

Teaching Cultural Traditions: Art of Laos



Figure A. Map of Laos (source: *CIA World Factbook*)

BY LYNETTE HENDERSON



In the fall of 2003 the Children's Art Workshop, the Program for Southeast Asian Studies and Hayden Library at Arizona State University (ASU), in cooperation with the Arizona Lao Association, had both the fascinating and occasionally difficult experience of teaching Lao art traditions to a group of 25 students from diverse communities in the Phoenix metropolitan area.

This project was part of a continuing grant, entitled ASU/Motorola Great Communities Seed Grant; 2002-2003; "Bridging Generations through Arts and Technology," for educational activities with the Lao community, an underserved minority group. The primary focus of this portion of the grant was to bridge generations within the Lao community by having older members teach young members cultural traditions such as art, and for ASU staff to teach elders new traditions in technology, such as how to use a computer.

The Eleanor A. Robb Children's Art Workshop (CAW) at ASU, directed by Dr. Bernard Young, was the site for classes. A Saturday art program and a natural partner for such art activities, CAW offers classes in the visual arts for children ages 5 through 15. "These classes encourage creativity and personal expression, provide

instruction in the use of materials and techniques for rendering images, and introduce children to art history and culture” (Eleanor A. Robb, CAW Website, 2004). This article describes my experience as one of two instructors teaching children about art traditions from Laos, a country in Southeast Asia (Figure A).

In the mid-1980s I spent 7 months in Asia as an art student, and traveled through Nepal, India, Thailand, and Bangladesh. This trip was a very powerful experience, and I still ponder the lessons I learned these many years later. As a doctoral student in art education, the invitation to join this project presented me with a unique opportunity to work with artists from the Lao community here in Arizona, and to help translate Lao traditions, skills and expertise into art-making lessons for children.

History of the Lao Community in Phoenix

There are many different ethnic groups within Laos. Most of the Lao people in the Phoenix community originate from the lowlands and represent the nation’s majority— as of the year 2000, approximately 3 million or 60% of the population (Mansfield, 2000). Other minority groups in Laos, many of whom are semi-nomadic, are grouped through language and customs: the Hmong, Mon-Khmer, Sino-Tibetan and Tibeto-Burmese-speaking hill tribes, which comprise the other 40% of the population.

The first Lao people arrived in Arizona in 1975 very soon after the Vietnam War ended. Approximately half came directly from the refugee camps in Thailand; the rest came to Arizona from other states such as California. Many first-generation Lao worked in factories, hotels, and restaurants. Although only 5% of the first generation continued on to college or universities at that time, the number has risen to 80% for the second generation. As of 2001, there were approximately 155 Lao families and 900 members who belonged to the Arizona Lao Association (Sisouvanh, 2001).

The Lao community in Arizona established its own Lao Buddhist temple in 1997. The temple in Phoenix also functions as a community center and offers language education and classes in Lao culture to youth. Through the establishment of the temple and community center, the community addresses some of the difficult aspects of refugee/immigrant life: changes in family structure due to work schedules, loss of the original language in succeeding generations, loss of cultural understanding in children born in the new country, and a breakdown between the generations which continues to increase as time goes by (Sisouvanh, 2001). The activities outlined in this project represent an effort to address these issues through art.

Community Collaboration

A group of consultants came together as a planning team: two students from CAW: Janet Thompson (pseudonym) and myself; two faculty from the Program for Southeast Asian Studies: Dr. Karen Adams (also the writer of the grant) and Ms. Jacqueline Butler-Dias; two artists from the Phoenix Lao community: Mr. Steven Phengmyrath and Ms. Kham Phanthong; one member of the Lao Association in Phoenix: Mr. John Sisouvanh; and Mr. Bob Sookvong, a Lao language instructor and interpreter at ASU. In addition to their other roles as community liaisons Mr. Sisouvanh and Mr. Sookvong functioned as



Figure B. Traditional Lao weaving. Photograph by author.

