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THE ARTS OF APSARA

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The barefoot grandfather sits at his loom as though at prayer. He's entered a rhythmic world of wooden pedals and webs of thread, a magical sanctuary where vivid colors and rich silks are born out of his own hands.

They are the same powerful hands that harvested rice and built cow wagons in Cambodia during the late '70s. And they are the same powerful hands that carried his wife and daughter to their graves.

Like thousands of other victims of the genocidal Pol Pot regime, the two starved to death.

Thong Chhim's stories of despair and death can be repeated by most of the adults in the Cambodian community of Long Beach. He dreams of helping to patch the fabric of his war-torn homeland with his loom. At 73, he says, his pain is beginning to ease.

With the opening Sunday of Arts of Apsara, a cultural center devoted to Southeast Asian art, Chhim says, the best of his mother country will be fostered and preserved. The expression is gentle and warm when he says through an interpreter: "The tradition of weaving is like a monument for children, so they know where they came from. If I don't pass on the tradition, it will be lost.

"Tradition gives people hope."

The United Cambodian Community sponsors the gallery and cultural center, which will offer art exhibitions, programs in the performing arts, lectures, classes and a gift shop at its plaza headquarters on Anaheim Street.

The center is the only gallery in California devoted solely to the art and culture of Southeast Asia. For more than a decade, the United Cambodian Community, one of the largest refugee service agencies in the country, has encouraged artistic endeavors. Until now, most of the efforts have been piecemeal.

"We want to reinforce the cultural heritage of Southeast Asia, and to be a place where people in the community can go to be mentored in art and dancing and music and folk crafts," says Heather Green, a Long Beach artist who serves on the center's advisory board. "We're an archive."

Near to where Chhim sits at his loom, Vibul Wonprasat, a Thai artist, talks about his vision of bringing East and West together in contemporary paintings.

"If you don't know your past you are confused," says Wonprasat, an award winning Los Angeles artist, muralist and founder of the Vibul School of Painting in Marina del Rey. "I'd like to help bring art to children. Art helps people understand the past and compare their own culture to the new culture."

In his mural "East Meets West" at the Bangkok Market on Melrose Avenue in Los Angeles and in his other work, Wonprasat borrows symbols from several cultures - Shinto banners, renditions of Japan's Great Buddha, Korean costumes, images of the Great Wall of China

But it is the Apsara, the most widely revered icon in Cambodia, that will occupy his attention Sunday. The Apsara is the stylized dancing goddess whose image is repeated on everything from travel posters and billboards to the ancient stone walls of Angkor Wat.

The goddess's name was chosen for the gallery as a symbol of beauty and continuity. Ingrid Aall, a professor of Asian art history at California State University/Long Beach, says the Apsara has become Cambodia's national symbol.

"Cambodians are at home with her," Aall says. "Her allegiance is with dance. ... She is also recognized as the protector.

“The further people get away from their homes, the more powerful symbols become,” she adds. “Every culture looks for ideals. Because the Apsara is revered does not mean women in Cambodia are held in high esteem. There is always a great distance in symbols between reality and the ideal. But the more the ideal is venerated, the more it assumes stature, the more it is loved, the more it is relied upon for emotional release.

“It is through art that a culture very often finds its identity. Art is more accessible than language. Art making is an expression of people's survival techniques. The Apsara contains ‘trauma’ - vitality. She has become a symbol of the vessel of life.”

For Thong Chhim, it is the loom that has become the vessel of life. His mother taught him to weave when he was a young man in a village near the city of Battambang.

After fleeing the Khmer Rouge, he took up weaving again at a refugee camp along the Thai border. In the past eight years, he's taught about 50 people in Long Beach to keep the tradition alive.

“It takes years of practice to retain the skill,” he says. “My only students are over 40. Younger people think it takes too much time.”

Someday, he'd like to return to Cambodia to build a weaving school.

Since assembling his loom at Arts of Apsara in recent weeks, Chhim says several people have asked him questions about learning to weave. He is surprised and pleased by the interest.

Weaving helps to repair the spirit, he says. “To weave you need to have strong arms. You need strong feet. You need a strong mind.”

And you need powerful hands.