

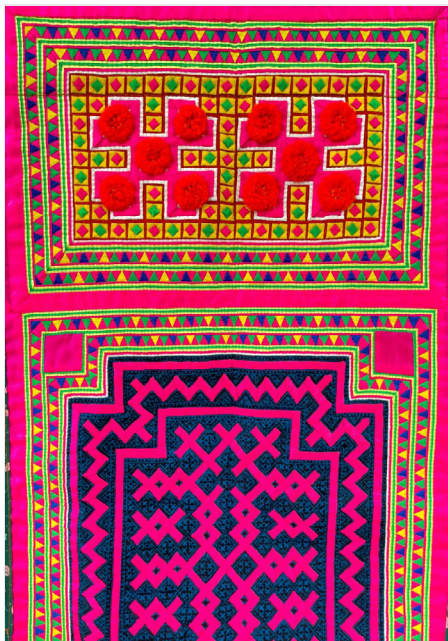
FIBER : SUZANNE THAO



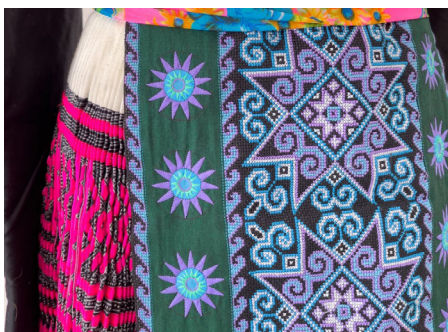
MEET Suzanne Thao and **WATCH** a video that features the artist at work and shows her connection with the Wearable Art Movement. **MAKE** an artwork inspired by these artists and **REFLECT** on your finished artwork as you consider what you might want to make next.

MEET

MEET SUZANNE THAO,
Paj ntaub artist and teacher.



Suzanne Thao, Baby Carrier, detail.



Lo La, (Suzanne Thao's mother-in-law)
Hmong skirt (Green Hmong people),
detail, 1980. Courtesy of Craft in America

"I believe that anyone who knows how to make paj ntaub is able to have inner peace for oneself and able to make friendships and connections to the community, learn respect, and honor."

—Suzanne Thao

Note: Hmong is pronounced similar to "Muhng" in English. Paj ntaub is pronounced similar to "pan-dow" in English.

PAJ NTAUB ARTIST Suzanne Thao lives in Minnesota, but grew up in Laos. She lived for a time in the Ban Vinai refugee camp in Thailand after the Vietnam war, where she started stitching with any threads she could find in the camp. She learned the techniques of paj ntaub from her mother and grandmother. It took much practice to perfect the cross-stitch embroidery, and then the appliqué and reverse appliqué techniques. Thao describes her learning: "I was very happy, so I told my mom, 'Mom! I am skilled at paj ntaub now!'" But her mother replied, "Mmm, you are not skilled yet. You must learn applique!"

Eventually the artist made it her mission to keep the craft alive, and to create community, by teaching others—which she has done for decades. Thao teaches classes at the Hmong Museum in St. Paul through the Project Paj Ntaub initiative. Teaching paj ntaub includes teaching the meanings of the symbols and the colors used. Her daughter Chuayi Yang says, "I feel like whenever I pick up paj ntaub and really work with the needle and the thread, it reconnects me to a part of myself. It's a way of me remembering who I am and where my heritage comes from." In speaking about the importance of her mother's work, Yang adds, "For my mom it was more than just teaching paj ntaub. It was really like, how do I make sure that this beautiful art that's really, truly, Hmong, continues to live on through my students?"

WATCH



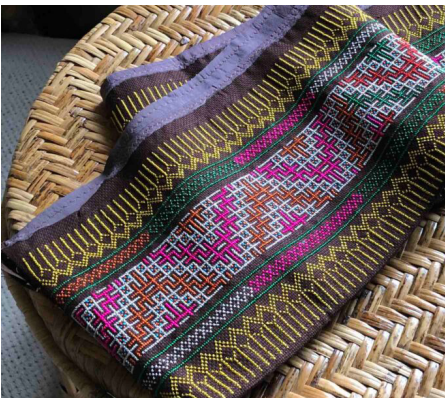
SEE AND LISTEN to Suzanne Thao talk about the craft of paj ntaub, the beautiful Hmong needlework that features cross-stitch and appliqué methods.