Our problem became, then, how to give students necessary skills, maintain a sense of individual vision and remain true to the form and function of Lao art and design as we understood it.

interpreters during the planning meetings for the purpose of clarifying understanding of the traditions, and to assist linguistically. We combined our efforts and expertise to create a series of art lesson plans that were intended to exemplify Lao traditions. Our experience in working together to present a set of traditions to children from both the Lao community (thus, familiar with the traditions), and non-Lao children (not familiar with the traditions), raised a number of points that I believe are useful for anyone who desires to teach non-Western cultural traditions in a Western setting.

Studio Activities

Janet and I developed lesson plans based on images and information provided by the two Lao artists, one an expert in weaving and the other an expert in drawing Lao designs. We created two separate courses, one specifically for all weaving and fiber projects, and the course I developed which included drawing, painting, and mixed media projects.

Lao design is very complex (Figure B), and it was clear to us, after discussion about possible lesson activities, that learning to make the exquisite images of mature Lao artists would take more than ten 1.5 hour sessions, the time we had available in one semester. In order to teach traditions such as the weaving and woodcarving design-images (Figure C) an element of student replication or copying had to be included, although replication

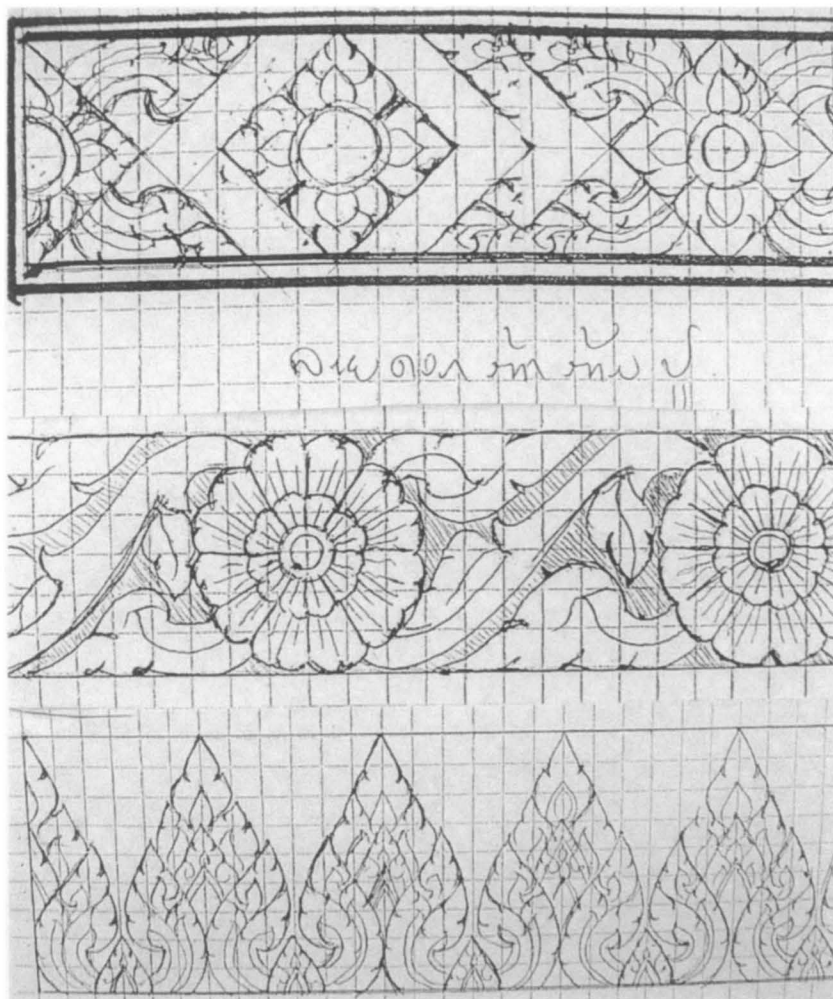


Figure C. Drawings by Steve Phengmyrath. Photograph by author.



conflicts with the Western tradition of individual self-expression, particularly in relation to children's artwork. Our problem became, then, how to give students necessary skills, maintain a sense of individual vision and remain true to the form and function of Lao art and design as we understood it, based on our English-language translations of the essential tenets of symmetry, balance and repetition.

