

Hmong Folk Arts Presentation

Hmong Cultural Center Staff

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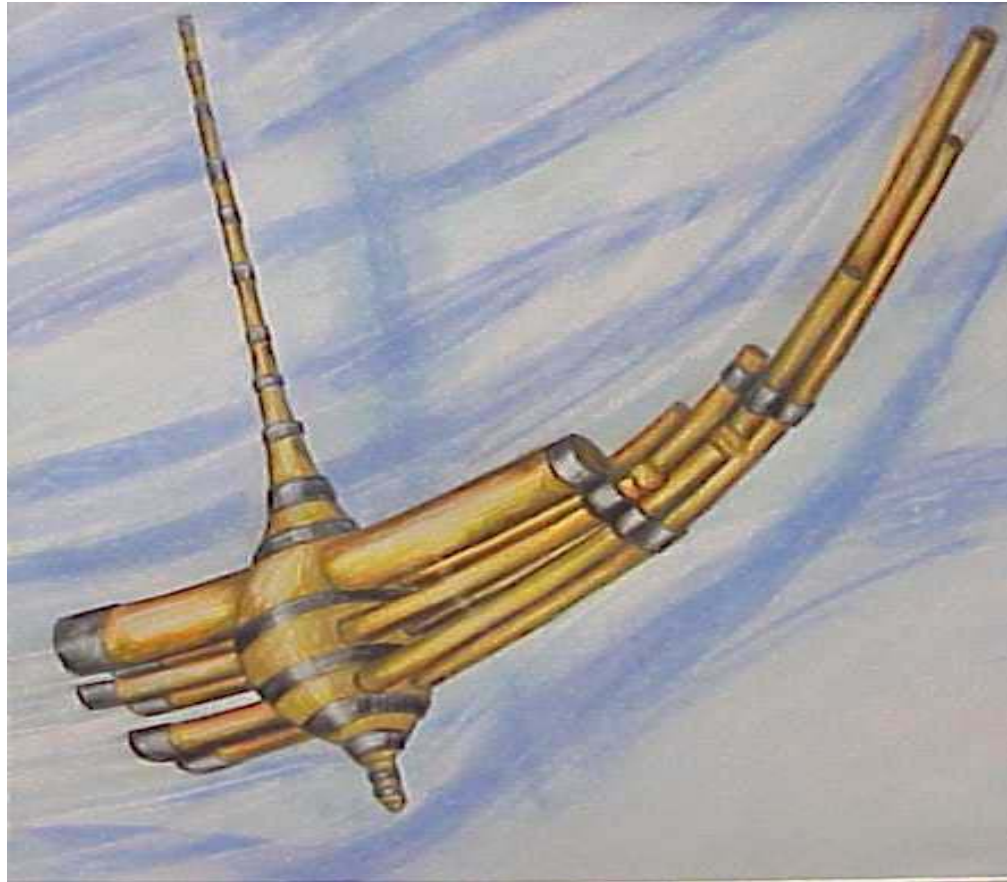
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Artwork by Seexeng Lee for Hmong Cultural Center

View videos of these Hmong folk arts forms at:

<http://www.hmongstudies.org/LearnaboutHmongvideos>

Qeej Instrument



Qeej Instrument

ORIGIN OF THE QEEJ INSTRUMENT

- There are several Qeej creation stories that explain how the Qeej came to be and why it is used for Hmong funeral, wedding and New Year ceremonies
- Early evidence for the existence of the Qeej instrument is found in Chinese scriptures dating to 3000 B.C.

Qeej Instrument

DESCRIPTION OF THE QEEJ INSTRUMENT

- The Qeej instrument is made out of six bamboo reeds. Each bamboo reed is precisely measured to be a certain length. The body of the Qeej instrument is carved out of wood and hollowed out. The mouthpiece is made out of copper. The straps that hold the reeds and body together are usually made out of tree bark.
- The sound of the Qeej instrument is produced by 8 copper blades located inside the instrument. When inhaling or exhaling, the copper blades vibrate to produce the desired sound. The musical notes produced are dependent upon variations in finger placement.
- The Qeej instrument is unique in that it plays spoken words. Every note or sound played by the Qeej instrument corresponds to a spoken word.

