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A Far World Comes Near: The Kingdom of Laos and Laotian Americans

University of Massachusetts - Amherst

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A Far World Comes Near:

The Kingdom of Laos and Laotian Americans
A FAR WORLD COMES NEAR

THE KINGDOM OF LAOS AND LAOTIAN AMERICANS

An Exhibition of Laotian Arts & Culture

Augusta Savage Gallery
University of Massachusetts, Amherst
April 1 thru April 17, 1987
A Far World Comes Near:  
The Kingdom of Laos and Laotian Americans

Introduction:

Intentionally, this exhibit divides into worlds Before and After. The photographs from Laos were taken before the Indochina War of the 1960’s. American military served in Southeast Asia in what most of us now see, in retrospect, as a misconceived imperial venture inserted within a series of Indochinese civil wars. It brought great tragedy to all concerned. In documenting everyday life in Laos as it used to be, we provide a frame of reference, a traditional perspective for viewing life in that far away world. In taking this viewpoint we do not gloss over the tragedies of past wars and continuing conflicts. We acknowledge the common humanity of all participants in these struggles and grieve for those who perished in the fighting. This includes the Americans who represented our own distant land and the numberless peoples of Indochina who died and continue to die in their nations’ ongoing struggles for political patrimony.

As a counterpoint to Laos before the war, the After photos from New England are of new Americans. They came here after fleeing Laos and enduring the sorrowful experience of refugee camps in Thailand. Then they sustained arduous initial stages of resettlement in the United States. Flight from the war ravished homeland to a peaceful United States repeats the experiences of many ethnic groups who came to America in previous generations and who continue to arrive today. The After photographs depict the parallel process of integration into American life and the simultaneous maintenance of valued traditions on the part of one of New England’s newest ethnic groups.

For the generation of Laotian peoples now coming of age in America, Laos of the 1950’s and even the 1960’s was grandparents and parents time, not theirs. The world depicted in the photographs from Laos touches on the life of the King and court at that time, showing an overwhelming presence in the royal capital of Luang Prabang (the Palace of the Great Prabang, statue of Buddha). That way of life is now a memory culture for the current inhabitants of Laos, just as it is for the people of Laos who have come to make new homes in America.

Our selection of photographs highlights the bright and happy, but in the process reveals glimpses of less than luminous aspects of life in the past and in the present. In our visual essay we have deliberately excluded the war and the processes of resettlement. We do this not only because these matters have been dealt with elsewhere but because, by showing the Laos of Before, we establish a baseline against which to portray part of the process of becoming American. It is also our desire to portray, in part, the rich heritage people from Laos have brought with them to America. For many, the long journey to America has involved the tragedies of family separation. For all Laotians there has been the breaking of ties with a way of life and a natural setting very different from New England. In sharing their present lives visually, Laotian people in New England indicate on ongoing consciousness of the traumas of the immediate past and a pride in their heritage.

For most viewers the pictures from Laos are exotic. This perspective is heightened by the fact that they are thematically removed from what was, even then, an expanding American presence in that part of the world. In this sense they are also distanced from most of the recent documentaries about Indochina which have focused on the war, the American presence and on the refugee experience. We invite viewers to penetrate beyond the veneer of people as exotic scenery. The pictures depict ordinary secular and ritual life as well as aspects of the yearly cycle of ceremonial activities. The captions are for those who wish explanations in this journey of discovery.
Acknowledgements:

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This exhibit is based on the work of Joel M. Halpern in Laos in the late 1950’s and 1960’s, and of Sam Pettengill in Western Massachusetts in the early 1980’s.

Joel Halpern is a professor of Anthropology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He lived in Laos when working in the community development division of the American aid program. After returning to academic life he revisited Laos as Chair of the Mekong Seminar of the Southeast Asian Development Advisory Group of the Asia Society, whose function was to provide liaison with the Mekong Committee of the United Nations. He has published several books and many articles on Laos.

Sam Pettengill has been a student at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and worked in documentary photography in New England. His recent work includes industrial plants and their neighborhoods, focusing on the world of work and of truck-stop diners.
A photo by the anthropologist from the Old Country now takes its place above the television in the new home, together with the American flag and family pictures from Laos and New England.
Ritual anointing of the statue of the Buddha at the royal pagoda at the time of the New Year celebration.

Arranging floral offerings in Laos for a religious holiday is both a pleasure and an art. Here in America we make the floral offering with leaves and flowers that we gather. At home in Laos we used to arrange the flowers differently, just the buds in rows, stuck into a banana stalk. Here we don't have banana stalks, so we do it this way now. There are not many Lao temples in America. Ceremonies such as this baci, a ritual blessing for the well-being of the soul, are frequently performed in homes and community halls around New England.

We arrange flowers in a beautiful silver bowl. On the leaves are many strings to bless our loved ones. You tie a string around the person and it serves as a blessing.
Another characteristic of Laos is its multi-ethnic character. Estimates vary, but about half the population has been composed of peoples who are not ethnic Lao. A group that migrated south from China over the last several centuries is the Hmong (formerly known as Meo or Miao). They lived on mountaintops and are best known in recent times as cultivators of opium, a crop introduced during France's colonial rule.

In the Indochina War many Hmong also served as part of a CIA-supported army in Laos. A man, who now lives in Santa Ana, California and is an electronics technician, saw this photo in a book of mine and wrote requesting a print of the original, explaining that the young woman on the left grew up to be his mother and she now lives in Paris.
The first generation to grow up in America has to rely on parents' recollections for knowledge of village life.
Fishing in the old country, whether by men on the broad Mekong or by men and women in irrigation ditches, was a pastime as much as a livelihood. Fathers taught sons many things: swimming, fishing, planting rice and catching snails.
Bathing children has also been a man's job in Laos where some sex roles tended not to be rigidly defined.
Entering the religious life need not be a permanent commitment. Traditionally it was an appropriate thing to do at some point in one's life. These townspeople being initiated as novices have opted to don priestly robes for the duration of the rainy season. The police chief of Luang Prabang is on the left.

Among non-Lao ethnic groups were the Khmu people who lived on the mountainsides and who came to town, even at very young ages, to work as laborers, as was the case with this Khmu boy.
Making friends in high school is part of becoming American. In Laos people tended to maintain most personal contacts with their own ethnic communities.

One Laotian girl came to America in 1979 and did not know any English. She and her family lived twelve people in three rooms for three months. Children at school would call her names. One day she had to push them, and then felt that she had made a mistake. She then talked to them, they apologized and now she has friends.

Bringing carefully arranged flowers and candles to a religious ceremony is a gesture of piety. It is practiced by people of all ages.
We come to America and my son wants to dress in the American way for Halloween. An American friend loaned me the clown costume so that my child can be like the others. Then the kids went out on Halloween to our friends homes, just like Americans.
Lao food continues to be enjoyed in New England but is prepared and served within the home, which has now become the focus for activities which are exclusively Lao in character.

"I like to work out on the floor. This is the Lao way. I am chopping limes and parsley. My neighbor is mixing a chicken salad. This is the way we like to cook. In America you have to stand on your feet all the time. Sometimes when I cook standing in front of the stove American style, my back hurts—but I can't work sitting down because the heat is on top of the stove."