

By Olivia Vang Thanadabout and Nicole Grabow

Introduction

Silver objects in HMong culture most commonly appear as necklaces called ***xauv*** (figure 1). These necklaces hold significance as wedding gifts and new years jewelry. In some families, parents will gift a *xauv* to adorn wedding clothing or other celebration garments. Pre-Vietnam War, *xauv* were made exclusively from silver metal and were very heavy. As tastes changed and the cost and availability of silver became less accessible, there was a transition from silver to aluminum, which is both lighter and more affordable. Many families still prize their original silver *xauv* as not only a show of craftsmanship, but also objects which recall the familial history of marriages and life before the great diaspora of HMong people.

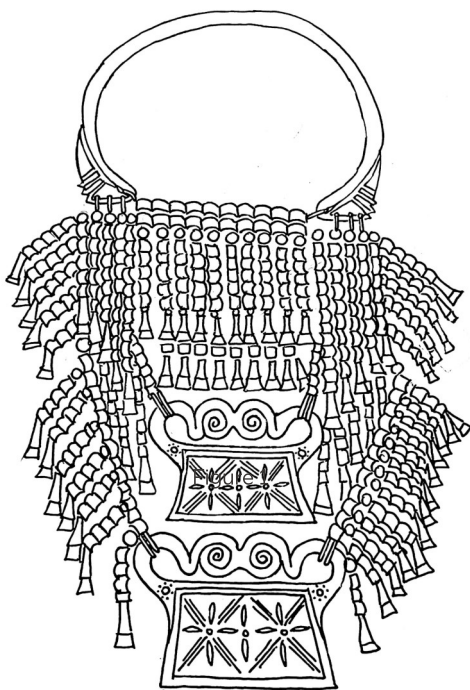


Figure 1

Symbolism

The word *xauv* in HMong directly translates to *lock*. Many people attribute this translation to the persecution of HMong (Miáo) people when we still predominantly inhabited the Yellow River Region of China. It is said that the Miáo people were forced to wear *xauv* as identification in order to further segregation tactics. While this translation and origin story is widely accepted, according to Lee Pao Xiong, Professor of HMong Studies at Concordia University, there is debate about the meaning of the traditional *xauv* symbol (figure 2).

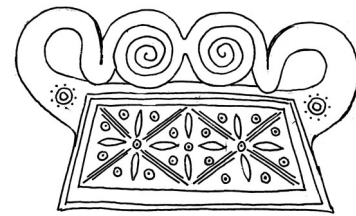


Figure 2

While some believe the symbol represents a jail-like room, Lee Pao Xiong states that the more likely meaning comes from the transformation of the Chinese character for



Figure 3

miáo, meaning *sprout*, into a decorative motif. The Chinese character (figure 3) shows a representation of rice fruit/sprout at the top and the paddy fields at the bottom. This idea is supported by the oral knowledge that the HMong were originators and masters of wet rice cultivation. The importance of preserving material culture is emphasized by objects like *xauv* because their shapes and symbols recall oral origin stories that remind us that history isn't always written down, but rather interwoven into the objects themselves.

Although *xauv* today have transitioned into fashion statements worn during new years celebrations and weddings, symbols such as this are reminders that preserving material culture is essential to understanding origin stories, especially those of predominantly oral traditions.

Understanding Silver

Silver is a warm, white metal prized for its strength, luster, smooth texture, and malleability. Silver tarnishes readily in our atmosphere and needs both protection in storage and to be cleaned regularly to maintain its brightness and color.

Pure silver is soft enough to be scratched by a fingernail. In art-making, silver is mixed with a small amount of another metal, usually copper, to increase its strength. *Sterling silver* is made of 92.5% silver and 7.5% copper, and is almost always stamped "925" somewhere on the item.

While *xauv* and most silver jewelry is made from solid silver, *silver plating* is popular for cups and serving trays, etc. In this technique a very thin layer of sterling silver sheet is applied over a less expensive metal, such as copper. *Electroplating* is a modern version that also uses sterling silver applied in a thin layer. Silver-plated items tarnish just as solid silver items do.

Other Silver-Colored Metals

Nickel Silver is also known as *German Silver* or *Paktong*, and is a common substitute because of its affordability and similar appearance, but it actually contains no silver. Instead, Nickel Silver is a mixture of copper, nickel, and zinc. It can be difficult to know for certain from looking at something whether it is made from Nickel Silver or real silver, but Nickel Silver does not tarnish the same way.