<https://youtu.be/hzR5OrWepDQ>

After viewing the segment, consider the following:

- Often people practice needlework simply because they enjoy it, or they want to make something useful, such as an ornament, a tote bag, or a baby bib. Paj ntaub can be used to make clothing, baby slings, baby hats, and other useful items. Beyond these functional items, what are the other reasons Suzanne Thao pursues the craft (and teaching) of paj ntaub?
- Mandora Young says, “Finding Suzanne Thao was like finding gold.” Mai Vang Huizel says, “The elder generation has the stories and the knowledge and the history all in their minds, and if we don’t connect with them, and if we don’t begin asking for it then it’s going to be lost.” Are there crafts and stories that you have learned, or that you would like to learn, from the elders among your family and community?
- Tousue Vang says of his digital version of a story quilt, “I was trying to find a way to tell the story of the Hmong American experience.” Chef Yia Vang describes the delicious foods created from a mix of ethnic cuisines in the Hmong market: “I believe in forging; when you forge ideas from different cultures together what you’re doing is you’re making a bond there.” Can you think of other examples of combining cultural art forms, foods, or ideas?

MAKE



Suzanne Thao, Hmong paj ntaub embroidery featured in the INSPIRATION episode

Try cross-stitch, an embroidery technique that looks like a pattern made of repeating the letter x, forming a design with a geometric appearance. Create your own embroidered design.

Gather some materials:

- Graph paper
- Size 24 tapestry needle
- 6-strand embroidery floss
- Embroidery hoop (optional)
- Markers
- Thimble (optional)
- Aida cloth, 6” square. 14-count

Start with a piece of graph paper and some markers to sketch designs. You will need a piece of aida cloth, a 6-inch square or larger. Aida cloth has different thread counts, or threads per inch. 14-count aida is a good size to start with. A size 24 tapestry needle has a slightly rounded point that sews easily through the holes in the cloth. Finally, choose several colors of 6-strand embroidery floss. Optional are an embroidery hoop to stretch the fabric and a thimble to protect your

finger. Because aida cloth is so sturdy, Thao and the paj ntaub stitchers don't use an embroidery hoop; they simply hold the fabric in their hands.

THE PROCESS

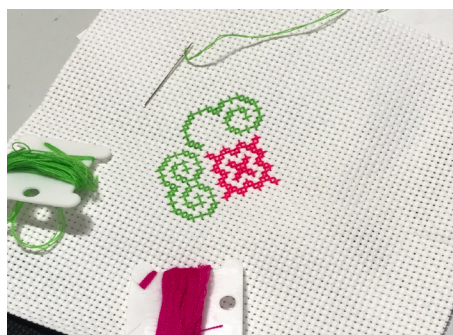
1. Use a piece of graph paper to doodle some possible designs by making an x in each square. Each square on the graph paper represents a square (with 4 holes forming the “corners”) on your fabric.
2. Cut off a length of about 16-inches of embroidery floss. Embroidery floss can be used as is but is more often divided into strands. Separate the floss into two strand sections, giving you three lengths of thread.
3. Thread your needle and stitch through a hole at one edge of your design and hold the end of the thread on the back of the fabric, leaving about an inch. You may want to tape that end in place to start. Later, you can plan to stitch over the end as you sew to hold it in place on the fabric back.
4. Take a stitch diagonally to the nearest hole. That is half of your x-shaped stitch. Come out next to the diagonal stitch and cross over the first stitch, forming an x.
5. Continue stitching to fill in your design.

Suzanne Thao says, “My grandmother taught me how to cross stitch. She taught that it was easy, just three stitches up and three stitches down.” Note that the top layer of her stitches all slant the same way, making a neat appearance. Similarly, you can make a row of half-x stitches, then sew back over each stitch to make the second half of the x. This will create a more uniform look in your stitching. Fasten off each thread (before you run out) by running it under some stitches on the underside of the design.

REFLECT

LOOK at your finished product.
Think about the process.

- Did you enjoy cross-stitching? Sewing can be frustrating at first! Thread can get tangled, or you may need to repeatedly rethread the needle, or carefully unpick some stitches. However, once you are more familiar with sewing, it can become a rhythmic and meditative activity.
- Do you like the look of your cross-stitching? Because it is on a grid, cross-stitching takes on a neatly arranged, geometric look. Look at the work of Thao and the other paj ntaub examples again and note how they also achieve curves and spirals made entirely out of cross-stitches. Cross-stitch works can be simple or very detailed.





Artist unknown, made in Thailand.
Hmong New Year Scene Story Cloth,
thread embroidered on pieced fabric.
Collection of Suzanne Thao.

- How is your cross-stitch practice piece different from Thao's and the other stitchers? The paj ntaub stitchers are creating designs layered with important cultural symbols, beliefs, and their history. Do you share any similar crafts within your family or your ancestry?
- What will you make next? You can plan a more detailed design, create your own patterns or symbols, or simply stitch randomly in a variety of colors for enjoyment.
- You might also be interested in the Story Cloths, a form of appliquéd needlework. Many of the quilts illustrate the history of the hardships, trauma, and paths to immigrating to the United States that many Hmong took to survive after the Vietnam War. You can look for needlework classes or groups nearby or online. More information and images of paj ntaub work can be found here: <https://learnuake.org/articles/hmong-culture/embroidery/>