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Cy Thao: The Hmong Genocide and Immigration

Paintings by Cy Thao

The paintings of Cy Thao tell traditional and contemporary stories of Hmong culture and migration, from creation beliefs to recent urban American experiences. As a Hmong-American, Thao has created a visual narrative based in the history and culture of his family's heritage.

The Hmong are regarded as one of the earliest groups in Eastern Asia, originally inhabiting the area north of the Yellow River in China as early as 3000 B. C. Hmong legend contends that the two earliest groups in this region were the Hmoog (Hmong) and the Suav (Chinese).

Enduring a legacy of genocide, oppression and multiple migrations, Hmong culture and tradition has remained viable. The initial migration, called "The First Move" began with early Han tribes forcing the Hmong out of their ancestral lands to areas further south in the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River Valley around 2000 B.C. Second and third forced migrations created further dispersions of the group into various parts of China, Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Viet Nam. Further evidence documents Hmong influence in Japan. Contemporary migrations have created Hmong communities throughout the world, including groups in Australia, Canada, France, South America and the United States.

Beginning with the Hmong creation story of the original hatching from the egg of a butterfly to the everyday life of Hmong Americans in St. Paul, Minn., these images paint a history that emphasizes the resilience and determination of a people.

John Ready
Director, University Gallery

Artist's Statement

The ideas for this series came into being when I was a junior in college. I was reading "Tragic Mountain" by Jane Hamilton. In the book there was a drawing of a Hmong village being pillaged, with women being raped and their heads decapitated and men being tortured. This was a drawing by an eyewitness who saw the whole event. He couldn't write so he drew what he saw. This illustration reminded me of the tapestries made in the refugee camps during the late seventies. The tapestries, or story cloths, depict daily lives, people running from war and coming to America. These were like picture books without words.

I thought it would be a great idea to use oil paint to continue this tradition of telling stories without words. I also wanted to stretch the boundaries of this method of story telling by adding my own personal commentary. I gravitated towards oil paint because it was more fluid and easier to manipulate than sewing.

In my junior year (1993) I experimented and completed three pieces. A year after graduating from college (1996), I decided I wanted to make a series out of this. I went to China and started researching the history of the Hmong people. I completed ten pieces from 1996-99. It was hard trying to paint and keep a job and pay the mortgage. In 2000, I received the Bush Artist Fellowship. I was able to spend a whole year concentrating on completing the series. I completed most of the series from 2000-01. To complete the series I traveled to three countries, read countless books, and talked to a number of people who experienced the war in Laos.

I want the series to educate the younger generation, to have some closure with the generation that went through the war, and hopefully to become a historical document for generations to come.

I would like to thank my wife, LeeVang, for her encouragement, patience, and support. I could not have done it without her.

Cy Thao

These reproductions and the exhibition "The Hmong Migration," fifty paintings and text by Cy Thao, are presented by the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program, an artist-run curatorial department of The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, which is made possible by generous support from the Jerome Foundation.



#1. In the beginning when Gods ruled the earth, someone angered the god of lightning. In his anger he struck the house that stored all the seeds of the world. The house burned down with all the seeds. Unknowingly the god of the seeds blamed the maple tree for burning all the seeds because he used maples to build the storage house. He chopped down the maple tree and when the maple tree fell, a butterfly flew out of a crack in the tree. The butterfly flew to the bank of the

water and fell in love with the water. She eventually laid twelve eggs. The eggs hatched into a dragon, tiger, snake, pig, cow, and all the creatures of the world. The last egg hatched into a Hmong person.

#2. Two brothers were working in the field. An old man appeared and told the brothers that a great flood was going to come. Because the older brother treated the old man unkindly, he instructed the older brother to build a metal drum while telling the younger one to build a wooden drum. When the flood came the younger brother and his sister got into the wooden drum. The older brother in the metal drum was lost in the flood, but the wooden drum floated for days until the earth dried. Because the brother and sister were the last two humans on earth they agreed to marry each other. Out of incest they gave birth to a big pumpkin. The brother cut the pumpkin into pieces and each piece turned into a human being. These beings became all the clans of the Hmong family.

