

Embroidered Laotian Textiles: From the Heart and Soul, together with Fate, to the Creative Cultural Way*

หัตถศิลป์ผ้าปักลาว : สืบสานจิตวิญญาณและศรัทธา สู่วิถีวัฒนธรรมสร้างสรรค์

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Abstract

Embroidered Laotian textiles are an example of prestige handicraft created by embroidering golden or silver spangles and tinsel on to textiles to produce beautiful designs. This superb craftsmanship has been related to the beliefs, fate and rituals of Laotians since the olden days. The creation of this kind of artistic handicraft is based on the specific use of certain signals to communicate meaning. Therefore, embroidered Laotian textiles are not only used as clothing or in utensils but they are also important goods for trade. In the past, they were used as tributes in the countries of Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Europe. Therefore, embroidered Laotian textiles are part of a culture that displays cultural connectivity that has been blended, has flowed and been transferred from place to place throughout the region.

Keywords: 1. Embroidered Laotian textiles 2. handicraft

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บทคัดย่อ

งานหัตถศิลป์ผ้าปักลาวเป็นงานหัตถศิลป์ชั้นสูง เป็นการปักดั้ง(ต้น)ประดับตกแต่งผืนผ้าให้มีความสวยงามด้วยวัสดุเงินดินทองบนผืนผ้า นับเป็นงานช่างฝีมือชั้นสูงที่เกี่ยวข้องกับความเชื่อ ความศรัทธา และพิธีกรรมของลาวมาแต่โบราณ โดยเกิดจากการสร้างสรรค์งานศิลปะที่มีกฎเกณฑ์ในการใช้สัญลักษณ์เพื่อสื่อความหมาย งานหัตถศิลป์ผ้าปักลาวไม่ได้เป็นเพียงเครื่องนุ่งห่มและเครื่องใช้เท่านั้น แต่เป็นสินค้าสำคัญในการติดต่อค้าขาย เป็นเครื่องบรรณาการในอดีตระหว่างเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ เอเชีย ตะวันออกกลางและยุโรป ดังนั้นจึงกล่าวได้ว่างานหัตถศิลป์ผ้าปักลาวเป็นวัฒนธรรมร่วมที่แสดงให้เห็นถึงความเชื่อมโยงทางวัฒนธรรมที่ผสมผสานลัทธิไสยศาสตร์ผ่านกันไปมาทั่วภูมิภาค

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Embroidered Laotian Textiles

Embroidered Laotian textiles are an example of prestige handicraft that has been connected to the beliefs, fate and rituals of Laotians since the olden days. In the past, Laos was seen as a country where a diversity of cultures was connected. It was a buffer state that accepted the cultures of other countries, for example, Thailand, China and France, and adjusted them to its own indigenous culture. This reflects the uniqueness of Laotians in their management of the relationship between different things and in their giving importance to the harmony of the things they have managed. Textiles which were used as tributes in the past were, for example, Hae Kung fabric (hand-woven silk with designs) from China, I-kat (Mud Mee) fabric from Cambodia, Hang Krarak silk fabric from Thailand and the Sarong from Indonesia and Malaysia. The application and acceptance of other cultures was a gesture of respect and a means of creating diplomatic ties with them. Such an idea is relevant to the statement made by Ajarn Vittaya Vudhithaisong (2558), Deputy Secretary of the Laotian Documentation Centre at Khon Khaen University, when he said that the Laotian royal court did not create or produce all the textiles for their clothing but it served as the centre for introducing them to the public. For instance, when clothes were made, the royal court would be seen as a channel where income could be generated because, once the artistic creation had emerged from the royal court into the outside world, people tended to imitate the royal fashion. This indicates that embroidered Laotian textiles were in the royal court before they became popular among commoners. The craft of tinsel embroidery on woven materials (the Teen Jok fabric) originated in India and it transferred to Indonesia, Angkor and Siam before it reached Laos. These items were woven materials decorated with golden tinsel designs, an embroidery technique that had been borrowed from China, Lieu, Lanna and Lanchang. The royal court

was the centre for the production of tinsel embroidered textiles. This continued until 1975 when the political system in Laos changed, marking the end of the production of handicrafts by the royal court. However, textile embroidery has continued and has remained a cultural root that reflects the beliefs and the heart and soul of Laotians because tinsel embroidered textiles are a prestige handicraft which manifests the embroiderers' craftsmanship in sewing gold strips on to the fabric and because gold is connected with the heart and soul.