Lao Weaving

We opted to develop lessons that would give parameters for what students would create and also offered them individual choices within those parameters. In weaving, for example, the students were first taught a basic over-and-under pattern (Figure D), but were allowed to choose their own colors. In a second project, students received a traditional Lao book-bag design that they decorated and stitched according to their personal preference. On a third project they created a banner that followed a particular weaving technique but were allowed to choose their colors, attach their choice of objects, text, or added stitching (Figure E). Kham Phanthong, a Lao weaving artist, provided assistance to students in all weaving and fibers projects.



Figure E. Student making banners. Photograph by B.Young.



Figure D. Traditional Lao weaving and students' first lesson. Photograph by J. Butler-Diaz.

Teachers should ask students to define and identify primary tenets of the tradition in their own work and then contrast those with familiar tenets as a learning tool, such as symmetry and asymmetry, for example, which are common principles in Western art.

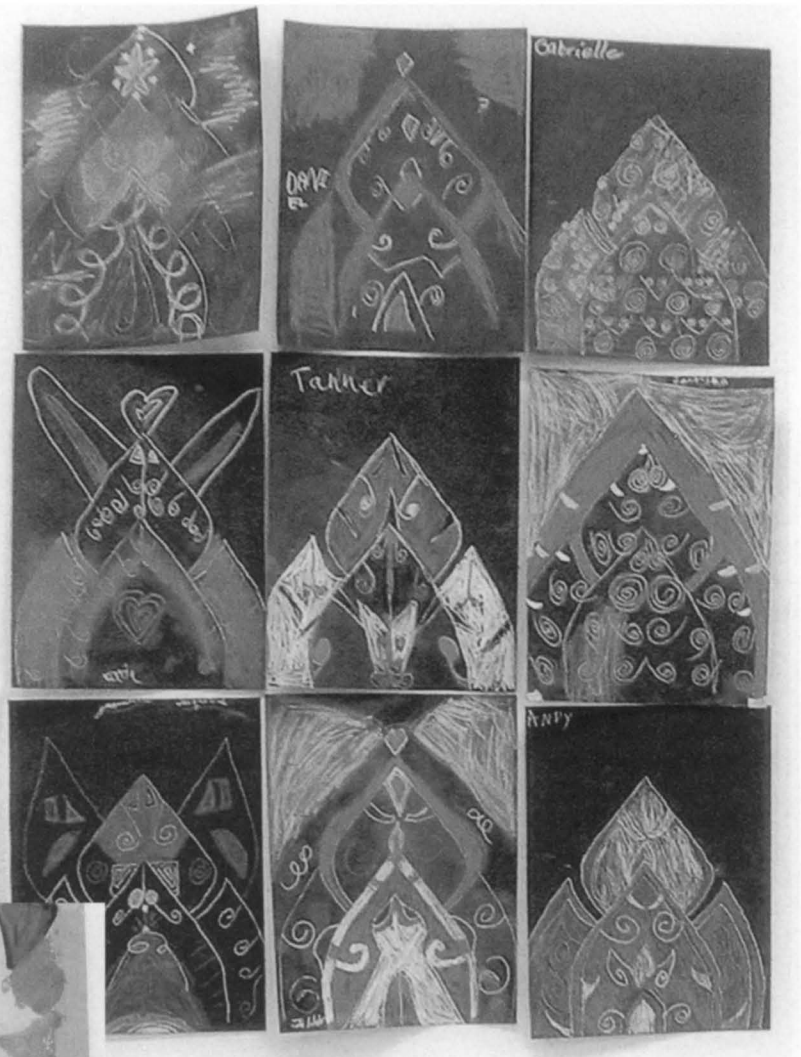


Figure F. Mixed media student drawings. Photograph by author.