#3. Five thousand years ago the Hmong people lived in the basin of the Yellow River where the present day Beijing is. The Han Chinese also had a kingdom nearby. In their expansion the Han Chinese took over Hmong lands. In defense the Hmong waged war. As the first Hmong King, Chi You led the Hmong against the advancing Chinese. The Hmong lost the war. Many fled the area. This started the Hmong migration that eventually ended up in America.

#4. One thousand years later the Hmong people who had migrated to the south built another kingdom. The kingdom was called "San Miao" (Peb Hmoob). In Chinese it means "Three Hmong." In Hmong it means "Us Hmong." The Chinese expansion eventually caught up to the Hmong Kingdom. There we fought another great war. We lost again. The migration continued farther south, close to the borders of Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and Burma.

#5. The Hmong people who migrated to the north eventually crossed the ocean and ended up in Japan. During the Qin dynasty the Emperor sent 3,000 people to Japan to search for the fountain of youth. On the ships many of the servants were Hmong. The people never found the fountain of youth. Fearing for their lives they sailed towards Japan. Today many Japanese visit Hmong villages with claims that their ancestors came from those areas. Some Japanese have claimed to be Hmong to the Hmong in China.

#6. After defeating the Hmong armies, the Chinese divided the Hmong into groups, assigning them different colors to wear. They hoped that this would ensure that they would never unite again. They believed that it would be easier to defeat the Hmong if they were divided. The Chinese also divided the Hmong into clans to further create division.

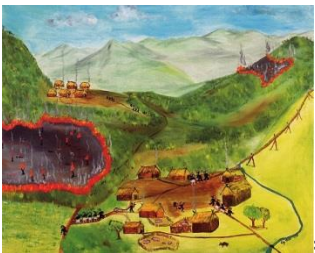
#7. To prevent the Hmong from ever retaking their land, the Emperor built a smaller version of the Great Wall. The "Hmong Wall" was about a hundred miles long with guard towers to watch over the Hmong.

#8. The Hmong fought the Chinese with cross bows and used the mountainous terrain to their advantage. They lured whole units into gorges and then rolled rocks onto the unsuspecting Chinese. The Hmong fighters were feared throughout China.

#9. After losing a major battle, a Chinese general sought refuge in the Hmong villages. In return for their kindness, he showed the Hmong how to make guns. Within a few years, the Emperor collected over 20,000 guns from the Hmong at the end of a major rebellion. There's a Hmong saying in China: "Fight a small war every 30 years and fight a big war every 60 years."

#10. In the mid 1800's the Chinese empire lost the Opium War to the British. To pay the British, they taxed the poor heavily, especially the Hmong. Many families had to dig up valuables that they had buried with the dead to pay the heavy tax. Out of desperation we rebelled. A long war broke out. We took back many lands, but in the end we lost again.

#11. The Hmong once again had to leave their homes. This time many of us left China for good. We found untamed and unoccupied land in Southeast Asia (Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, and Burma).



#12. There were already people in the low lands. The only places left were the mountaintops. This new land gave us the freedom to live freely. Life on the top of the world was difficult. To survive we had to resort to slash-and-burn farming methods. Huge waterworks constructed out of bamboo brought in fresh water.

#13. In the mountains of Laos the untamed jungles were infested with man-eating tigers. The Hmong had to trap and kill many tigers before it was safe to live there. Fields had to be cleared for housing and farming.

#14. Laos was already under the control of the French. The French needed money to run their colony. Opium was a great cash crop for the French. Since the Hmong lived on land that was good for cultivating opium, they were encouraged to grow as much opium as possible. When collecting taxes the French preferred opium to cash.

#15. The French treated the Hmong poorly and collected heavy taxes, while giving local control to the Laotians. Due to this harsh and unfair treatment, the Hmong rebelled. The French, in their arrogance, couldn't understand why the Hmong rebelled. They called the rebellion "The Mad Man's War."

#16. To fight the well-equipped French army, the Hmong made homemade cannons out of wood. They lured the French soldiers into the middle of an empty village using a shaman. Once in position, the Hmong fired the homemade cannons killing many French soldiers.

#17. The Hmong also used methods that they had mastered while fighting in China. They would lure the enemy into gorges and then roll rocks down the mountain, burying many French alive.

