



BABY CARRIERS

RICH SYMBOLS OF ETHNIC CULTURE



A handicraft show at the National Art Museum of China is displaying pieces of fabric lovingly embroidered by women from the country's south. **Lin Qi** reports.

Between the soaring, lush mountains in Southwest China are the villages of ethnic groups where women pass down exquisite embroidery traditions through generations. Among the many items they produce is the *bei shan* or baby carrier.

Women use colored threads to create a variety of patterns on a piece of indigo-dyed fabric to make it.

They use the carrier, which has two straps, to swaddle their babies and carry them on their backs when farming, doing housework or going to the fairs and socializing.

The carrier, which protects the new lives, has significant meaning for those living a difficult life in the remote mountainous areas where they face natural disasters, threats from wild animals and diseases. Also, it showcases different ethnic cultures through the stitching techniques that girls from the different communities learn.

The creativity of these women is being celebrated at a handicraft exhibition called *Attachment to the Hometown* at Beijing's National Art Museum of China.

The exhibition has around 150 baby carriers from eight ethnic groups, including the Miao, Dong, Shui and Yi, from Guizhou, Hunan and Yunnan provinces as well as the Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region.

The earliest carriers on show were made in the late Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) while the latest are from the 1980s.

Wu Weishan, director of NAMOC, says the carriers on display are testimony to the brilliance of ethnic needlework, which is now giving way to mass production items.

"The art of making baby carriers is a way for the users to showcase their beliefs, their fairy tales and their respect for nature. This item helps bring the audience closer to the soul of these ethnic groups," says Wu.

"They are records of human society"

The history, culture and the aesthetics of these groups are seen in the vivid patterns, both realistic and abstract, of these carriers.

The designs often feature animals, too. And while the Miao from Guizhou's Zhijin county prefer geometrical shapes that resemble fish, the Yi feature ram horns to symbolize wealth and use them to create whirlpool-like designs.

Some baby carriers also sport butterfly designs. A Miao legend has it that of the 12 eggs laid by a butterfly, one hatched into Jiangyang, the ancestor of the Miao people.

The Shui believe there were nine suns in the ancient times, and one day as a mother with her infant searched for water and was about to faint because of the fierce sun, a giant butterfly appeared spreading its wings to provide them with shade.

Women from the city of Gejiu, Yunnan, use abstract designs representing the sun, moon and stars on their carriers to show their respect for nature. They hope these symbols can give energy to their babies.

As many ethnic tribes do not have a written language, they often use Han characters in their designs. As a result, some baby carriers feature Han characters that convey auspicious and encouraging messages.

Mothers also attach tassels, perfumed medicine bags and shiny materials to their baby carriers to scare away evil spirits and demons.

The carriers at the exhibition are from a donation of 1,770 baby carriers made to NAMOC.

The donation was made by Ada Tang Lee Wai-ching, vice-chairman of the Fu Hui Education Foundation, a charity based in Canada and Hong Kong. She learned of this collection of baby carriers through Lee Meiyin, a collector of ethnic Chinese costumes and a researcher at the Dunhuang Academy China.

In 2012, Lee met an American col-



The ongoing exhibition *Attachment to the Hometown* presents around 150 baby carriers of different ethnic groups.

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If you go

9 am-5 pm, Mondays closed, through Sept 18. 1 Wusi Dajie, Dongcheng district, Beijing. 010-6400-1476.

lector named Mark Clayton in Los Angeles, where she gave a lecture on Miao embroidery.

She was taken to Clayton's storage facility where she was astonished to see thousands of pieces of ethnic Chinese embroidery which he had collected.

She says because of the rising costs of storage and preservation, Clayton then wanted to donate 5,000 baby carriers to museums in the United States so that more people could appreciate the beauty of Chinese embroidery, but was turned down by such institutions.

Lee then offered to move the baby carriers to China and she persuaded her friend Tang to buy them from him.

