



THE HMONG TERM *paj ntaub* (pronounced pan dau), meaning flowery cloth, describes the labor-intensive appliqué, reverse appliqué, and embroidery that decorate traditional Hmong clothing. (In reverse appliqué, designs are cut from layers of cloth and the raw edges turned under and stitched, exposing the layer below.) Before their culture was disturbed by the Vietnam War, Hmong women learned these techniques and built their skills from an early age.

While in Thai refugee camps after fleeing their homes in the mountains of Laos, the Hmong began adapting traditional *paj ntaub*, embellishing the types of objects that would appeal to a broader market in order to make or supplement an income. The items produced to sell to Americans included pillowcases, tablecloths, bedspreads, coasters, bookmarks, coin purses, stuffed animals, and embroidered clothing. Cloth squares with reverse appliqué and embroidery, which could be used as a decorative table cover, pillow top, or wall hanging, proved to be a particularly popular adapted form of *paj ntaub*.

From 1981 to 1999 Corrine Pearson operated Hmong Handwork, a consignment shop selling hand-stitched items made by Hmong women, both those who resettled in the United States after leaving refugee camps in Thailand and those who remained behind. A member of St. Paul's First Covenant Church, Pearson had an interest in helping Hmong women of her church market their skills. The shop closed its doors in 1999, a victim of changing times as young Hmong women found easier and less time-consuming ways to make a living.

The Minnesota Historical Society is fortunate to have received Pearson's store records and nearly 300 textiles that document a changing culture during Hmong resettlement in Minnesota. The collection shows how modern innovations developed as colors changed, garment styles changed, and everyday items were transformed. To help the *paj ntaub* stitchers, Pearson worked to identify color trends and objects that would sell better in the American community and commissioned the best artistic work that she could find. Many of the Hmong who settled in Minnesota were particularly skilled at reverse appliqué techniques. Their skill and artistry transformed plain cloth into unending, complex patterns of color and design.

—Linda McShannock, associate curator

Top: Appliqué and reverse appliqué with satin stitch embroidery, cucumber-seed motif; made by Phia Lao. **Middle:** Steps motif in reverse appliqué, outlined with seed stitch and with centers of chain stitch peacock ocelli; made by Lee Her. **Bottom:** Reverse appliqué, variation of elephant-foot motif; made by Mayo Yang.



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