Figure G. Student painting, tempera. Photograph by author.

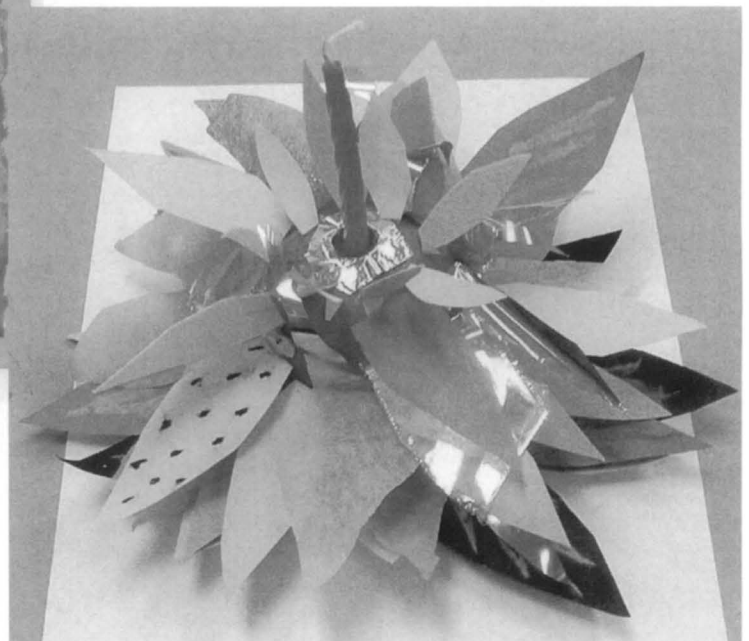


Figure H. Mixed media candleholder. Photograph by author.

Drawing, Painting, and Mixed-Media

The drawing, painting, and mixed-media class began with a set of drawings pre-designed by Steve Phengmyrath, one section of which I enlarged to 8.5" x 11" to simplify the design. In the first three weeks of the course, students reproduced the design by copying or tracing, then added designs of their choice, in colored pencils, crayons, pastels and tempera paints. Some of the designs grew quite complex but maintained the elements of symmetry, balance, and repetition (Figures F, G). In time, the students became familiar with a set of five designs and utilized them in combination with each new medium presented. Students also enjoyed making masks. From one of Mr. Phengmyrath's drawings, I simplified the image of a head, breaking it down into numbered cutout shapes that students assembled out of various colored papers of their choice. Students then embellished the image with additional cutouts, paper strips, and pastel drawing. Another particularly successful mixed-media project was the making of a candleholder used in a Lao festival whereby the maker would create a shape similar to a lotus flower, insert a lit candle in the center and release the object onto a stream or river where it would then be carried into the world, full of good wishes for the future. Students were allowed to be creative in its design, provided it reflected the object's positive function in carrying good wishes (Figure H).

In addition to the lessons, it was important to create an environment in the classroom that would enhance and support our studio activities. Although the drawing artist, Mr. Phengmyrath, was unable to attend class weekly, Ms. Phanthong and volunteers from the Lao community attended for one or more sessions each. Also present in the classroom for most of the semester were Dr. Adams and Ms. Butler-Diaz, who functioned as advisors and assistants.

The art traditions presented in the CAW classes included objects and images from the hill tribes—Hmong, in particular, and the "lowlanders." Both the fibers and the mixed-media classes listened to Lao community members' personal stories as well as those from books, while working on their projects. Students asked questions of the volunteers and examined authentic sample artworks after listening to the stories. Support materials such as the examples of real artwork and modified instructor samples, a world map; a map of Laos; photographs of animals; landscapes; cityscapes; and people and their activities from Laos were posted on the walls of the classroom every day and referred to by the teachers at every lesson.