Qeej Instrument

HMONG CULTURAL USES OF THE QEEJ INSTRUMENT

The three main cultural uses of the Hmong Qeej instrument are the following:

- 1. Funeral Ritual
- 2. Marriage Ceremony
- 3. New Year's Ceremony

The Qeej plays a much more important role in the Hmong funeral rituals than in Marriage or New Year's ceremonies.

Qeej Instrument

THE INTRINSIC ROLE OF THE QEEJ INSTRUMENT IN THE HMONG FUNERAL

- The Qeej instrument plays an essential role in the traditional Hmong funeral ceremony. There are many Qeej songs that are incorporated in the Hmong funeral ceremony. These songs include the following:
- The Death Song - The death song is the most important of all Qeej songs. It is used to send the spirit of the deceased to join its ancestors in the afterlife.
- The Song to Resurrect the Horse - The purpose of this song is to resurrect a horse for the soul of the deceased so that he/she may have a horse to ride during their journey to the land of the ancestors.
- The Song to Give the Deceased Money - The purpose of this song is to give the incense and money that is burning during the funeral ceremony to the deceased person.

Qeej Instrument

THE INTRINSIC ROLE OF THE QEEJ INSTRUMENT IN THE HMONG FUNERAL (Additional Qeej Songs in the Ceremony)

- The Song to Give the Deceased Animals - The purpose of this Qeej song is to give the animals that are used during the funeral ceremony to the deceased person. For example, if a cow was butchered at a farm and its meat was brought back to the funeral to be cooked into dishes, the Qeej player would perform this song to allow the deceased person to take the cow with them on their journey to the afterworld.
- The Song to Give the Deceased An Army - As it is believed that on the journey to the afterworld, the soul will encounter many wars, the purpose of this song is to give the soul an army for protection.
- The Song that Sends the Body to the Ground - This is the final Qeej song that is played during a funeral ceremony. The purpose of the song is to guide the body of the deceased to the ground to be buried.

Ncas



Ncas

DESCRIPTION AND PURPOSE OF THE NCAS

- The Ncas is made with brass, a bamboo case, and string.
- The “Ncas” or mouth harp is traditionally used by the Hmong in courtship and played either by young men or women. Clever couples can use the instrument as a private form of communication. This instrument can be used to combine the spoken word and verbal tones.

The instrument is played by putting the thin metal blade of the instrument up against, and between the upper, and lower lips, and plucking the blade to produce vibrations. The vibrations of the blade manipulate the lip and mouth cavity to produce a kind of masked combination of speech and music. Inhaling and exhaling helps produce the sounds of the instrument.

Hmong 2-String Violin



Hmong 2-String Violin

DESCRIPTION AND PURPOSE OF THE TWO-STRING VIOLIN

- The Hmong Two-String Violin is made from wood, coconut shells, plastic, wire, string, and horsehair. This instrument has a long neck and possesses two-strings with a drum-like chamber that is played with a violin-like bow. The strings are suspended between the drum and the neck.
- The Hmong Two-String Violin is played as a traditional form of entertainment and is also used during traditional Hmong courtship and the Hmong New Year's festival

Hmong Free-Reed Pipe



Hmong Free Reed Pipe

DESCRIPTION AND PURPOSE

- The Hmong Free Reed Pipe is made with bamboo, cane, and a brass reed.
- The Hmong Free Reed Pipe instrument consists of a narrow bamboo tube with six finger holes in the front and one in the back, which produce melodies. A brass reed is inserted into the side of the pipe and covered by a cane wrapping, which slides down the pipe to allow playing. Young Hmong men have traditionally used this instrument to communicate in secret during courtship.

