

Hmong Motifs & Symbols

In ancient times, the embroidered patterns served double duty -- to decorate and to communicate. According to oral history, long ago when the Hmong were still concentrated in China, they were forbidden to use their original, written language, which was made up of picture symbols. So the women started sewing the symbols into their skirts to create messages, disguising them as patterns.



Elephant's Foot

(Prosperity)



Snail

(Family)



House

(Unity)



Chicken feet

(Guide to spirit world)



Leaf Frond

(Growth)



Sun

(Life)



Landscape

(Nature)



Fish Hooks

(Young women seeking husbands)



Mountains

(Strength)



Fences

(Safety / Security)



Seeds

(Abundance)



Diamond

(Earth / Four Seasons)



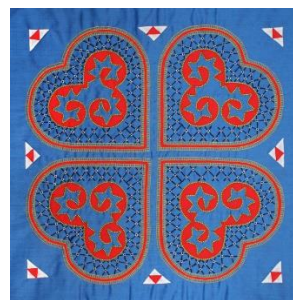
Chicken Eye

(Union)



Centipede

(Healing and good health)



Dragons Tails

(Longevity / Power)



Rams Horn

(Wisdom)

SYMBOLISM IN HMONG FOLK ART

In the arts of the Hmong we find many examples of the use of symbols. Symbols in most cultures can be traced to a time before a majority of people could read and write. Everything stood for something. If you had the "right dictionary" you could read the symbols. Colours were significant as well as the designs themselves.

Pa Ndau (reverse applique) and Batik designs contain traditional and highly symbolic patterns. For instance, the snail is a symbol of family growth and interrelatedness. The centre of the coil of the snail's shell symbolizes dead ancestors. The outer spirals are the successive generations, and the double snail shell represents the union of two families and also symbolizes the spinning motion used in many spiritual chants

Shapes of designs, expressions of nature, and spiritual depictions all have specific meaning. One caution, though, is that diversity is one of the most salient characteristics of the Hmong. For instance, different Hmong groups may have different interpretations for designs that are considered the "real" ones. The overall pattern of the symbols, however, is common to all Hmong groups.



This is a batik work, but the red appliqué features draw the most attention. The motif used includes an overlapping diagonal bar with extensions. As a whole, the design looks like a fence motif. The batik motifs include leaf fronds and fences. A batik frame was completed using seed motifs as embellishments, and the white and red borders complement the batik and appliqué work.



This batik work features several motifs, such as fences, seeds, mountains, and diamonds. The red motif, a square fence with overlapping extensions, was embroidered in appliqué. Such batik work could serve as the top panel for a baby carrier. The frames were also created in white, black, and red using appliqué technique.