

Threads of Life

Traditional Textiles of the Golden Triangle

A Presentation by Victoria Vorreiter



High in the mountains of the Golden Triangle, where Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar once knew no boundaries, lives a rich multiplicity of traditional peoples. Prominent among them are the Akha, Lahu, Lisu, Hmong, Mien, and Karen, six distinct groups who have maintained their independence and identity to a high degree. Each represents an extraordinary world, unique in history, language, customs, arts, music, religion, and features. No less astounding is the diversity of their traditional garments.

Much can be perceived from the textiles these ethnic groups wear in daily life and don during social and ceremonial enactments. The range of these demonstrates a multitude of purposes that are both functional and fantastical. Clothing serves primarily as physical protection, keeping the wearer safe from the ever-changing elements of the environment. By displaying common motifs, colors, and styles important to a people's heritage, garments offer every community member an inexpressible sense of identity and cohesion. Special garments clearly signal a person's calling, at times bestowing the wearer with special powers. When adorned with precious items—coins, beads, seeds, or silver—clothing demonstrates wealth and social status.

Clothing also marks every person during the cycles of life. Baby carriers are decorated with a profusion of colorful designs to block evil spirits. The sumptuous attire worn in adolescence serves as a beacon to attract a mate. Distinctively embroidered symbols, charms, and jewelry promote health, while repelling misfortune. Ritual clothes, sewn specially for last rites, are worn by the deceased to enter the ancestor world. Traditional textiles are a vital manifestation of a people's legacy, connecting untold past generations to present generations and beyond.

Victoria Vorreiter, an American researcher, photographer, and filmmaker, highlights the traditional garments of the peoples of Southeast Asia through **Threads of Life: Traditional Textiles of the Golden Triangle**, a dynamic presentation enhanced by a wealth of vivid photographs and textiles of the people who wear them.

Victoria has spent over a decade documenting the traditional music, ceremonies, and culture of the mountain 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 Thailand 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.