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THINGS TO DO

# Hmong Cultural Center in St. Paul expands folk arts exhibits



A qeej class at the Hmong Cultural Center. (Courtesy of Hmong Cultural Center)

By **KATHY BERDAN** | [kberdan@pioneerpress.com](mailto:kberdan@pioneerpress.com) | Pioneer Press

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Hmong history, culture and community in Minnesota has long been on display at the Hmong Cultural Center in St. Paul.

Recently, the compact museum and library on the second story of a building at Western and University added exhibit information about Hmong folk arts.

You're to be excused if you've never been to the center, says director of programs Mark Pfeifer. Many visitors are from out of town and hear about it via "places to see" visitor information. Others come for ESL classes or to do research in the center's library.

Though small, with nary a massive woolly mammoth nor a razzle-dazzle sound and light show in sight, the cultural center offers clear, concise information about the Hmong — mostly in the form of 22 panels hung in hallways and rooms at the center.



Display cases at the center. (Courtesy Hmong Cultural Center)

Display cases with Hmong tools, traditional musical instruments (the Qeej) and clothing help tell the stories on the panels.

"There's no collections budget," Pfeifer says. "Everything here is donated."

Pfeifer says the Hmong Cultural Center has been in St. Paul for 26 years, moving to its current location about five years ago.

A walk-through look at the panels is loaded with information about Hmong settlement in Minnesota (two waves, in 1980 when they fled Laos, and again in 2004 when they left Thai refugee camps), religion (based on shamanism for many), clans (there are 18 and just that many different last names).



Panels and iPads tell the stories at the Hmong Cultural Center in St. Paul. (Courtesy Hmong Cultural Center)

“There’s a lot people can take away if they take the time to come in here,” Pfeifer says. The center recently added iPads to several exhibits for more information.

The number of panels has grown in stages over the past five years, Pfeifer says. The recent addition of the folk arts panels and displays “really adds to what we can offer,” he adds.

A small room in the center focuses on Hmong embroidery. Symbols used in the artistic tradition are explained. And visitors learn that the familiar story cloths sold at craft shows and markets didn’t get started until the 1980s as a way to make money for Hmong in Thai refugee camps.

The library in the Hmong Cultural Center has books, binders filled with research papers, and newspaper stories about Minnesota Hmong from 20-plus years.

Once or twice a month, cultural center staff offer one-hour tours. Pfeifer and the center’s executive director Txongpao Lee offer “Hmong 101” classes. The center has classes on Hmong funeral songs and wedding songs and playing the Qeej. Special programs include a talk on Hmong Shamanism on Oct. 17.

## If you go

- **What:** Hmong Cultural Center
- **When:** 9 a.m.-6 p.m. Mondays-Fridays, weekends by appointment
- **Where:** 375 University Ave., Suite 204, St. Paul
- **Admission:** \$5; pre-arranged guided group tours available for a negotiated fee.
- **Info:** 651-917-9937 or [hmongcc.org](http://hmongcc.org)

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## Kathy Berdan

Kathy has been an arts journalist for almost 25 years. Her career goal is to interview all four Monkees, and she's three-fourths of the way there. (Yes, she did talk to Davy Jones before he died.) She loves Twin Cities theater and is a huge fan of the St. Paul Winter Carnival and the Minnesota State Fair.

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