If we consider the connection between exquisite embroidered Laotian textiles and their Thai counterparts, we will find that their historical link goes back to the time of the Lan Chang Kingdom, and that they were related in their artistic and cultural roots. At present, this linkage can be found in the area of Nan Province in Thailand (Chao David Somsanith, Interview, 3rd February 2016). In the interview, Chao David Somsanith classifies embroidered works according to their function as follows:

1. Embroidering fabrics and clothes: originally the fabrics and clothes used in the royal court were embroidered with genuine gold. These clothes and fabrics would be worn and used in formal and elaborate ceremonies. The art of gold tinsel embroidery was intended for decoration. The gold strips would be embroidered at distant intervals on the fabric, for example, on the collar edge, the sleeves or the rim of a blouse/shirt. According to ancient tradition, when the owner of the embroidered fabrics died, the embroidered parts would be separated and presented to the offspring. The embroidered designs would have symbolic value or would be meant to communicate certain meanings. However, after 1981, the tinsel embroidery on the clothes of the royal court were adapted to clothes worn by Nang Sungkhan and now they are applied to clothes that have become merchandise in fashion circles. The symbolic meaning of the embroideries has been lost because people use them without realizing their significance and because they are no longer related to rituals as in the past (Chao David Somsanith, Interview, 3rd February 2016). The tinsel embroidery on clothes also reflects the rank of people in the royal court, for instance, yellow was only used for a queen's cloak because the colour would become radiant in sunlight and the red colour of a traditional skirt suggested life power (Vittaya Vudhithaisong, 2558).



Figure 1 Attire of the Luang Prabang Royal Court

2. Religious embroidery consists of the embroidery on a monk's utensils and the Phra Bot (woven materials depicting an image of the Lord Buddha or other religious figures). Embroidered Laotian handicrafts are connected with Buddhism in the same way as those in Thailand. The artwork is created to be presented to monks of high monastic title or dedicated to Buddhism, for instance, the Phra Bot.



Figure 2 The Embroidered Phra Bot-- created by Chao David Somsanith

3. Embroidery on banners and utensils used in rituals: because embroidered Laotian textiles are related to beliefs and rituals, they can be found in the decorative parts of a ritual, for example the Bai Sri Su Khwan Rite (a propitious rice offering ceremony to invite the guardian spirit to protect the attendees of the ceremony).



Figure 3 Embroidery which is part of the utensils used at the Bai Sri Su Khwan Rite

4. Dance Costumes: embroideries can be attached to the costumes of the dancers in the Ramakien (Ramayana) Masked Dance, such as the costumes of Phra Luxaman and Phra Rama. The Ramakien or Ramayana Masked Dance is a piece of performance art that is part of shared identity of the ASEAN countries.

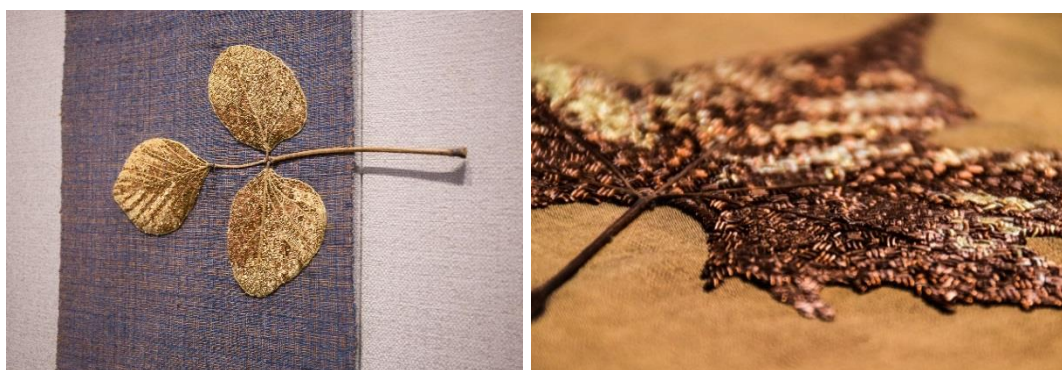


Figure 4 Embroideries in a contemporary art style—works created by Chao David Somsanith

5. Fine art products: Chao David Somsanith as an artist specializing in embroidered Laotian textiles, has appropriately applied ancient wisdom to his contemporary works, resulting in the production of artistic works that have been created from combined ancient embroidery techniques and are presented in a new form. The examples in Photo 4 depict the embroidery in contemporary art. This suggests how ancient wisdom can continue in a sustainable manner.