Aluminum: Although silver was used for hundreds of years for HMong jewelry, after the great diaspora of HMong people post Vietnam War, aluminum *xauv* became widely popularized. Most *xauv* that are found at HMong markets now are made of aluminum. Aluminum became the preferred metal for *xauv* because it is light weight and much cheaper to produce. Aluminum also requires less maintenance because it doesn't tarnish like silver. This being said, traditional silver *xauv* are still prized for their vintage style, monetary value, and authenticity. Many people might save buying silver *xauv* for special occasions like weddings, but will wear aluminum *xauv* on new years for comfort.

What is Silver Tarnish?

Silver reacts with sulfur in the air to produce silver sulfide, which is a brown-black mineral that we know as tarnish. When it forms, it begins in a very thin yellow or iridescent layer on the surface of the silver. Over time, the color shifts to orange, blue, brown, and finally black.



The bright metal surface is gradually consumed, so that areas of thick tarnishing may appear etched or pitted after cleaning.

Nickel silver may tarnish to gray, but more slowly and not specifically from contact with sulfur. *Aluminum* does not tarnish.

Abrasive Polishing

Abrasive polishing uses a hard material, usually in the form of a powder or paste, to cut through the silver sulfide. The ideal polishing material is harder than the tarnish but softer than the silver, since anything harder than silver will scratch it.

Chemical dips were common in the past but, due to the health hazards, abrasive polishing is now preferred.

Advantages of abrasive polishing include:

- Control over the level of polishing
- Nontoxic
- Easy to learn



For silver items attached to textiles, abrasive polish can be used in just a small area and the fabric can be protected.

The disadvantage of this technique, however, is that it is very slow!

Calcium Carbonate (CaCO_3) is the optimal abrasive for silver polishing since it is hard enough to cut through the silver sulfide, but soft enough that scratching to the silver surface is minimized.

It is important to remember that some silver objects are softer than others and *can* be scratched with calcium carbonate and cotton swabs if used aggressively. Be gentle.

Aluminum oxide (Al_2O_3) is a white power similar to calcium carbonate. Aluminum oxide is more abrasive than calcium carbonate, and should be used only for cleaning *Nickel Silver* or other harder metals, like brass. It will scratch silver.

Commercial Polishes and Cloths

Most commercial polishes and polishing cloths contain aluminum oxide and can scratch your silver. They work quickly, but the abrasive is too hard and will gradually wear away the silver over years of care.

How to Polish

Silver polishing with calcium carbonate is simple to learn and can be done at home. Here is what you will need:

- Nitrile or latex gloves
- Calcium carbonate powder
- 1:1 solution of distilled water and ethanol
- Cotton swabs and/or cotton cloth
- Undyed cotton velvet

Step-by-Step

1. First, clean the silver with ethanol on cotton swabs or cloth. This removes surface dirt or grease, as well as loose silver sulfide, and helps the polishing go faster.

2. Dip cotton swabs into the water+ethanol solution until they are just moist, then dip the swab into the calcium carbonate so that a small amount sticks to the damp swab. Apply to the silver in circles. Begin gently and examine the surface for scratching. If you see no scratches, you can press more firmly.

3. Allow the calcium carbonate powder to dry on the surface, and then brush it away with a stiff brush. Clear remaining powder with the water+ethanol solution on cotton swabs. You may need to repeat steps 2-3 several times to achieve the level of polishing you want.

4. Apply ethanol alone on cotton swabs or cloth. This drives off any water that may be remaining in crevices.

5. Buff gently with cotton velvet.

Polishing Tips

A toothbrush or similar stiff brush can work very well in the place of cotton swabs for delicate sections of *xauv* or other intricate jewelry.

Leave a small amount of tarnish in crevices to highlight incised decorations.

Hold a white sheet of paper over the silver to cast a reflection after clearing the calcium carbonate. This will reveal areas of tarnish you may have missed.

Storage

Protecting silver from sulfur when it isn't being worn will prevent tarnishing. *Pacific Silvercloth* is a product made especially for this purpose, and can also be used to line jewelry boxes or create storage bags.



Wrapping items in acid-free tissue or undyed cloth and placing them in a zip-lock bag can be an effective alternative to using Pacific Silvercloth.

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