

SOUTHEAST ASIAN RESEARCH PAPER

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This paper is based on field work done with the Southeast Asian community in Bowling Green, Kentucky. The project was part of a class assignment in which the students did research and interviews on various aspects of the Southeast Asians. I chose the topic of art-- the art that is done here, what has been retained from their homeland, how it has <sup>been</sup> adapted, how it was learned, and the materials used. I have had little success in getting people to talk to me about this subject. This paper, to date, is about mostly observances made while working with the Southeast Asians at the Refugee Assistance Center, as well as a history of their art. I am still trying, desperately I might add, to get interviews, but have about run out of time and perseverance. I have scheduled an interview with one of the teachers who might possibly give me some insight to my topic from a different point of view. I shall continue to try and set up interviews but I fear that it is a waste of time.

In my research for this project, I have found very little written documentation on the art of Southeast Asia. Most has been written on the "High" art, or the temple ruins and museum pieces. This is not the art I am interested in. What I have been trying to focus on is the art made by the average person and what it means to them. I have worked with mostly Vietnamese and some Cambodian. The Hmong are the only group of refugees in the United States that have had much written on their art. This has been fairly recent.

The art of Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia goes

back many thousands of years. It was only in the seventh century that a history of the art could be made and an evolution traced. This is done by examining the temples, which were built of brick and stone and have resisted the elements of time.<sup>1</sup> Around the thirteenth century, there was a political upheaval and the great empires either fell or survived under great difficulty. Some of the art was lost forever. The materials used for the construction of the temples in this time changed from stone to wooden constructions, all which has been lost. It is not until the ninth century that much is known. But at this time, much of the culture was being influenced by the Western world and much of the culture disintegrated.<sup>2</sup>

The art and architecture in the Dong-Son era, which lasted until the fourteenth century, reflects the influence of Indian and China. During the thirteenth- and fourteenth-centuries, the culture of Southeast Asia grew increasingly more independent of their great neighbors. The areas within Southeast Asia became more independent of each other, although they still influenced each other culturally and artistically. A good example of this is two fifteenth century shrines on the slopes of Gunung Lawu in central Java, Candi Sukuh and Candi Ceto, which have terraced layouts and unroofed shrines. These and other elements of the shrines are reminiscent of religious structures in the Pacific.<sup>3</sup>

The art of Southeast Asia is a continuation of thousands of years of tradition. Some styles have changed over the

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years but the motifs remain similar. This true especially in the art of the Hindu and Buddhist influenced countries where every image is a copy of a copy. The artist often remains anonymous and is an agent of a universal soul. Art is a vehicle to describe, nonverbally, culture as a whole to the whole of culture.<sup>4</sup>

There is a different way of thinking about art in Southeast Asia. It is not a "Western sense of aesthetic independent of anything else" but a sense of "oneness" within the Buddhist ethic.<sup>5</sup> Everything is interrelated, a part of a whole. "Art is part of life and not a separate entity, in the same sense that religion is a part of life. It is a way to explain the universe." <sup>6</sup> This is a part of the religion. The religious laws govern how images are portrayed. In the Hindu religion, the image is stylized in a supernatural, symbolic way. This is seen even more in the Moslem religion, where man is not portrayed at all.

Art is not an elitist concept in the Southeast Asian countries. The images and objects are made to be used and worshipped. Every community or household uses some art forms in this manner. The artists of this area believe in an economy of the line. This means that they do not feel obligated to fill in every line and space for the observer, they feel that people never see the same object in the same way and therefore use their imagination to fill in the empty spaces themselves. This causes the object to have a greater meaning for the observer since they are interacting with the

object.7

A vast common bond forges between the people of Southeast Asia because of the common cross-cultural and cross-national characteristics of the art. There is a shared iconographical system that goes back thousands of years. This is based on the common factors of migration and the influence of two powerful forces in Asia--China and India, as mentioned earlier. There are also great cultural differences as well. Some of the differences are the literacy factor, the diversity of religions, regional customs, and the materials used.8

