These design motifs are often found on many types of paj ntaub (pronounced pan dow) or flower cloths. Different Hmong groups have varied interpretations for these designs. Here are some typical designs and related information for understanding Hmong textile patterns.

**Centipedes** are known for their medicinal qualities and are highly respected in Hmong culture. The centipede (repeated zig-zag motif) is often used in borders on textiles.

**Chicken Foot** (chicken eye or tail)
These elements might symbolize family prosperity, respect, and honor toward ancestors.

**Diamonds / Triangles**
A diamond in a square can represent the altar maintained in the home, mountains, the imprint of the most powerful good spirit, or the floor plan of a Buddhist pagoda. Triangles are used to represent teeth, fish scales, dragon scales, fences, mountains, or are included in designs as protective barriers to keep evil spirits out.

**Elephant Foot**
Elephants are respected for their strength, and the Hmong avoid saying anything to hurt elephants lest they come and damage a family’s property. Some Hmong say that elephants lead dead spirits to the otherworld.

**Heart**
A heart pattern symbolizes protection and affection.

**House**
A Hmong traditional house is built so that a distant mountain can be seen from either the front or the back door. Before building a home, the Hmong dig a hole a few inches in diameter and place as many grains of rice in it as there are people in the family. If the spirits move the grains of rice in the night, another site must be chosen. Except in the lowlands, all houses are built with wood and bamboo, thatch roofs, dirt floors, and no windows.

**Maze**
A dream maze is a pattern of right-angle appliqués. Legend has it that a Hmong woman awoke from a dream to cut out this new and different pattern. This design also includes an ancient universal symbol known as the “happiness for all symbol” which was originally a symbol of peace, love, and happiness (this symbol was altered by the Nazi party in Germany and adopted by the party in 1935).

**Pumpkin and Cucumber Seeds**
Seeds symbolize fertility and good fortune. The pumpkin seed together with a snail pattern is often used on children’s hats. It is thought that young souls tend to wander and Hmong patterns could hold a child’s soul in its body until it is used to being in a new environment.

**Snail**
Snails are a symbol of family growth and interrelatedness. The center of the snail shell symbolizes the ancestors. The outer spirals are the successive generations and the double snail shell represents the union of two families as well as the spinning motion used in many spiritual chants.

**Star / Spider Web**
The eight-pointed star indicates good luck and is a protective symbol. Spiders are not removed from the home. Their webs are used medicinally.

(Design interpretation from www.HmongEmbroidery.org, pp. 78-87 of Teaching with Folk Stories of the Hmong, and pp. 11-12 of Folk Stories of the Hmong. Diagram from pp. 70-71 Michigan Hmong Arts: Textiles In Transition)
Use the Cloth as Community: Hmong Textiles in America works on view as inspiration to design an abstract pattern influenced by Hmong designs or sketch your favorite design from the exhibition here: