The Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre (TAEC) is a local social enterprise founded in 2006 to promote the appreciation and transmission of Laos’ ethnic cultural heritage and livelihoods based on traditional skills. The Centre’s primary activities are two-fold: a museum, and fair-trade handicrafts stores directly linked with artisan communities. The Centre’s work includes school outreach activities, craft workshops, lectures, research, and a non-profit foundation.

TAEC is located in Luang Prabang at the foot of Phousi Hill behind Dara Market. Entry fee is 25,000kip, free for children under 12 and Lao citizens.

HANDICRAFTS AND LIVELIHOODS

Ethnic minority communities living in rural areas make up the poorest sector of the Lao population. Recognising the unique obligations of a museum working with these communities, TAEC runs an innovative livelihood development programme based on traditional handicraft skills. The overwhelming majority of handicraft producers in the programme are ethnic minority women, who studies have shown spend their income on their family’s food, health, and education needs.

Currently TAEC supports over 600 handicrafts producers and their families in 12 provinces of Laos. The programme is a window into the breadth and diversity of traditional crafts practiced throughout Laos: the wood carving of the Ta Oy people of Champassak, heavy handspun cottons dyed a rich indigo by the Tai Phuan of Savannakhet, colourful appliquéd toys made by Akha women in Phongsaly, and sturdy crocheted Liana vine bags by the Kmhmu of Oudomxai Province. TAEC works closely with handicraft producers, providing small loans and payments upfront, training in product design, quality and small business practices, and logistical support. According to fairtrade and sustainability principles, the sale price is divided evenly between TAEC and the producer.

In addition to the obvious benefits of extra income, the programme also fulfils TAEC’s broader mission of promoting interest, investment in ethnic minority cultures, and craft preservation. In gaining a monetary value, as well as their value as a symbol of identity and culture, traditional handicraft skills are revitalised and continue to be practiced. The production and sale of new craft products also discourages poor communities from making a one-off sale of their antique family heirlooms, which often results in the memory of how to make them being lost.

If you would like to support the expansion of our handicrafts work, providing more opportunities to rural ethnic minority women, please consider donating through our US-based non-profit 501c3, the Luang Prabang Fund for Culture and Conservation.

Thank you for spreading the word and work of TAEC! www.taeclaos.org
TAEC Artisans

Lu Mien

Lu Mien women are expert embroiderers, spending many hours from the time they are young to master the three main stitching techniques and to create colourful and complex motifs. The Mien say that a woman’s abilities can be judged by her embroidery – a dexterous, patient embroiderer will make a hardworking, dedicated wife and mother. TAEC has been working with a cooperative of Lu Mien embroiderers in Luang Namtha Province for nearly ten years. In 2012, TAEC supported Famjoy Sehli, the head of the cooperative, to show their work at the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market.

Videos:
How to use a Yao Mien baby carrier https://youtu.be/CFsXLcQs9g0
Braided Cord of Mien Textiles https://youtu.be/tOvCebmTKFs

Akha

Traditionally inhabiting the remote highland areas of northern Laos, Akha traditional clothing consists of heavy indigo-dyed cotton adorned with applique and embroidery work. Akha women are particularly well known for their silver headdresses, which indicate marital status and geographic and ethnic affiliation. The whimsical Akha Biladjo crafts TAEC promotes were developed over several years by a French artist with a remote village in Phongsaly Province and is now a self-sustaining craft association called Akha Biladjo. TAEC is proud to support this successful community-based project, stocking a wide variety of dolls, jewellery, and ornaments.

oma

The Oma are an ethnic group living in the far north of Laos, traditionally in highland areas, practicing swidden agriculture. They are more recent immigrants to Laos – having relocated here in the 19th century. They belong to the Sino-Tibetan ethnolinguistic family, and are often grouped with the Akha peoples, though they themselves do not necessarily identify themselves as Akha. Their languages are not mutually comprehensible, and their traditional clothing is distinct. The Oma are well known for their graphic black and red applique work, and the silver headdresses and ornamentation women wear. Generally, the blue-black or white heavy cotton they use as a base for their clothing and handicrafts is handwoven and dyed in their community, while the red cloth or embroidery thread applied is bought from traders or the market. Their embroidery is painstaking and detailed --- it is exceedingly slow work to create the even and colourful designs that adorns their clothing and these products.

Video:
The Oma people of Laos https://youtu.be/YsRs2okZJ24
LANTEN (YAO MUN)

The Yao Mun began migrating from China 200 years ago. There are now about 10,000 of them living in Laos, particularly in the north along the Chinese and Burmese borders. Others migrated to Vietnam, and some are still living in China. The Yao Mun believe in Taoism, and use Chinese characters for their written language.

The Lanten are known for upholding their culture and traditional dress. Lanten women wear hand-woven, dark blue indigo-dyed tunics with a pink tassel on the chest and short trousers. Men wear a simple indigo dyed jacket and trousers. Their clothing is made from hand-spun, hand-woven cotton, and indigo bushes are grown by each family.

