TEXTILES ALONG THE MEKONG

WOMEN FROM UPLANDS and lowlands along the Mekong River and its tributaries produce some of the world’s most beautiful and technically sophisticated weaving. The interaction between weaver, loom, and yarn results in textiles that are artistic treasures suitable for daily life.

Weavers use a variety of looms. Some weavers use back-tensioned looms: the weaver sits on the floor or ground, while her back, extended legs, and feet place tension on the warp in order to insert the weft yarn across the warp. The upright loom came to Southeast Asia about 1,000 years ago. The wooden frame of this loom creates tension for the weaving elements suspended within it and gives the weaver enough flexibility to create long pieces of cloth.

Traditional fibers for Mekong River weaving include hemp and other bast (woody) fibers, homegrown cotton, and silk from silk worms raised in villages. Today, some weavers also use durable synthetic yarn produced and dyed in factories. However, local yarns and natural dyeing are returning to the Mekong region as informed consumers request them.

The traditional dress for men and women of most cultures in Southeast Asia was a wraparound skirt and a shawl to cover the chest. Lowland women made men’s skirts of higher quality silk than they used in their own skirts. Men of the hills tended to wear loincloths that local women carefully designed and wove. Tailored clothing was more common among the Chinese of the northern Mekong, the Vietnamese, and recent immigrants to the region, such as the Hmong, Akha, and Nung, who were heavily influenced by Chinese practices. The blouses, shirts, and tailored trousers found throughout the region today are often inspired by Western definitions of modesty and modernity.