Some of the principal decorative motifs in Southeast Asian art are the sun and astral motifs, floral motifs, and animal representations. The sun and astral motifs are said to be remnants of a solar cult that was later absorbed into other ritual forms. Some of the floral motifs such as the "Ixora" blossom on the combs of the Semang and Sakai, may have been associated with the solar cult. The motifs of some animals refer to dietary taboos. The motif of the bird is quite common. It sometimes represents the soul, as in the funerary figures of the Tai. The naga, or serpent, is a motif connected with myths of water, grass, and marshes. The naga is the antithesis of the bird which by contrast, represents myths of the air, trees, and clouds.9

There are many types of art in the Southeast Asian countries. These include but are not limited to: textile-applied arts, basket-making, lacquerware, carving, pottery,

metalworking, and paper. I will briefly describe each of these.

One of the textile-applied arts consist of batik, tie and dye, (or plangi) which is similar to batik, in that it is another resist-dying process using tied-off or knotted areas of fabric to resist the penetration of dye. Another type of this is embroidery and applique, couching, and various others.<sup>10</sup> These are used in making blankets, articles of clothing, samplers, and many other textiles. It is a very painstaking work that requires great knowledge and time.

Weaving is an important art form. There is a long tradition of complex and magnificent weaving fabrics in Southeast Asia. Much of the weaving is interwoven with tradition. In some societies, a girl is not considered of a marriageable age until she can weave proficiently.<sup>11</sup> Each area of Southeast Asia has their own unique way of weaving. But in almost all of the areas, it is the women who are the weavers.

Other art forms include basket making, which is the process of plaiting, twining, and coiling. Most of these forms are temporary utilitarian objects but some are made for decorative purposes. This technique can also be applied to ornaments, hats, and other articles of clothing.<sup>12</sup> The patterns used to decorate the baskets are variations of geometric motifs. Often there is a contrasting color used or the item is painted after it is finished. The color scheme for this usually consists of a combination of black with a

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range of browns and reds.13

Lacquerware has long been an art form in China and Japan, but it also found in Southeast Asia. Wood, straw, and horsehair are all used as a base for some lacquer pieces. Lacquer is used to cover architecture, furniture, and other objects. It is usually used with gold leaf. It can be applied in different colors or just black and gold.14

Carving is one of the most popular forms of art. It has existed since the Neolithic times. Wood carving is closely related to social customs and religious concepts. "It is a three-dimensional rendering of fantasy thinking. Spirits are thought to reside in carved wooden figures and they are alleged to carry supernatural powers."15 When carving wooden objects a solid piece of wood is used, except for wooden furniture and houses. Among the Mon-Khmer, the poles of the houses are ornately decorated, especially the central poles. This has religious significance because it is felt that where the pole rises is the most important part in the dwelling.16 The tools used are few and simple. Axes, chisels, and knives are the primary tools used in carving wood. They are all hand-powered. Paints are often ground and mixed by hand as well. Wood is not the only material used in carving, stone and ivory are also used.17

Pottery is another form of artistic expression. Newamn tells us that there is a pottery tradition in at least one part of Southeast Asia that dates back more than 6,000 years. This is the Ban Chieng pottery in northeastern Thailand.