Traditionally, young Yao Mun women pluck their eyebrows and comb their hair away from their forehead in a way that is very unique and different from other groups. Women also make very thin paper from bamboo shoots. The paper is used in the practice of Taoism.

Video:
The Lanten people of Laos https://youtu.be/chEO0HiDR94

KMHMU

The Kmhmu are the second-largest ethnic group in Laos, whose ancestors are considered to be the original inhabitants of the country. The Kmhmu traditionally practiced shifting cultivation of upland rice, and are known for their intimate knowledge of the forest and forest products.

Kmhmu men are skilled bamboo and rattan basket weavers, and most household tools can be made of these materials. Kmhmu women traditional wove using backstrap looms, but this skills has largely died out. However, they still make bags using the strong Liana vine, which they harvest from the wild, then dry, twist into rope, and crochet. These natural bags and pouches come to TAEC from Oudomxai Province, where a government project helps to train and coordinate the village producers.

Videos:
Learn a few Kmhmu words https://youtu.be/7-y25J49DJU
Preserving the traditional art of basketry https://youtu.be/sMyNyfB0dZE
The Hmong are one of Laos’ most famous ethnic groups, with a large overseas diaspora, particularly in the US. Maintaining a strong cultural identity, different Hmong sub-groups have distinctive traditional clothing. Nowadays, they are worn only on special occasions.

In particular, Hmong Njua women are well known for their resist-dyed (batik) skirts made with hemp and cotton. Woven using a combination backstrap and frame loom, the hemp cloth is painted with beeswax designs and dyed with indigo. The beeswax is then boiled off to reveal the pattern in white. Traditionally, this cloth is embroidered, appliqued, and pleated into a traditional knee-length skirt, a process taking up to nine months to complete. TAEC has adapted Hmong natural textiles into bags, hats, and pouches.

Videos:
- Components of a Hmong skirt https://youtu.be/soAv_ITuToY
- Hmong textiles – reverse applique https://youtu.be/qGiYMRQmR9k
- Hmong textile art or “flower cloth” https://youtu.be/pka8pmeK7wE

The Katu are a small ethnic group living in the Annam Mountains of southern Laos and central Vietnam. Due to their remote and inaccessible habitat, the Katu have kept many of their cultural traditions. They believe in nature spirits, and also have a concept of a powerful (female) Creator Spirit inhabiting the Sky. Katu women weave textiles on a backstrap loom – an ancient technique for creating cloth. Cloth is often decorated with beads, and sewn into simple skirts and tunics for wear. TAEC works with cooperatives of Katu women from Salavan and Xekong Provinces, promoting their backstraploom textiles of cotton, banana fibre, and beads.

Videos:
- Visit a Katu community house https://youtu.be/UQ6Lj_23okI
- Preparing a backstrap loom https://youtu.be/_syhEMNiL8c
- Katu weaving with beading https://youtu.be/7TDUpcgz0OU
TAEC Artisans

TA OY

The Ta Oy are an ethnic group from the far south of Laos, and similar to the Katu, traditionally lived in the Annam highlands. The masks and wood carvings of the Ta Oy were traditionally used to represent ancestors and spirits and adorn their community houses. However, nowadays they are primarily used for decoration and sale.

Masks are made by Ta Oy men and women in Champassak Province, who migrated from Xekong in the 1980s. The design of the masks is first roughly chiselled into wood, and the whole piece is charred in a fire. Then, the burnt wood is scrubbed off with a natural brush made from a dried coconut shell and polished with clear wax. TAEC has been working with this community since 2010.

Videos:
The Ta Oy people of Southern Laos https://youtu.be/kQsdqZvpd5Q
Woodcarving – Traditional art of the Ta Oy https://youtu.be/eQEvhgCvJvk

TAI GROUPS

The Tai of Laos include a number of different ethnic groups who are primarily valley and riverbank dwelling peoples. These include the Tai Lao, Tai Lue, Tai Dam, and Tai Daeng, most of who practice paddy rice farming and have adopted Theravada Buddhism.

The Tai groups are famous for their silk and cotton textiles, hand woven on frame looms that are a ubiquitous village sight under their stilted homes. Girls learn to spin cotton, reel silk, and weave at a young age, helping their mothers and female relatives with simple tasks at first and graduating to more complex designs and techniques as they gain experience. Textiles are used for tube skirts, shawls, blankets, bags, and ceremonial cloths. TAEC supports Tai weavers of silk and cotton, from Houaphan Province in northern Laos, to Savannakhet Province, in the south.

Videos:
Indigo pots in a Phou Tai village https://youtu.be/wfaLUGq0nVE
Phou Tai Ikat https://youtu.be/2ippWT9_4Sc
Four pedal loom used by the Phou Tai https://youtu.be/JgMjHs1v36Q
Tai Dam Wedding Preparations https://youtu.be/s0F7lgWWESw