#18. After the harvest season each village would set a date for the New Year celebrations. For three days people did nothing but feast and participate in the New Year celebrations. This was the time for young people to meet and hopefully find a mate.



#19. The Hmong lost the rebellion but not the cause. After the war the French appointed Hmong officials to handle local affairs. Hmong were given land to live on and farm in the low lands.

#20. During the New Year celebrations one activity was to have bulls fight. All the villagers would come out to see the brutal event. If a bull died, the villagers would get a free feast.

#21. In fear of a communist takeover of the world, America started sending "advisers" to Southeast Asia to prevent the domino effect." The Hmong were recruited to become America's foot soldiers in Laos in their fight against communism.



#22. The "Secret War" lasted 15 years. The Hmong had an army of 30,000 soldiers to fight for America. Clan rivalry also sent a quarter of the Hmong population to the communist side. Towards the end of the war many of the Hmong soldiers were as young as 11 years old because most of the grown men had died.

#23. Before the war the majority of the Hmong were just simple farmers. Many had never seen a vehicle before. During the war, the Hmong quickly learned to use modern technology. Many excelled at it. One of the best fighter pilots in the world was Lee Lue, the fearless Hmong pilot who logged over 500 missions before he was shot down. As a pilot he flew two to three missions per day. Most American pilots went home after logging 100 sorties.



#24. When America left Saigon, they packed up and left Laos too. The Hmong were left to fend for themselves. On May 14, 1975, the last C46 took the last of the Hmong military officers to Thailand. This marked the final end of the "Secret War."

#25. The people, fearing for their lives, also left Long Cheng, the CIA secret base. They headed toward Vientiane the capital city. Before reaching Vientiane they had to cross a river. At the river a local officer, also a Hmong, took soldiers to the bridge where the people were crossing. There he urged the Hmong people to return to their homes. The people refused and the soldiers opened fire, killing many.

#26. The communist soldiers came to Hmong villages and massacred whole villages. Women were raped, men tortured, and babies slammed into objects or the ground. After ravaging the village the soldiers dismembered the corpses.

#27. To speed up the genocide, the communists sprayed chemicals on villages. People, animals, and crops were wiped out. We called this chemical Yellow Rain."

#28. With the communists committing genocide against the Hmong, the people left Laos. Usually whole villages would leave together, with as many as 5,000. Only half would ever make it across to Thailand.



#29. The Hmong people were no longer safe in Laos, now that the communists took over. Trying to elude the communist soldiers many people spent anywhere from several months in the jungle to a year before ever reaching the Mekong River. Food would run out, so people had to eat whatever they could find. People ate roots, barks, and leaves. Many people died from starvation.

#30. As a last resort the former Hmong CIA army picked up their arms and banded together to defend themselves on Phu Bia Mountain. There the communist army slaughtered the Hmong.

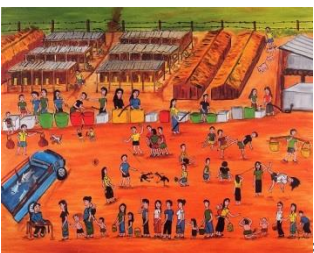
#31. At the end of the war many of the old soldiers became ruthless warlords in areas that the communists do not control yet. Anyone accused of being a communist sympathizer was executed. Many went after their neighbors to settle old disputes. This time it was Hmong executing Hmong. Others became bandits to rob and kill other Hmong people who were trying to flee the communists.

#32. Reaching the Mekong River, the border between Laos and Thailand, was very difficult. After coming close many never reached the river. Those that had made it across tell stories of seeing babies trying to nurse on rotting corpses not knowing that their mother is already dead.



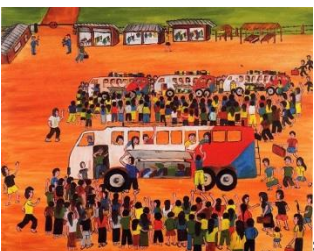
#33. To cross the river people blew up plastic bags or made bamboo rafts. Those that had money hired Thai boaters to take them across. After already receiving the payments, the boaters dump the boats in the middle of the river killing everyone while he swam to shore. Once across some of the people were forced by the Thai police to turn back to Laos.