Clay is a popular medium because it is cheap, abundant, and easily obtainable. Pots are made and used for usually utilitarian purposes. They usually do not have a long life-span. Clay is also used to make ceramic sculptures, which usually serves a religious purpose.<sup>18</sup> Most of the communities use the potter's wheel and kiln to produce pots, but the Pou Eun potters use molds and bake their pots without a kiln, they simply cover them with straw and earth and put them out in the sun to bake. Decoration is usually a simple design incised by a bamboo stick or metal blade.<sup>19</sup>

The use of metals has been in existence from 6000 to 5000 B.C. There has been great debate as to whether or not the Southeast Asians made or imported their bronze tools. Nevertheless, due to the influence of the Dong-Son culture, metalworking has been a dominant art form in Southeast Asian history. The Dong-Son culture, merging with Eurasian influence, travelled through China to northern Vietnam by 750 B.C. This culture was known best for the use of the elaborate decorations with "S" spirals organized in metrical repeats. This simple design energized the plain surface of forms. A popular process for making sculptures and small vessels is the technique of lost-wax casting (cire perdue). In this procedure, a wax form is encased in some kind of investment and burned out, leaving a new form made of metal that is revealed when the investment is removed.<sup>20</sup> Larger statues are cast in a standard bronze-founding technique of pouring molten bronze into a negative mold. Many different



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kinds of metals are used with a variety of techniques. These include; repousse, raising, filigree, inlaying, forging, knitting of wires, niello, and construction.<sup>21</sup>

Metal jewelry is used in almost all ceremonial costumes. There is some that is worn everyday. An example of this is in the Black Tai communities where the woman's bodices are closed in front by small round buttons of engraved silver. Earrings are made into a simple hoop design. Necklaces are made into circles by putting two naga, or serpents, and placing them back to back. This motif is common to the Tho, Tai, Meo, Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian.<sup>22</sup>

The medium that I had wanted to concentrate on with this project is that of painting, drawing, using paper, and parchment. This is expressed in many forms. One of these is the use and making of ritual masks and headgear. This involves the use of paper-mache, gold leaf and rhinestones. These materials serve as an exorcise of evil spirits. Through these vehicles it is thought one can make contact with the spiritual world. Some of the masks are used symbolically in performance situations which are religious in nature or reenact local myths.<sup>23</sup>

Shadow puppets are another interesting form of art. The origin of the various performances (called wayang topeng) with these puppets is said to date back to the time when the Javanese were still animistic in worship. The puppet or shadow play was a way for people to hold council with ancestors. This supposedly derived from India, and

disseminated both west to Turkey and north and southeast to China, and to Southeast Asia. The puppets are made from parchment, cut out and painted with gold and bright colors. They are all stylized, becoming symbols to express the significance of each character.<sup>24</sup>

The wayang is also painted on paper, cloth, or canvas to represent the figures and their stories in a graphic manner. As in the puppets, these figures are also stylized. Chinese black ink is applied as a fine line drawing with a pen and also painted by brush in gradations of gray to black. There is another type which is made into colorful scroll paintings. These are divided into two categories. The *ider-iders*, which are five-to six-yard long strips of cloth, twelve to fifteen inches wide, are hung under eaves for festivities. The other is called the *langses*, which are large, painted canvases functioning as wall hangings or as curtains. It is interesting to note that the wayang paintings are produced in workshops where the master painter outlines the figures and the assistants paint in details and colors.<sup>25</sup>

In the book on Southeast Asian art by Newamn, there is a chapter entitled "We Have No Art. We Do Everything As Well As We Can."<sup>26</sup> In this chapter she says that in the Balinese language there is no word for "art" or "artist." To these people art is not a category, it is a way of life and there is no need to define it as such. Art is a central object used by everyone in their home, and in their places of worship. "It is a collective obligation to make things

beautiful," Newamn says.<sup>27</sup> This was especially interesting to me since the people I have worked with at the Refugee Assistance Center say that they have no art and cannot draw, but I will speak more of that later.