Lee was able to convince Tang, vice-chairman of Hong Kong electronics and appliances retailer Broadway Photo Supply Ltd to buy the items as the businesswoman is known for passion for ethnic handicraft.

Tang, who has been deeply involved in charity work in Sichuan province over the past two decades, frequently travels to poverty-stricken villages in the Liangshan Yi autonomous prefecture, where she and the Fu Hui Education Foundation run teaching programs and offer scholarships to ethnic children.

She says the voluntary efforts have helped hundreds of children complete middle school.

Speaking of her involvement in the embroidery project, Tang says: "The baby carrier is the start of a joyful childhood and a future of happiness. The donation can preserve ethnic embroidery. I also hope it will help deepen research into ethnic cultures in China."

Tang plans to donate the remaining pieces she has bought to the museum of Renmin University in Beijing and an education foundation in Hong Kong.

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Wu Weishan, director, National Art Museum of China



A woman from the Shui ethnic group in Guizhou province carries her child on her back in a *bei shan* or baby carrier.

QIN GANG / FOR CHINA DAILY

FOLK ART

Vietnam devises strategies to revive dying art form

By XINHUA in Hanoi

Visitors to Hanoi can now see 12 genres of Vietnamese folk paintings at an exhibition at the Hanoi Museum. More than 200 works from well-known painting genres such as Dong Ho, Hang Trong and Kim Hoang are on show.

The exhibition, which opened on Friday, aims to showcase Vietnamese traditional folk paintings to domestic and foreign visitors, the organizers say.

According to Nguyen Tien Da, director of the Hanoi Museum, traditional folk paintings display a community's unique cultural characteristics.

Speaking of the challenges facing the art form, he says: "The question of how to combine traditional and modern art needs thorough consideration and investment in order to nurture awareness among the young about the preservation of ancestral cultural features."

Truong Quoc Binh, former director of the Vietnam Fine Arts Museum, says as the nation's socio-economic situation changes, many types of traditional folk paintings are on the verge of disappearing.

The demand for traditional folk paintings has also decreased, which has forced craft villages and artisans to

seek other jobs, says Binh.

For instance, Dong Ho paintings were once among the "must-have" things during the lunar New Year festival, or Tet as it is locally known, for worship or decoration purposes.

People then displayed Dong Ho folk paintings in their houses throughout the year and replaced them with new ones every Tet. But the tradition has faded away with time.

Making the same point, Nguyen Dang Che, an artisan from Dong Ho village in Vietnam's northern Bac Ninh province, says: "Before 1945, my village had 17 clans engaged in producing Dong Ho paintings. But due to

changing economic conditions, Dong Ho paintings have gradually lost their position.

"Most families in the village have now turned to making votive paper to earn a living. Now there are only two clans in Dong Ho village who still follow the tradition of producing Dong Ho paintings," says Che.

Meanwhile, Kim Hoang paintings, which were also popular items during Tet in Vietnam, can now be found only in museums or fine art galleries.

It is said that a flood in 1915 destroyed almost all the original woodblocks in the Kim Hoang village. Now, experts are seeking ways to restore this

painting genre, which originated in the late 18th century.

Speaking about how the state is helping preserve and revive these traditions, Binh says: "Vietnam has put significant efforts into preserving traditional folk paintings, including building a list of its national intangible cultural heritage and restoring and developing traditional craft villages.

"But, the country is facing numerous difficulties in reviving traditional craft villages. There are difficulties in sourcing materials, supporting artisans, as well as enabling the passing down of the tradition to younger generations."

Even the Vietnamese people



An artisan makes a Hang Trong painting at the ongoing exhibition at the Hanoi Museum. YAN JIANHUA / XINHUA

are sad at the dying of the art.

Pham Cong, an 80-year-old resident of Hanoi who visited the exhibition, says: "It is a pity that many of Vietnam's traditional folk painting genres

have disappeared. The new generation should learn about and develop the country's traditional painting genres."

The exhibition will run for six months.