Signalling through Embroidered Laotian Textiles

Embroidered Laotian textiles play a role in the signalling of meanings and are markers of identity. They can be divided, according to the type of embroidery, into two groups—tinsel embroideries, which appear in the silver and golden embroidery groups and embroideries of sparkling colours, which are mainly made from imported items, for example, tinsels, spangles and precious stones. Because of the belief that a king is a divine figure, the materials used in embroideries made for the king must be carefully selected. The colour that represents the monarchy is yellow. In terms of design, most embroidered Laotian textiles are related to the decoration of religious architecture, which consists of both auspicious and forbidden designs. In an interview, Ajarn Charatphong Vongsilchitdara, a specialist in gold strip embroidered fabrics, classified Laotian designs in textiles into three types as follows.



Figure 5 Architectural designs which influence embroidery designs

1. Animal designs which can be divided into three groups as follows:

1.1 Designs of mythological animals or animals in the Himmavanta Forest: most of these animals are used as the symbols of royal families, which consist of the Front Palace (Wang Na) and the Grand Palace (Wang Luang). Originally, it was forbidden for commoners to use these designs and, since they were considered to be high in rank, they were not placed inappropriately. Other animal designs also belonging to this group are, for example, a bird, symbolizing the Grand Palace, and the Hasdi Link or the Hasdin Bird, a large mythical bird living in the Himmavanta Forest, with the body of a bird whose beak is in the shape of an elephant's trunk, being a symbol of the Front Palace. This mythical bird earns more respect than the Naga Serpent.

1.2 The designs of animals in general: these designs indicate different meanings. For example, a butterfly stands specifically for what should be avoided. This is because the butterfly design was used at ceremonies where noblemen pledged allegiance to their King. If the fabric was embroidered with the image of a butterfly spreading its wings, this would show the user's readiness to make a pledge to serve the King. A fabric embroidered with the image of a butterfly with its wings folded would suggest that he was not ready. The image of a bat suggested good luck; a fish symbolized a son and was used to express congratulations when the son took office or succeeded in his education.

2. Floral designs are designs of flowers or leaves, for example, peonies in bloom suggesting the readiness of women to get married.

3. Decorative designs (Laotian designs) are the prototype designs found in architectural works or paintings. Most of them do not suggest a meaning but they are used for a decorative purpose. These designs are, for example, the Soi Sa or the Kruay Cheng design and the Phum Khao design.

The designs of embroidered Laotian textiles share certain characteristics with the designs of fabrics in the ASEAN community but the unique identity of the Laotian designs lies in the curvy and fluttering presentation of combined natural designs.

Different Stages in the Process of Embroidering Gold Strips

Embroidering gold strips or golden and silver tinsel on to Laotian textiles involves the following stages:



Figure 6 Vad Houp (Drawing a design)

1. Vad Houp or Vad Phap (drawing a design) is when a design is drawn from the designer's imagination. The design is drafted on to wax paper and, mostly, is created from a combination of prototype patterns.



Figure 7 Tok Lai or Sap Lai (Making a design by means of perforation)

2. Tok Lai or Sap Lai refers to the process of using different sizes of chisel to perforate the design on wax paper to make it stand out.



Figure 8 Ngad Dok (using stem stitches to fix the design to a textile)

3. Ngad Dok or making stem stitches is done when the design obtained from the perforated wax paper is fixed on to a fabric which has been stretched on the embroidery frame, with red thread being used for stem stitches along the design to fit it to the fabric.



Figure 9 Taem Dok (Separating the design into parts)

4. Taem Dok is the stage where the embroiderer separates the design into parts using a pencil or a pen to draw lines on the wax-paper design in order to specify the direction of the embroidering.



Figure 10 Vad Dok (making stem stitches to outline the design)

5. Vad Dok is the stage when red thread is used to make stem stitches to outline the design; it is common to use red thread because this helps to accentuate the gold colour of the design.