There is a new art that is emerging for the Southeast Asians. It is a self-conscious art developed for strangers, or tourists. It is usually created to sell, with a Western element in the art. Newamn says that the consumer cult is taking hold, "Where people once had so very much to be proud of, the replacements for their artistic efforts are nothing more than assembly-line copies of copies, common denominator products of machines."<sup>28</sup> Gowing, on the other hand, explains the situation as a natural outcome of the search for new style to express more contemporary ideas. He states further that although there seems to be little sign of new art forms in the older Asian religions, the artists seem freer in their interpretation of Asian forms due to the influence of Christianity.<sup>29</sup>

In an article by Maxine Miska, an explanation is given of the situation as a fight to save identity, especially of the refugees that have fled their country. She focuses on the plight of the Vietnamese and their struggle to maintain tradition through art and poetry. It seems that the function of some of the art forms have changed since coming to America. Miska gives the example of Vietnam silk flowers and how they were once intended just to mimic nature and fool the eye by the skill of the artist, but now these same flowers

preserve images that can be held only in memory.<sup>30</sup>

Many of the Southeast Asian refugees have adapted their traditional textile arts to life in the United States. There has been much written about the Hmong and their textiles. Their work is identifiable by the use of brilliant, jewel-like, embroidered and appliqued textiles. The garments produced by the Hmong are now being reserved for special occasions such as funerals, weddings, and celebrations. Most of the time these people dress the same as most Americans. The production of these articles of clothing were manufactured for birth to death.

The art of the Hmong, and all Southeast Asians, has changed and been modified since coming to America. The materials are different, the old unattainable or unaffordable. So they have had to adapt their work with materials they can make or purchase. The amount of time is also a factor in the change of art. Miska tells us that a large and complex Hmong textile may take two years to complete. There are very few people who have this amount of time to devote to a project such as this.<sup>31</sup> This is not just a problem for the Hmong though, it is a problem for all Southeast Asians.

Many of the pressures of American living have affected many of the art forms. In my interview with Thu, a refugee from Vietnam, he mentioned the same thing to me. He commented that here, in America, he does not have the proper tools (he left these in his homeland) or the time. He said

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that he had to work so hard here to make a living that he didn't have time to devote to art. Thu carved wood back in his homeland. He said that he learned by watching others.<sup>32</sup> Luena Minner, a teacher at the Refugee Assistance Center, said about the same thing as Thu; most of the refugees just didn't have the time to devote themselves to art projects.<sup>33</sup>

While working on this project one of the teachers, Luena, suggested that I "teach" an art class. She said that it would be a good way for everyone there to know me and might help me in the long run. I agreed, hoping that it would generate interest in the project and that people would get excited about it and grant me interviews. It did not help me get interviews but I met a lot of great people. The people I met were very nice and excited about art. But all of them said that they could not draw. I do not know if this was just modesty or what, but contrary to what they said, they could draw. The majority of them could set down and draw almost anything. They were above average in this field. But it seemed to embarrass them to do it. Almost everyone participated. The groups I worked with ranged in age from early teens to mid- and late- fifties. It was mostly men, with two teenage girls. I would estimate that I worked with at least 25 people in the span that I was there.

As mentioned before they were all talented but there were some that were exceptional. Some of the people who were classified as "good" artists would not talk to me or participate in the class. I do not know if they were shy,

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embarrassed, or if it was because I am a woman. There was one young man who I must mention. His name is Dung. I never learned his last name. He is sixteen years old and is not formally taught in the arts. But his work is exceptional. While I was there I saw drawings that he had done of horses, a boat, and a dragon. I also saw a boat that, his uncle believed, he had come over to America on, carved with very few tools. It was beautiful. The precision of the carving and its great detail was extraordinary. He and some of the people that were there were discussing the techniques, I wished that I spoke Vietnamese so I could understand what they were saying. I asked but they just replied that they were comparing how he had done it with other things. I really think that they did not think that I was interested in hearing the techniques. Even though I told them that I was. Luena said that Dung had drawn her a picture of the boat that he had come to America on and that it was wonderful. She never did bring it in. She and some of the other teachers wanted me to get someone from the art department at WKU to come and teach or at least let some of the people at the Center go up and help them and in return learn. I wish it were possible and that I had the time to do it because there is some wonderful talent there.