Hmong Flute



Hmong Flute

DESCRIPTION AND PURPOSE

- The Hmong flute is made of bamboo and a brass reed.
- The Hmong flute consists of a narrow bamboo tube with six finger holes in the front at the lower end and one open curve at the top end. The mouth is curved where the brass reed is inserted to produce melodies. The Hmong flute is played for entertainment purposes

Hmong Marriage Songs

HMONG MARRIAGE SONGS DESCRIPTION AND PURPOSE

- Orally recited Hmong marriage songs play an intrinsic role in the Hmong marriage ceremony.
- One example of an important Hmong marriage song is “Zaj Coj Nkauj Yab Nraug Vauv Los Rau Niam Txiv Hauv Tsev” (bringing the bride to the groom’s family). This orally recited song is performed in the traditional Hmong wedding ceremony by the Mej Koob (Marriage Facilitator) when he or she presents the bride and groom to the groom’s family. The song is intended to bring the new couple luck and a successful marriage. The song is usually performed with an umbrella in the traditional Hmong marriage ceremony. The umbrella itself represents the unification of the two clans (families) in the new marriage.

Hmong Funeral Songs

HMONG FUNERAL SONGS DESCRIPTION AND PURPOSE

- Orally recited songs play a key role in the traditional Hmong funeral ceremony along with the performance of songs on the Qeej instrument.
- One example of an important orally recited Hmong funeral song is “Cob Tsjaj” – (Song to give blessing to the family of the deceased through the sacrifice of a pig). This song is typically sung at a traditional Hmong funeral by the Txiv Xaiv (ceremonial funeral singer). The song “Cob Tsjaj” signifies the support (a pig) given to the deceased family by relatives and the community. As another example, the grieving family’s response song “Txia Tsjaj” (Receiving the Pig) is also orally recited by a ceremonial funeral singer. The response song “Txia Tsjaj” represents the mourning family’s thank you to the organizers of the funeral and also involves an expression of hope that the community will do its best to help the family at this difficult time.

Hmong Folk Tales

HMONG FOLK TALES DESCRIPTION AND PURPOSE

- The Hmong have a large repertoire of folktales that they have orally passed down over the centuries. These folktales explain such things as the creation of the world and the origins of the Hmong people and also provide lessons on how to treat others and live wisely. Folktales also provide lessons for how to treat others.
- One example of a prominent Hmong folk tale is the story of how the 18 Hmong clans got their names:

"A very long time ago, the whole universe turned upside down. The earth tipped up, and the sky rolled over, and the whole world was flooded with water. All living things were killed, except one brother and his sister, who had ran and taken refuge in an unusually large wooden and funeral drum. The brother and sister married each other and lived together as husband and wife. Later, they gave birth to a child. This child was like a round smooth stone. They cut the round egg-like child into little pieces. Then they threw the pieces in all directions. Two pieces fell on the goat house and these became the clan Lee. Two pieces fell in the pig pan became the clan Moua. Two pieces that landed in the garden turned into the clans Vang and Yang. This is how they founded all the Hmong clans."

Hmong Tapestry



Hmong Tapestry

DESCRIPTION AND PURPOSE

- Hmong Paj Ntaub story cloths play an important role in Hmong everyday and ceremonial life. Paj Ntaub story cloths are closely associated with Hmong community celebrations including the New Year and rites of passage including birth, naming ceremonies, courtship, marriage and death.
- Traditionally, young Hmong girls begin to learn the repertoire of motifs and stitches associated with Paj Ntaub embroidery at age 5 or 6. Up until the 1970s, most Hmong Paj Ntaub consisted of traditional geometric and abstract designs as seen above. After this time period however, many Hmong embroidery artists living in Thai refugee camps and in the Western resettlement countries began to incorporate in their work embroidered human figures, animals and scenery depicting the Hmong experience such as New Year festivals, the escape from Laos, life in the refugee camps and life in the United States.
- SOURCE: MacDowell, M. (1989). Stories in Thread: Hmong Pictorial Embroidery. Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Publications.

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