

# Hmong Threads of Life

## Traditional Hmong Textiles of the Golden Triangle

A Presentation by Victoria Vorreiter



Over the millennia, the Hmong have developed an astonishingly rich culture as they migrated from their source in the far reaches of northern China along mountaintops that flank the great rivers of Southeast Asia, finally finding sanctuary in the foothills of Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar, and further in the four corners of the world.

A traditional, self-reliant people living close to the earth—keenly attuned to the rotations of the sun and moon, the cycles of seasons, and the wheel of life—the Hmong have created a complex, all-encompassing belief system rooted in animism. Frequent rites, ceremonies, and festivals are performed throughout the year to maintain harmony between the world of man and the realm of spirits.

The Hmong of the Golden Triangle are composed of numerous groups and subgroups that display diverse customs and speak a range of regional dialects. Despite such diversity of practices and vernacular, the Hmong find commonality in shared tenets that permeate their way of life, worldview, oral tradition, and craftsmanship.

Of all the characteristics that distinguish the Hmong subculture divisions, none is more striking than the variations found in their clothing. While it is true that “a common thread” runs through untold generations and throughout the vast Hmong diaspora, these threads are woven, dyed, tailored, embroidered, and embellished in spectacularly distinctive ways—ways that identify the group while displaying the unique artistry of the Hmong seamstresses who meticulously fashion every piece for each family member through the cycles of their lives.

**Victoria Vorreiter**, an American researcher, photographer, and filmmaker, highlights the traditional garments and fabrication practices of the Hmong of Laos and Thailand through **Hmong Threads of Life**, a dynamic presentation enhanced by a wealth of vivid photographs and textiles of the Hmong who create and wear them.

Victoria has spent over a decade documenting the traditional music, ceremonies, and culture of the highland peoples of Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, and China. This has resulted in an extensive body of work, beginning with the **Songs of Memory: Traditional Music of the Golden Triangle** book, compact disc, and multi-media exhibit showcasing the six major ethnic groups in the region: Akha, Lahu, Lisu, Mien, Hmong, and Karen. These collections have appeared at the East-West Center, Hawaii; the Jim Thompson Center, Bangkok; the University of Mandalay, Myanmar; the Golden Triangle Gallery, Chicago; and the Chiang Mai Arts and Cultural Center.

Of late Victoria has delved specifically into Hmong traditions, creating an archives that consists of an in-depth book and film, **Hmong Songs of Memory: Traditional Secular and Sacred Hmong Music**, and a many-layered exhibition, **Hmong Songs of Memory, Hmong Threads of Life**, launched in Chiang Mai in 2016, which includes a variety of integrative components—photographs, a film, a comprehensive collection of musical instruments, artifacts, and full textiles of the four major Hmong subgroups in Laos and Thailand.