It is interesting to note the subject matter that people choose to draw while in class. The older people would draw "memories" or things they remembered from their homeland. One man, Chai, did several wonderful drawings of

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the landscape of his homeland. He included the flora and the fauna. Some would draw pagoda's or customary motifs, such as Dung's dragon. The younger people would draw more "Americanized" things such as Lighthouses, self-portraits, animals native to America. Some of the older people would also draw things from their life today, an example of this is one man who drew a street scene.

Although this project did not turn out as I wished it to, I learned many things and made some friends. There is still so much I would like to do for these people. I would like to see their work be somehow promoted, like the example in John Finck's article "Laos: Stitchery As Language Among the Hmong in America."<sup>34</sup> In this article he talks of Hmong women who live in Providence, Rhode Island. With the help of an organization called the Southeast Asian Cooperative, they sew traditional textiles and sell them. This is not the only organization like this, there are twenty-two such organizations across the country marketing Hmong handwork.<sup>35</sup> These organizations have four major goals. It helps supplement the income of these women; keeps the tradition alive by creating a market; teaches these women how to run a business; and it alerts people and communities about the Hmong and one aspect of their culture.<sup>36</sup> There are benefits and drawbacks to a program such as this but it can be a good thing. Successful marketing might help these people come to grips with their identity in America and help them financially. On the other hand it could make them more

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competitive and they might change a lot of their traditional designs and colors to fit American taste.<sup>37</sup> Only time will tell.

The people of Southeast Asia are very gifted artisans and work with many different art forms, as I hope this paper has shown. Their art goes back thousands of years and encompasses many cultural influences. Although the influence of Westernization can now be seen to have strongly influenced this art, much is retained from their heritage. Even though I did not get to do much interviewing on this subject, I have observed and learned much about these people. It has been a valuable learning experience and I have made some new friends and seen many gifted artists. I wish that I could have done more to help them, especially in marketing their crafts. I know that a market is out there. I just want to end in saying "Thank You" to those people who talked with me and shared some valuable insights. I wish you all well and regret I did not have more time to get to know you better.



## FOOTNOTES

1Bernard Groslier, The Art of Indochina; Including Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1962), p. 10.

2Groslier, p. 10.

3Sr. Lawrence Gowing, Gen. Ed., The History of Art. (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1983), p. 293.

4Thelma Newamn, Contemporary Southeast Asian Arts and Crafts. (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1977), p. 2.

5Newamn, p. 1.

6Newamn, p. 1.

7Newamn, p. 2.

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9Jeanne Cuisinier, "South Asia," Encyclopedia of World Art, 1961, Vol. 1, 855.

10Newamn, p.18-32.

11Newamn, p.54.

12Newamn, p.109.

13Cuisinier, p. 851-852.

14Newamn, p. 146.

15Newamn, p.157.

16Cruisiner, p. 852.

17Newamn, p. 167-187.

18Newamn, p. 191-206.

19Cruisiner, p. 852.

20Newamn, p. 215-216.

21Newamn, p. 216.

22Cruisiner, p. 854.

23Newamn, p. 275.

24Newamn, p. 279-282.

25Newamn, p. 288-290.

26Newamn, p. 295.

27Newamn, p. 295.

28Newamn, p. 296.

29Gowing, p. 294.

30Maxine Miska, "Folk Arts of Southeast Asia: Persistence and Change," Festival of American Folklife, (1980), 20.

31Miska, p. 21.

32Informal interview with Thu Newyang by the author, Bowling Green, Ky., March 27, 1989.

33Informal interview with Luena Minner by the author, Bowling Green, Ky., April 24, 1989.

34John Finck, "Laos: Stitchery As language Among the Hmong In America," Craft International, (1982), 33-36.

35Kurt Dewhurst and Marsha MacDowell, ed., Michigan Hmong Arts: Textiles In Transition. (Michigan: Michigan State University, 1983), p. 21.

36Finck, p. 34.

37Dewhurst, p. 24.

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