Important Challenges in Teaching Cultural Traditions

Many of the issues described below were part of our initial planning for the Lao art classes. Some ideas came about as resolutions to conflicts that arose during the semester, and some through post-semester reflection. One primary point confirmed throughout the course is the importance of maintaining contact with experts in the tradition(s) that will be taught. If no experts are available, an alternative that helps to create a sense of cultural immersion in the classroom is to have expert publications and materials about the subject on hand for reference. In addition, as with any lesson plans, the teacher should determine the audience, e.g., students—their cultural demographics, ages and past art experiences, as well as the cultural paradigm(s) under which they have previously been taught. This information can be deduced by knowing where the students have attended school in previous years—in our case, the United States of America.

"Celebratory" multicultural art education, which refers to positive presentation of an art tradition but minus either discussion or critique of its relationship to dominant beliefs, values and practices, is viewed as "soft multiculturalism" (Chalmers, 2002, p. 294), and needs to more directly challenge the role of art in cultural production and reproduction.

It is important to be aware of the ways in which language influences how a topic is learned. Because the diverse CAW students spoke English as a common language (first languages included Lao and Spanish), and because the lessons were presented by English-speaking instructors, English-language words were used to describe traditional Lao art forms and processes. While some aspects of art may not be limited by language (Boughton & Mason, preface, 1999), they may certainly be defined by it. As a result of this experience, I highly recommend that translations be verified with knowledgeable persons, in this case the Lao artists, for accuracy in both context and meaning. An example of this is our use of the words *symmetry*, *balance*, and *repetition* to describe some of the design elements in traditional Lao imagery.

Nuances of the possible conflicts that may arise between a student's dominant cultural paradigm and the traditions proposed by the teacher are not always possible to determine in advance, as in our case. If a teacher anticipates conflicting elements, he or she should address each one with a solution that will maintain the integrity of the tradition while allowing its concept to be understood by the students. Consult with the available experts when modifications must be made in regards to materials or processes. Ask how closely the product need resemble the original tradition to maintain both material and conceptual integrity. An example of this in our classes was the conflict resolution regarding the need to replicate traditional forms as a basis for student images, but—due to students' and parents' expectations that an art class would allow them to create freely at some point—enhancement of forms with other design elements of students' own choice was allowed, as well as the use of nontraditional media (Figure H).

As mentioned here, it is important to repeat and review primary tenets of the tradition at every lesson. Teachers should ask students to define and identify them in their own work and then contrast those with familiar tenets as a learning tool, such as *symmetry* and *asymmetry*, for example, which are common principles in Western art. Finally, teachers should critique, summarize, and honor the results, even if unexpected outcomes have occurred, such as in students' weaving products, where the very complex task of a simple weave was mastered by students but the outcome did not really resemble traditional Lao weaving, due to both material differences and the complexity of traditional Lao designs that reflect skills attained through long-term practice. Our team reminded ourselves that all traditions change and develop over time and incorporate new ideas as they encounter different cultures and the customs, values, and materials of different people.



Art of Laos and Multicultural Education

The need for multicultural education is greater than ever because although the demographic landscape in the United States continues to change rapidly in terms of the diversity of race and ethnicity—in some areas and cities Whites are no longer the majority—the majority of teachers are primarily White, especially in areas of specialization such as art (Young, 1999). Role models, of which there is currently a profound shortage from groups such as African American, Native American or Mexican American, for example, are important as teachers and leaders in education, and in underrepresented areas. It is critical, therefore, that art teachers present multicultural curricula that include art and artists from various racial and ethnic groups, and ensure that curriculum content is authentic, respectful, accurate, and uses appropriate criteria to the particular culture for analysis and interpretation.

