

COMMUNITY ARTS NEWSLETTER

SERVING THE ARTS IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY

Volume 3, Number 7, November 1981



Su-Mei Yu, Curator of the Lotus Folk Art Center museum and gallery, with Blue Hmong wedding dress.

Gallery Shows Southeast Asian Folk Art

by Lynette Thwaites

"We have lost our land, we have lost our everything....I cannot help but cry. We have lost, but I hope each of us will unite so that we can build again."

When the doors of the Lotus Folk Art Center opened for the first time on October 16 a large group of Lao Hmong women were already waiting patiently on the surrounding lawn with bags and boxes full of brightly colored needlework. Su-Mei Yu, Curator of the Center's museum and gallery, was delighted and a little surprised to see so many of them. Since communication with the tribal Hmong people is less than perfect, Yu was not certain how many would respond to her invitation. But, clearly, the clan leaders had sanctioned the event, and about two hundred women came to attend the

opening of the Lotus Folk Art Center and to show and sell their Pan Dau (a traditional form of applique and embroidery).

The Center is a community project dedicated to preserving the arts and crafts of Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, and Lao Hmong refugees whose cultures have been endangered, if not destroyed, by war and transplantation into an alien western culture. Su-Mei Yu, also Director of the Southeast Asian Alliance, one of the non-profit organizations which supports the Center, said that another purpose of the Center is to help refugees attain economic independence. "We hope that we can create economic self-sufficiency for the artists and craftspeople who otherwise lack marketable vocational skills and have had to rely on public assistance."

Continued on page 2

(Refugee Folk Art, Cont.)

The work of artists renowned in their own countries and work of local artisans will be shown at the Center, the first institution of its kind in the country according to the Office of Refugee Resettlement in Washington.

Toui Siphonekham, a Laotian weaver, is typical of the Center's twenty-five artists. She fled Laos to a refugee camp in the Philippines and has been in the United States for several months. Toui, in her early thirties, lives with her husband, parents, and seven children in a two-bedroom apartment in Linda Vista. She brought the essential parts of her loom from Laos, but its frame was built here from discarded plywood. When she arrives home from her evening English classes she puts the children to sleep and begins work on her cloth. One piece of cloth takes two weeks to complete.

There are presently about 25,000 Southeast Asian refugees in San Diego, the largest single group of such refugees in the country. According to Ms. Jean Nidorf, a community psychologist who has been instrumental in setting up the Center, the influx of refugees began in earnest after the fall of Saigon in 1975 and escalated two years later. In addition, San Diego has attracted 'secondary migration' from other U.S. cities because of the hospitable climate, availability of Asian foods, and the already existing refugee community.

"These people are not like the early American immigrants who came



Blue Hmong elder Mau Yang.

life," cautioned Ms. Nidorf. "They came fleeing oppression and the dissolution of their societies, and although they are grateful to be here, many would prefer to be back in their homelands....The single most important concept for these people is 'the family,' and this concept has been shattered as families have been split up."

Many refugees have lost social status: few speak fluent English; fewer are able to read and write it. "Many are literally unable to function," said Ms. Nidorf, who predicts that the Center will

contribute to the psychological well-being of the refugees by helping to ease their devastating sense of loss, as well as helping them to function economically.

Indochina, the old name for Southeast Asia devised by the French imperialists, gives the impression that the countries have no individual cultural character beyond the influences of its neighboring civilizations. In fact, each Southeast Asian country has its own distinct culture. The Lotus Folk Art Museum exhibit includes religious

carvings in gray soapstone by Cambodian artists; highly polished lacquer paintings fashioned with gold-dust and crushed eggshells; Pan Dau, and tapestries of the Laotian and Lao Hmong peoples; as well as costumes, jewelry, musical instruments, and photographs.

Strangely, of all the refugees the tribal Lao Hmong have the most vigorous folk art tradition. The Hmong (Free People) from the mountain slopes of Northern Laos are not generally well regarded by other Southeast Asians. However, judging from the abundance of colorful Pan Dau on display at the opening, it is their aesthetic tradition which has the best chance of being sustained in living form. Some concessions have been made to appeal to the American market, but Yu insists that the Pan Dau is still produced using traditional methods, colors schemes, and designs.

Unfortunately, the geopolitical features which gave each Southeast Asian country its individual culture also contributed to the long history of tension between the peoples. Through the cooperative effort to keep their arts alive Su-Mei Yu hopes that the Center will become a meeting place for all the refugees and that understanding between Southeast Asians will be enhanced.

It will be a while before the Lotus Folk Art Center can determine whether it is succeeding in its effort to keep refugee crafts and skills intact. Meanwhile, it provides a showcase for the sale of work and an island for the uninitiated who are adrift in the sea of western consumer culture.

PHOTO: MEREDITH MOON FRENCH