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Japanese Textiles: Three Ancient Art Forms

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Japanese Textiles: Three Ancient Art Forms

Abstract

This paper explores three distinct and distinctive textile production methods found in Japanese tradition. The beautiful art of sashiko—a singular quilting style-grew into an art form in the northern farms. Dating back to pre-history, the bound dyeing technique of shibori was refined in Japan. Another distinctive cultural art was Japanese weaving, including kasuri, a style of dyeing or painting warp and weft threads. In this study I was afforded the opportunity to experiment and try them firsthand, as well as research the traditional methods and history.

The textile arts have been rural-bound treasures for centuries. No matter the country, state, or region, we find incredible examples of high craftsmanship tucked away in some of the most unexpected and remote places. Japan is no exception to this rule of buried treasures which have been emerging over time. Holding the keys to three distinct and distinctive textile production methods, Japan is the mother of its own unique aesthetic heartbeat. In the northern farms the beautiful art of sashiko—a singular quilting style—grew. Dating back to pre-history the bound dyeing technique of shibori was refined. Another distinctive art developed in the form of Japanese weaving including kasuri, a style of dyeing or painting warp and weft. In this study I was afforded the opportunity to experiment and try them firsthand, as well as research traditional methods and history.

Sashiko, meaning “little stabs,” began as a simple running stitch method used on the coarse local bast-fiber fabrics to repair and strengthen garments (Liddell 13). The technique became more decorative when in the 18th century seafarers began trading worn cotton to the northern farms (Austin). According to Liddle, “...women had more leisure time, after they were released from the chore of stitching fabric together by the availability of cotton clothing,” (13). In the cold of northern Japan, even cotton considered too worn out by southerners was willingly recycled as a much softer and warmer material than the local hemp and ramie. Sashiko became a fine art as the geometric typically white-on-blue quilting craft became more intricate and precise on clothing, futons, and other everyday use items (Austin).

The craft itself is still in use today and, though a little obscure, an art that can be picked up easily by quilters, embroiderers, and other textiles artists. The technique is traditionally executed using a thread specific to the job, called sashiko thread, a long

needle, and a coin-like thimble which lies in the palm of the hand. Layers of indigo or other colored cotton sandwich an insulating layer. These layers are then basted to hold them in place during stitching. Contrasting white cotton sashiko thread is typically used to make running-stitches following grid-based or circular repeating patterns. Within sashiko there are two types; Moyozashi and Hitomezashi. Moyozashi is comprised of stitched lines which come together to make a larger pattern. Hitomezashi is a style similar to cross-stitch in that it is composed of small stitches a distance apart which work individually into a straight grid (Briscoe).

I took the opportunity to try my own hand at sashiko, and though I was initially intimidated by the neat precision of the examples I saw, once I chose and marked a pattern it was enjoyable and surprisingly simple to do. I adapted a traditional pattern called the hemp leaf to a single repeat on a small grid. Using a long hand needle from the local fabric store, no thimble, some cotton perle thread and a rectangle of dark blue cotton cloth I carefully followed directions from Briscoe's book. I managed to reproduce a fair imitation of the beautiful handwork of Japanese women from ages past, and look forward to carrying on the tradition in future projects. The stark contrast of white on deep indigo, the signature look of sashiko, I find very appealing in its simplicity.

Shibori dyeing techniques typically rely less on stark contrast for beauty than sashiko, though that element can be present as well. A remarkably diverse method of dyeing cloth, its origin is so ancient that it is still debated where it actually began to be practiced. Some of the earliest surviving examples of shibori in Japan date back to around 756A.D. (Wada).

Shibori is the practice of tightly binding cloth, (usually cotton or silk), with thread. This is called thread resist, as the thread-bound sections of cloth resist absorbing the dye. There are a number of ways to accomplish this including wrapping, folding, or stitching and gathering the fabric before applying dye (Wada 100-108). One of the most common techniques is to make little rings by pulling up small sections of the cloth and tying them into bubbles before dyeing. The result is an un-dyed ring where the cloth was tightly bound, usually slightly squared (Wada 13).