#34. If you made it across the river, Thai officials take you to a refugee camp to register. Although the refugee camps are a lot better, Thai police often abuse the refugees' human rights.

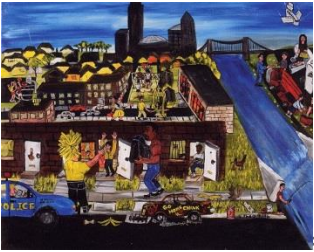


#35. We spent a lot of time waiting. Every other day we waited for the UN ration truck to deliver food. At night we waited for the water pump to open so we can fetch water for cooking and bathing. Some people waited for their names to appear on the list to come to America. Others are still waiting for Laos to get better so they can go back home. Some just simply wait because that's all they know.

#36. Water was in short supply so it was a welcoming sight when it rains. Instead of running for shelter the kids take out the soap and take a cool rain shower. While many of the kids were clueless to the hopeless situation of the refugee camps, many of the adults simply gave up hope of a normal life. Funerals were a daily event. Being sick was the rule.



#37. Those that passed the test had permission to come to America. Those that had sponsors got to board the bus to America." It was a time of sadness and uncertainty, more than happiness or joy. We only knew America as a word. No one had a clue to what America looked like.



#38. AMERICA! The land of opportunities and freedom. To the new arrivals it was the land of uncertainty, confusion, and fear. Many ended up in the "projects" where the government housed the poor. Life there was hard. Many of the criminals preyed on the scared refugees. What a rude awakening for us.



#39. Finding jobs for unskilled refugees with no English was impossible. Almost all the refugees depended on federal support to survive.



#40. Prior to America most of the children have never been in a school. Fitting in was impossible. The Hmong children stood out like a sore thumb. We were poor, we looked different and we did not speak English. We were easy targets for the school bullies. Sometimes we fight back.

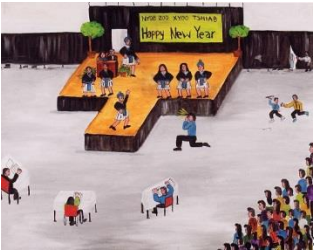


#41. After acquiring enough English skills from attending night schools, many of the parents found minimum wage jobs doing assembly-line work. Our parents worked 14-16 hours per day but were still poor.

#42. The Boy Scouts of America was a natural fit for the Hmong boys. We get to learn about America in a safe environment. We also get to explore the woods like our parents use to do back in Laos.



#43. To keep the culture alive we have to adapt. Instead of celebrating the New Year outdoor and after the harvest season, we celebrate it during American holidays or weekends because it is the only time we can get off from work.



#44. The New Year not only changed from outdoor to indoor, but many of the activities were added while others disappeared. The ceremonies and bull fights have been replaced by beauty pageants and dance contests.

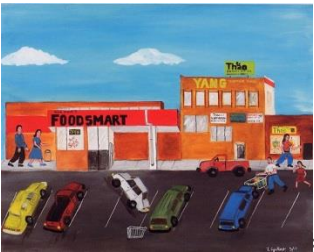
#45. A New festivals were created so families can still gather outside like back in Laos.

#46. Not only the culture changed, the children changed. We were once forced by the Chinese to divide into groups. Now the Hmong children willingly divide each other into groups, wearing different colors, and killing each other.

#47. Not only the children are changing, many of the adults also are changing. Under pressure and anxiety of becoming more American, many tragedies erupted. Older Hmong start committing suicides out of loneliness. The middle-age Hmong kill their whole family before taking their own lives.



#48. With the communists committing genocide against the Hmong, the people left Laos. Usually whole villages would leave together, with as many as 5,000. Only half would ever make it across to Thailand.



#49. After 25 years of being in America, our communities are beginning to take root. The children are getting a first rate education. Opportunities are beginning to open up. Hmong businesses are popping up everywhere, It's a sign that we will make it here too.



#50. 5,000 years ago the Hmong lived on the basin of the Yellow River. Today the trail of the Hmong migration goes through China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Burma, South America, France, Australia, Canada, and America. Where the trail leads to, no one knows