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Hmong embroidery is the thread that binds

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To the untrained eye, the boxes stuffed with embroidered tapestries, pillow covers and clothes stored at a St. Paul archivist's home may look like a pile of pretty things.

But to those behind the first-ever virtual museum of Hmong embroidery, those boxes are treasure chests full of dragon tails, elephant feet and mountains. The swirls and geometric designs in vivid pinks, reds, greens and blues are commonly used in Hmong embroidery, a centuries-old art form that is fading fast.

To preserve this intricate artwork, and to teach more people about it, the leaders of two major Hmong cultural preservation groups in St. Paul have teamed up to launch a website displaying more than 200 pieces of Hmong embroidery in their collections.

"It was time for us to work together and tell young people that this is what the Hmong preserve for a long time," said Txongpao Lee, executive director of the Hmong Cultural Center, one of the groups behind the website.

Many of the pieces featured on hmongembroidery.org were purchased by Marlin Heise, a volunteer archivist at Hmong Archives, the other group involved in the virtual museum. The rest were donated by Hmong people looking to get rid of their old things, said Xai Lor, project coordinator for the website.

"When I see Hmong people tossing [embroidery] away, it's like tossing culture away," he said.

Decorate, communicate

A skill once passed on from mothers to daughters, embroidery was used mainly to decorate clothes hand-sewn for the Hmong New Year and other occasions. Called paj ntaub (pronounced "pan dow"), it means "flower cloth" in Hmong.

In ancient times, the embroidered patterns served double duty -- to decorate and to communicate. According to oral history, long ago when the Hmong were still concentrated in China, they were forbidden to use their original, written language, which was made up of picture symbols. So the women started sewing the symbols



Xai Lor, curator at the Hmong Cultural Center started a website to catalog the meanings traditional Hmong quilt Wednesday, November 21, 2012.

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This is the development of the Hmong alphabet. Xai Lor curator at the Hmong Cultural Center started a website catalog the meanings traditional Hmong quilts. Here are examples. Wednesday, November 21, 2012.

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into their skirts to create messages, disguising them as patterns, Lor explained.

Today, no one can decode those messages because the original language's meaning has been lost, he said.

Most of the motifs that appear in traditional Hmong embroidery are inspired by nature and are associated with animals. A series of swirls facing each other, for example, is called "elephant foot" and generally is associated with "family." There is also the "ram horn" pattern and tiny slits that symbolize "seeds." Traditional motifs appear on everything from belts to baby carriers to aprons.

Newer embroidered pieces reflect influences from China, Vietnam and Thailand, places where many Hmong people currently live. They're geared toward tourists and include wall hangings, sofa pillow covers, and fabric story books for children featuring pictures of humans, animals and Hmong and English words.

"We tried to put as many different samples as possible so people could see how it evolves throughout the years," Lor said of the website's diverse collection.

Two audiences in mind

Two major grants funded the new site -- a \$10,000 gift from the National Endowment for the Arts and another worth nearly \$3,000 from the Asian Pacific Endowment of the St. Paul Foundation.

Lor said the site has been viewed by more than 1,800 unique visitors from countries all over the world, including Japan, France, Israel, Romania, Sweden and Vietnam.

The educational site was built with two audiences in mind: non-Hmong people who want to learn more about the culture, and young Hmong-Americans who don't know about paj ntaub.

"A lot of Hmong kids in the United States, they don't know anything about it because they don't have the opportunity to make Hmong embroidery," Lor said.

A traditional paj ntaub piece can take months to complete, and young people -- and even elders -- in the U.S. don't have time to sit and sew. The advent of machine-made embroidery, too, has led to the traditional art's decline, Lor said.

A few years ago, folks at the Hmong Cultural Center had some money for cultural classes and decided to offer paj ntaub lessons.

"We tried for a whole year to recruit students," recalled Mark Pfeifer, a grant writer for the Hmong Cultural Center, who said they



Traditional Hmong embroidery used symbols to tell a story. Many of the meanings have been lost to time, but historians are trying to save what they can.

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had to cancel the classes. "It seems the younger girls, and even their families, are not interested," Pfeifer said. "It's not being passed along."

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