorial embroideries that recalled their life experience: everyday life in the mountain villages of Laos, work in the fields, shamanic rituals and New Year celebrations, scenes from folk tales and, finally, the shattering images of war and dramatic escape from Laos. Dr Linda Gerdner, a specialist in geriatric nursing who during her work in Minnesota encountered a number of Hmong refugees, became fascinated by these embroidered documents, known as *paj nuaub dab neeg* (flower cloths of people and customs). During almost two decades of close collaboration with the Hmong, she organised an extensive collection of these textiles and made a great effort to document and explain their cultural significance. Fortunately for us, she decided to share the results of her passion by publishing images of forty-four Hmong story cloths from her collection.

For at least two reasons this book is an outstanding publication. First of all, with great care it presents the mastery, beauty and historic significance of this unique group of textiles created in some of the most oppressive conditions of refugee camps. Secondly, Gerdner conducted meticulous research in an attempt to explain the cultural meanings and significance of the images represented on the textiles. Gerdner's passion for the Hmong culture and needlework took her beyond their communities in the USA, to villages in Laos as well as to the last refugee camp in Thailand – Wat Tham Krabok, closed around 2005. In most cases the embroidered fabrics have been accompanied by an extensive visual documentation such as historic photos taken in refugee camps, images of the actual objects or plants represented in the textiles, or photographs taken by the author in Hmong villages in Laos. There are also statements by Hmong people who, in their own voices, explain the scenes and imagery of the textiles.

The author is well aware of the historic significance of this group of textiles as well as their ephemeral nature. In principle, this is the textile art of refugee camps: these exquisite, painstakingly made embroideries, originated in the late 1970s in refugee camps of Thailand, where the Hmong

had an abundance of time and a need to generate income. There was also the wish to inform the outside world of the atrocities of the war in Laos and the fate they suffered. While in dress embroidery the Hmong usually apply geometric motifs executed in cross-stitch, chain-stitch and reverse appliquéd, in this new genre of textiles they decided to use different means of expression: abstract symbols have been replaced by pictorial, narrative representations for which a satin stitch was more suitable. Relief agencies that supported the camps provided necessary materials, with the favourite becoming a blue, cotton blend used as a background cloth. While the men's duty was to sketch the outlines of figures and, at times, text captions, the women's task was to turn them into elaborate, embroidered images.

Besides generating income, the creation of these fabrics may have become a form of catharsis that provided relief from memories and atrocities of the war. Probably most moving are the story cloths that depict the war in Laos and subsequent escape to Thailand. The graphic scenes of torture and executions conducted in a most cruel way, shootings of civilians and other forms of violence have been presented with such detail that they could be used as court evidence.

The Hmong who settled in the USA or other countries were no longer able to produce this elaborate and time-consuming form of textile art: pressures and challenges of a new life would not permit them to spend hundreds of hours on embroidering just one piece of fabric. This monumental textile art, born in refugee camps, came to an end with their closure.

This carefully researched and well presented book is probably the best ever produced publication showcasing this unique group of textiles. While in principle it is addressed to readers in the USA, it will also be of interest to Australians, as their country is home to more than 3,000 Hmong refugees. While a decade ago the largest settlements of the Hmong were in north Queensland (Cairns and Innisfail), following two devastating cyclones the majority of them decided to move to a more secure life in Brisbane. Significant numbers of Hmong also live in Melbourne, Sydney and Tasmania. The book is a splendid acknowledgement of the textile skills of these people as well as providing an excellent insight into the tragic history and elaborate cultural traditions of this little known group of migrants.

NOTE: Maria Wronski-Friend has also conducted research that documents changes in the Hmong migrants costumes in Australia. See section 'Dress and Personal Narrative' on the ICOM Costume Committee website <http://www.clothestellstories.com>