In my own experiments with shibori I was not initially very successful. The complexity of the chemistry involved was a whole new world to me, and a challenge to navigate. I attempted a pole-wrapping and scrunching method several times, a folded and dipped variation, and finally the common traditional bound small dots on several silk and rayon scarves. The first experiment dyeing over an existing color on silk washed almost completely out. In the second session I used a soda ash wash on clean silk and rayon, which took on the dye much better. With guidance and experienced supervision I eventually did come out with many more successful projects than I had planned to undertake at the beginning, all unexpected in their results. Having tried shibori dyeing I am not confident that I could succeed again. It is a challenging but rewarding medium. The appearance of the finished products from this style of dyeing can be surprising. Unplanned variations and pattern details often emerge even in a precisely planned project, and are a wonderful part of the art of shibori dyeing (Brito 13).

Kasuri is another art of the precisely imprecise, and much of its charm and character is defined in its variation. Kasuri patterns are often unique to, or associated with, their region of origin (Marshall). Each locality has its own specialty, and the rural

nature of the art's diversity is a tribute to the organic growth of these art forms at hearth-sides, in towns, cities, and country homes over the centuries. Kasuri, (also called ikat), is often sewn into informal cotton kimonos. Worn by both men and women, these kimonos called yukata are often made of cotton and in the past the fabric has commonly been woven using in-home backstrap looms (Marshall). This plain woven fabric is characterized by soft fuzzy looking edges around the woven-in patterns due to shifting of the individual threads in the weaving process.

Using the same binding technique as shibori, in kasuri warp or weft threads are bundled together and tightly wrapped with string in various patterns of stripes. After being dyed, the threads are un-bundled and offset from each other on the loom to form various patterns. In this way a simple, plain weave can create interesting and diverse contrasting patterns in the cloth. In kasuri there are three types of weaves; Tate-gasuri which means the warp is dyed, Yoko-gasuri in which the weft is dyed, and Tate-yoko-gasuri in which both the warp and weft are dyed, giving the fabric stronger colors and even more intricate patterns (Marshall). I bound and dyed white warp threads with a bright blue dye in bold stripes myself, and rinsed out the excess dye. When the dyed warp threads were dry I wove a section on a makeshift cardboard frame. I used a traditional yabane, (“arrow” or “feather”), pattern arrangement of the warp threads, and succeeded in weaving a section until the pattern was visible.

Studying and working on these projects has been a wonderful way to discover first-hand what my Japanese ancestors have done for so many generations. Out of obscurity these dying arts are being slowly rediscovered as another generation reaches back through history toward art in an irreplaceable form. In each of these rich and

complex cultural traditions lie buried new and brilliant possibilities both for utilitarian use, and valuable self-expression. For several generations our eyes have been toward cities; industrialization, technological advantage, and a life of physical ease. In me and a handful of my peers, a tendency to turn our eyes back to the land, the home-based quality-driven arts, and almost anything that will allow us to work with our hands in the world we can see is re-emerging. It may be too slow in coming to save some of these old arts, but retaining these old-world skills is well worthwhile.

Quality standards are a constant battle in almost every area of industry, and with greater mass production we seem to lose that battle a little each day. While clothing more people effectively and quickly is an admirable aim in the textile industry, and many fields of work and study are benefiting from the rush forward, there is much to be said for hanging on to some of our old ways. Craftsmanship and pride in a job well done are ideals that have fueled our cultures since their beginning, and while increasing productivity can save us in many ways, the inspiration for these old arts was based in making beauty flourish out of our needs. Sashiko didn't have to be beautiful to keep us warm. Shibori takes more time than a plain dyed cloth. Kasuri is in no way necessary for life, yet each of these crafts is a reminder that even in economic difficulty we can create an environment that helps us to appreciate and enjoy the world around us.

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