

## **Abstract**

The objective of the project is to show how dowries affect the perceived worth Hmong women. The twenty bronze and aluminum masks represent money or “gold and silver” paid from the groom’s family to bride’s family for her hand in marriage. The twenty-five hand-made suitcases and hand-woven baskets represent the gifts that a bride’s family gives her to start a life with her husband. The dowry is a tradition in Hmong weddings and is psychologically impactful upon Hmong women. The dowry was proof to the bride and her family that her husband saw her worth and will love and take care of her. A dowry meant the daughter was valuable for her contribution to her own family and will do so for his family, too. However, because Hmong life in America is much different than in the jungles of Laos where every family member had a role for its survival, the real intentions behind the dowry have changed. Hmong women growing up in mainstream America view a dowry as demeaning because of the monetary amount tied to their worth. Most young Hmong in America typically see the dowry as family greed that puts the couple in debt before they are married. They see the dowry as less about a bride’s worth and more about families trying to keep or retrieve “their money.” With this project, I hope to encourage thoughts and discussions on this changing view of the Hmong dowry and its place in Hmong culture today.

## **Research Problem**

With this project, I will examine the Hmong dowry and its reflection of a Hmong woman's worth in the traditional culture and also how the meaning of the dowry has evolved with Western influence. The dowry is the money negotiated between the groom's and the bride's families during the Hmong wedding and given to the bride's family in exchange for her hand in marriage. There are symbolic and practical values in this dowry exchange. Traditionally, the dowry is a way for the bride's family to ensure that her husband-to-be knows the woman he is marrying is not "free" and, therefore, he needs to value her and the time and effort her family has invested in raising someone who will be a benefit to his household. For this project, I will create sculptural interpretations of the psychological impact a dowry has on Hmong women who grow up knowing that at a critical point in their lives – their wedding – they will be assigned a price tag. During the wedding negotiations, the dowry is referred to as the "nqi taubhau," which means "the price of the head." My artistic interpretation of the Hmong woman's worth measured by her dowry will be ten cast bronze and ten cast aluminum masks to symbolize this "price of the head" of Hmong women. They will be highly polished to give a rich, vibrant and metallic shine that conveys the "silver" and "gold" or money value to the face of each Hmong woman. In addition to the masks, I will also be making a total of twenty-five suitcases and baskets to symbolize the second half of a woman's worth at her wedding: what gifts her family will bestow upon her to bring to her new life with her husband's family. When the woman gets married, her mother will pack all of her traditional Hmong clothes hung with valuable coins into a basket (or presently, in a suitcase). These are the clothes that her mother has been preparing since she was born for this special day of her life. Not only is the bride's mother giving her all of these traditional clothes to use in her new life as a wife, but these items also signify how rich or

valuable a bride is by the number of clothing items with which she was gifted and how elaborate and expensive they are. These gifts in the baskets and suitcases are equally symbolic of her worth in the Hmong culture. In my project, the baskets will be hand-woven by me, the artist, using traditional Hmong textile. The suitcases will be wrapped and dressed in colorful fabric and Hmong needlework that symbolize the contents that they hold inside.

### **Student involvement/Project timeline and Educational Background**

I will be interviewing and talking to the Hmong community to further my research as well as interviewing the Hmong women in the community to hear their stories and discuss their ideas and thoughts on the dowry issue. Along with the verbal interactions, I will also be gathering books, articles, and other written information to read and study to help broaden my knowledge to enhance this project. Also, I will be attending wedding ceremonies to get closer look at what takes place during the wedding and the negotiation. To achieve this project, I will be spending 40 hours a week at the Sculpture Lab in the Art Department. I have worked in the Sculpture lab for three years now and am familiar with the equipment and tools. I have helped administer two bronze pours and one aluminum pour and have been taught the appropriate training to pursue every one of my propositions to complete this project to make it a successful show for Senior Exhibit Fall of 2010. I will meet with my instructor once a week to discuss my progress and evaluate how I am doing. This project is an ambitious one and will require a lot of time. Below is my timeline for the summer:

**Stage 1:** Interview, observe, gather information (including library and online research).

**Stage 2:** Acquire materials

Estimated Materials

-Bronze                      \$200

- Aluminum \$60
- Basket weaving material \$80
- Suitcase material \$60
- Hmong fabric \$100

Total: \$500

**Stage 3,4,5:** Molds for masks, Bronze pour, Aluminum pour, Clean and Polish masks

**Stage 6:** Make suitcases and baskets

### **Motivation and Outcome**

I am a young Hmong woman in America who is struggling to find the balance between my traditional upbringing and my Westernized world-view. In a way, I am still trying to figure out my self-worth, not to other people or what they may think I'm worth, but what am I to me. I am very passionate about this project and it is a very personal project. Not only will I be dealing with this when I decide to get married, but I have known and witnessed a lot of close friends and relatives go through this evaluation of themselves when their dowry price was being determined. I want to shed some light on this issue through my sculptural pieces and allow people to ask some questions themselves of what exactly the traditional practice of marriage dowry is trying to measure – is it the worth of a woman or something else? By having this exhibit be shown publically at one of the UW-Oshkosh galleries this coming fall and the UW Oshkosh Celebration of Scholarship Event in spring, I hope to make people aware that, what seems to be an ancient practice, is still used today and it continues to shape the lives of many Hmong women who are otherwise very Westernized.

As a Hmong female artist, I want to speak up about a traditional belief that has been set in place by a patriarchal culture and address a topic that has a very different meaning when set in the context of women raised in a women-empowered country like America.

## **Mentor Statement**

As PaShoua Vang's Sculpture Instructor, I am honored to serve as her mentor for an Undergraduate Student / Faculty Collaborative Research Grant.

PaShoua began to think about her concept last semester and realized that this research could reach way beyond the classroom. She began to articulate her ideas visually and verbally finding that her presentation generated a lot of questions and interest from her peers who were not part of the Hmong community. The subject matter and content were so pertinent to PaShoua's life and culture that she envisioned a much larger and more public presentation that would reach out not only to her classmates, but the larger university and especially, the Hmong community. As her instructor, I encouraged her to pursue the larger project.

The one factor that inhibits most research projects is the funding. This pursuit is no different. PaShoua is willing and able to carry out the labor of creating and installing the physical project as well as doing further research regarding the concept and an appropriate presentation. The grant would give her the means to achieve her endeavor.

As her mentor, I would help facilitate the creation of the physical objects involved in the installation, some of the planning, and help her stay accountable to her timeline and specific goals.

In order to further be useful to PaShoua in the capacity of mentor, I am willing and able to be available to her for questions and discussion several times a week, including one regularly scheduled meeting each week. I can answer technical questions, direct her to helpful contacts and resources, encourage her during challenges that may arise, and advise her regarding composition of her installation and articulation of her research. Not Hmong myself, I also expect

to learn a lot from PaShoua's research and look forward with enthusiasm to the success of her project.