The conceptual framework for the Lao art classes was based on a “Western humanistic conception of art” (Desai, 2003, p.187) which assumes that art is a reflection of human interests and values through which one can reach an understanding of a particular group of people. This conception supports the practice of studying artifacts found within the material culture of the group in question. Art is created within the context of various aspects of culture, its social structure and history, and through its icons, symbols and customs (Kader, 2003, p.19), and is therefore a feasible way to enter into the complex configurations of what is known as “culture.” The Lao art classes offered at CAW were created because there is now a significantly large number of Lao people in the Phoenix area who wish to maintain and share their cultural art traditions with their own members and others from the surrounding communities, as aspects of both cultural recognition and survival of their community's values.

Art traditions other than Euro-American, although acknowledged as significant, have in both the past and the present been relegated to a marginal status in the art classroom, and maintain a “celebratory” (Chalmers, 2002, p.293) character rather than function as an integrated part of the curriculum. What characterizes multicultural art education today, however, is no longer viewed as widely understood and agreed-upon. Multicultural art education is and has been for at least a decade, considered a “contested terrain” (Desai, 2003, p.186), in which perspectives vary depending on their origination and on particular issues regarding culture and power relationships. “Celebratory” multicultural art education, which refers to positive presentation of an art tradition but minus either discussion or critique of its relationship to dominant beliefs, values and practices, is viewed as “soft multiculturalism” (Chalmers, 2002, p. 294), and needs to more directly challenge the role of art in cultural production and reproduction.



Over time and with focused attention, the presentation of a multitude of art traditions will become more commonplace within art education, particularly within teacher preparation programs.

The way in which the Lao art traditions were presented in these classes addresses a more challenging definition of art education in terms of requiring students to accept the validity of paradigms different from that which is dominant, in this case the Western notion of art as primarily self-expression or as a documentation of reality. I am suggesting that more could be done, however, to push the “bounded notions of culture” (Chalmers, 2002, p. 296), in terms of addressing current socio-cultural issues. Once traditions are introduced and explored, student activities could call for identification and awareness of students’ cultural origins and relationship to “others,” to prevent “stylistic appropriation,” and “homogenization” (Garber, 1995, p. 219-220) of cultural imagery. For example, during the process of working on a project related to Hmong storycloths (Figure I), the volunteers from the Lao community told their personal stories to the children about what it was like to leave their countries as refugees—the hardships they faced, the homes and people they left behind, and their experiences in settling in a new and foreign country. They also described the differences between emigrating voluntarily and the status of a refugee. These stories were related to the function of traditional storycloths and brought the artworks to life for the students.

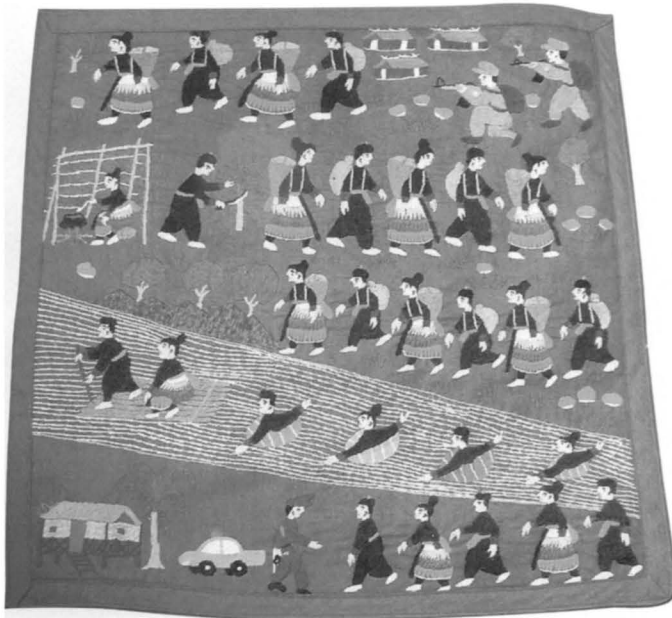


Figure I. Hmong Storycloth: Leaving Laos, crossing the border. Photograph by author.