Figure 11 Thom Dok

(making flat stitches on a design that has been outlined with stem stitches)

6. Thom Dok is the stage where flat stitches are used to fill out the whole design which has been outlined by stem stitches. The embroidery process will continue until the end of the thread and the end knot will be hidden under the embroidered design. Tinsel embroideries will display the design on the top side. The embroiderer will use one hand to push the needle from underneath and his/her other hand will pick the needle from the top. While embroidering, the embroiderer will lubricate the thread with wax to make the process smooth and easier.

Continuation of Embroidered Laotian Textiles Today

Embroidered Laotian textiles have been connected to the way of life, beliefs and the heart and soul of Laotians for a long time. They originated when the upper-class members of the royal court used embroidered textiles to classify people according to the position and rank of the user. Others were used as elements in rituals and religious beliefs. Later, embroidered textiles gradually became popular among the general public. They have thus become cultural capital that is both tangible and intangible and they are found in different forms that can be summarized as follows.

1. Conservation: after the change in the political system resulting in the termination of the royal court, the embroidered textiles of the Laotian royal court came to an end. However, as the textiles are able to exhibit their original authentic value, they have been collected to be displayed in museums. The original knowledge about embroidery can be preserved and transferred through the teaching of embroidery masters. Some handicrafts have been newly created in the traditional form through traditional techniques.

2. Adaptation: the embroidered Luang Prabang textiles have been a part of rituals and religious beliefs since the olden days. Nowadays, they are still valuable and have maintained their original meaning as a part of or the utensils used in certain ceremonies or rituals, for example, the invitation of the Khwan (guardian) ceremony.

3. Developing innovations or creating contemporary products in the form of different kinds of art, for example, the Masked Dance costumes or contemporary artworks.

4. Application without an awareness of artistic value (“Folklolisation”) refers to imitating an ancient artifact and making it contemporary without realizing its original meaning. This is when the traditional technique is applied to make a contemporary product and to create added value to original cultural capital (Patcha Utiswannakul and Suppakorn Disthaphun, 2560)

Guidelines for the Development of Embroidered Laotian Textiles

From the existing forms of embroidered Laotian textiles it can be deduced that their continuation is in the form of conservation and development but these two concepts are not integrated. If a creative dimension is to be considered from local cultural capital in accordance with the concept of cultural industries, merchandise production or services in creative designing have to be connected with both tangible and intangible art and culture. The products have to be artwork with economic potential. This is a way of making use of cultural assets together with the production of merchandise as seen in Chart 1, showing the creation of artwork from cultural capital in accordance with the concept of cultural industries.

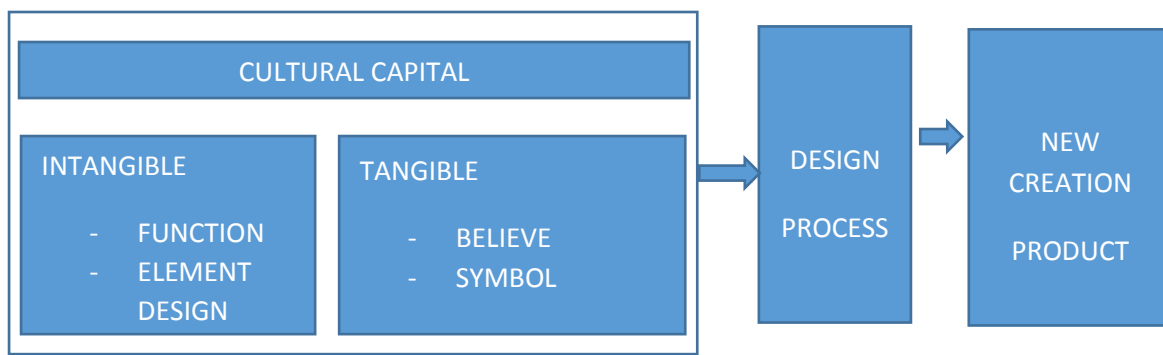


Figure 12 The design process from cultural capital

The chart showing how a product is created from cultural capital in accordance with the concept of cultural industries suggests the idea that conservation can be practised side by side with development. It is the application of cultural capital through the study and analysis of the tangible elements of cultural capital, for example, function and design factors in terms of, for instance, shape and form, colour, decorative detail, technique and materials. This should be carried out together with the study of the intangible elements of cultural capital, for example, the beliefs or meanings hidden in the cultural capital. This study is the first stage before taking all the elements obtained from the analysis to the design process which may result in the design of newly created products that still maintain unique cultural capital values and can create added economic value in a sustainable manner.

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