The distinctions made by the storytellers between people who came to the United States as “refugees” versus “immigrants” allowed those students whose families had immigrated recently to relate to the stories and artworks in a more personal way. Left out of the stories, however, were the difficulties that the Lao community in the United States, like many other non-White communities, may face on a daily basis due to racism, stereotyping, and prejudice against foreign-language speakers. This information and the probable questions that arise are the arena in which students can become aware of their relationship to “others” as Garber suggests. Reproduction and incorporation of various art traditions can function to affirm and validate those traditions and the cultures they represent. A more activist approach, however, would be to relate the socio-cultural experiences of the Lao to student lives by incorporating students’ thoughts and feelings about contemporary issues, along with desires they may have for themselves and the future of their community.

Presenting more in-depth cultural information and digging a bit deeper in terms of the content in children’s art products is both positive and challenging for teachers. There is often hesitation in the classroom due not only to fear of exposing students’ personal issues in a public setting, but also due in part to assumptions created by developmental researchers about what children can do at different age levels. For example, Piaget stressed children’s egocentrism through age 7 (Driscoll, 2000); however, many of those assumptions are now in question as a result of the postmodern perspective that challenges notions of universality (Tarr, 2003).

The picture we have of children in need of protection not only from environmental elements but also from ideas and concepts that may be too complex, often causes educators to shy away from new and perhaps untried topics. It is often presumed to be difficult for young children to make connections between areas of knowledge, however transfer may be achieved by young children if the ideas are presented through a more developed and informed person, such as a teacher. In this way children can be guided into higher-level thinking and “meaning-making” in their art production rather than simply “replicating culture” (Tarr, 2003, p. 6), whether it be their own or one that is new to them. In the Lao art classes, direction into higher-level thinking occurred on an individual basis, depending on student interest and developmental levels and we found it best to remain flexible

within the boundaries of the projects. Student products, therefore, reflected a mixture of both “stylistic appropriation” and a more authentic integration of tradition with experimentation and students’ prior knowledge and experience.

The concept of “teaching for understanding” as discussed by Walker (1996, p.11) mentions four essential elements: “key ideas,” “knowledge transfer” [related to context], “personal connections,” and “problem-finding” (p.17). In our case, I believe that the entire course contained all of these elements individually or two together in every project. Due to the short length of each activity—one or two class periods—students did not spend the time necessary to get into deeper connections and more complex “problem finding,” except in terms of embellishment and personal interpretation when looking at Hmong storycloths. Key ideas however were present in the three elements on which we chose to focus: balance, symmetry, and repetition. Similarities in context were a bit harder to apply as traditional Lao art is not attributed to the single vision of one artist, but is rather a collective enterprise developed over time with significant changes coming through regional influences and overlapping cultures. On the whole, I believe that students came away with a new awareness of a nation, its culture, and two very important art traditions.

Conclusion

Due to the differing nature of traditional Lao craftsmanship and the Western emphasis on self-expression, issues arose both during the planning stages and in the classroom on exactly what and how to teach Lao weaving and design. Context also played an important role regarding potential conflicts in terms of the flexible nature of a Saturday art program, regarded more as entertainment than education by some parents and students, and demographics of the student body. Teacher and staff awareness of those factors and possible ensuing issues, however, will help preparations of future classes for issues that need resolution, and to remain focused on both the material and conceptual aspects of art production. In addition, the notion of pushing into deeper content in student artworks is one that can be built up through a series of activities moving from simpler lessons to a more complicated mixture of form and function. Over time and with focused attention, the presentation of a multitude of art traditions will become more commonplace within art education, particularly within teacher preparation programs. The issues will seem less contentious as appropriate language and viable solutions become easier to access through repeated practice, leaving the way open for both teachers and students to successfully navigate and enjoy the complex mysteries of art and culture.

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