

Mingei and the Buddha Nature

The Thomas Murray Collection of Japanese Folk Textiles

By Thomas Murray Photography by Robert Bengston

When Westerners think of Japan, they often will conceive of one of the world's most modern societies with huge metropolises, sushi, ninja computer games, and factories churning out state-of-the-art automobiles and cameras. Knowledge of Japanese history tends to be confined to Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai* and Richard Chamberlain starring in *Shogun*, the mini-series. This abbreviation is profoundly unworthy for this most fascinating and complex culture which has existed in a continuum for thousands of years. We must fight sloppy thinking of stereotypes with true understanding.

Art has always been the primary vehicle for the transmission of culture in traditional societies. It is, therefore, through the appreciation of Japanese art that we of the West can expand our awareness of contemporary Japanese identity. We become personally enriched with exposure to the underlying spiritual and intellectual themes which permeate Japanese aesthetic philosophy.



Conscious pursuit of this goal can be a daunting task. Where is one to begin? Every category of Japanese artistic expression is worthy of exploration. Ideally, living in Japan for an extended time offers the greatest opportunity to get to know temples, shrines, and gardens. Short of that, and fortunate for us, we have the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. There, one may have the pleasure and the privilege of viewing subtle masterpieces including ancient archeology, early Buddhist sculpture, Samurai swords, and calligraphy. A seminal exhibition on Japanese folk craft about a decade ago at The Asian helped visitors to appreciate the far less familiar arts and crafts traditions of common people, such as farmers and fishermen.

The exhibition explained the philosophy of Soetsu Yanagi who conceptualized the term *Mingei* (folk art). In his book, *The Unknown Craftsman*, he celebrates objects in daily use whose form was shaped by practical function and materials available. He gives voice to the underlying spiritual nature of traditional craft, pointing out that the anonymous artisan so often achieved a kind of unself-consciousness or perfection in his or her work, analogous to the ego-less Buddha. In this manner, we can recognize the nobility of folk art, which must take its rightful place in relation to the more classical Japanese art disciplines.



While that presentation was a reasonably thorough survey of Mingei, space did not permit the inclusion of many textiles. This necessary omission provoked curiosity within the Bay Area community about the breadth of creative expressions found in Japanese folk textiles; I would like to thank Caskey-Lees for their invitation for me to show my Japanese textile collection. This, I hope, in its own admittedly limited way, will expand upon that earlier museum effort and honor the 20 years I have been going to, and learning from, Japan.

My own association with Japanese art and aesthetics began in earnest with my arrival in 1982. I was invited to contribute Indonesian tribal art and textiles in conjunction with a Tokyo "for sale" exhibition on shamanism. I brought many things I thought would appeal to the Japanese market. In short order, I discovered all of my preconceptions of what they would like were ill-founded. At first, I didn't sell a single piece. I recall the stinging rebuke, "This is European taste, but we are Japanese, and therefore, we have Japanese taste!" I was so depressed I felt like going home immediately. But instead, through the persistent hospitality of Japanese friends, I ended up staying a year. To afford this, it pained me to sell my masterpieces at deep discounts to get enough money to eat the cheap noodle soup available at stands under the railways. But I learned.

I have returned regularly ever since, each time with a sense of wonder at the deeper beauty I have come to know, as Japan has "opened her kimono" to me, so to speak. Throughout the years, I have collected costume and textiles as a means of coming to understand what "Japanese taste" really means. I have discovered that through this narrow aperture one can develop a very broad view.



Mingei textiles are very collectible and have been so for a long time. Therefore, availability has always been a problem. The pieces that I

show here reflect this difficulty in combination with aesthetic choices made through a lens of personal subjectivity. This collection is neither comprehensive in decorative techniques nor exhaustive in sheer variety of possible types. However, it does offer insight into the inspired works of the unknown craftsman. I especially would like to encourage viewers to bear in mind Yanagi's Mingei philosophy while looking at the textiles and try to see for one's self the Buddha nature found therein. In the greater Zen-sense, we examine the whole object, the material from which it is made, the technique of its patterning, and the origin of its color. The Buddha is nowhere and everywhere, but especially in the details.

Materials that were worked with include natural fibers sourced from wild plants, such as *fuji* (wisteria), *kozo* (paper mulberry), *asa* (ramie and hemp), *bashofu* (banana leaf), and *ohyo* (elm bark). Cotton was introduced from India in the 15th century and received wide-spread acceptance because of its greater warmth and insulation. Silk was normally restricted to the high castes, however broken and discarded cocoons (known as *tsumugi*) were salvaged by commoners. Clothes were used until they became rags, then rags were either rewoven (*saki-ori*) or stitched together into yet more cloth, early recycling. Deer and fish skin were also sometimes used. Unlike animal fiber protein, dye does not take easily to plant fiber and, therefore, colors were restricted. Indigo is a beloved color in Japanese custom and has the added benefit of being resistant to insects. Walnut, oak, and chestnut provided browns and grays. Red, yellow and black came from natural pigments. Patterning techniques include the famous *kasuri* (ikat) which could be single or double and was introduced from SE Asia by way of Okinawa. Batik-like *norizome* (rice paste-resist) could be painted free-hand from a tube (*tsutsugaki*) or applied to the textile through stencils, a technique known as *katazome*. Perhaps the most spectacular example of this is *bingata*, the brilliant-colored textiles of Okinawa. Embroidered quilting, known as *sashiko*, contributes both beauty and strength to costume and textiles. *Shibori* is the name of tie dye used to such great effect, with patterns accomplished in tiny knots or big, bold ties creating strong graphics. Finally, the Ainu of the far north are famous for their appliqué and embroidered graphic designs on robes that are known offer talismanic protection.



I hope this presentation stimulates interest in Japan, and her textiles in particular. Collecting them has greatly enriched my life. For this I am most grateful.

For those interested in further study, I would recommend the following materials:

Beyond the Tanabata Bridge: Traditional Japanese Textiles, by William Jay Rathburn (New York; Thames & Hudson in association with the Seattle Art Museum, 1993)

Japanese Country Textiles, by Anna Jackson (Victoria and Albert Museum, 1997)

Japanese Folk Textiles, An American Collection, Hanten, Atsushi, Kataginu (Shikosha, 1987)

Mingei: Japanese Folk Art from the Montgomery Collection, by Robert Moes and Amanda Mayer Stinchecum (Alexandria, Virginia: Art Services International, 1995)

Textile Art of Okinawa, by Reiko Mochinaga Brandon and Barbara B. Stephan (Honolulu Academy of Arts, 1990)

PHOTO CAPTIONS

2. Unlined Robe (detail), Okinawa, Japan. Bashofu banana fiber, kasuri double ikat. Edo/Meiji P
3. Nobori, Festival Banner, Kyoto or Tokyo, Japan. Cotton, tsutsugaki freehand resist, painted p
in.
4. Festival Robe with family crests (mon kasiwa), Japan. Cotton, tsutsugaki freehand resist, pai
5. Yogi, Sleeping Garment, Shimane prefecture, Japan. Cotton, tsutsugaki freehand resist, quilti



Woman's Coat (detail), Tohoku area, Japan.
Asa fiber, cotton, sashiko embroidery, katazome stencil resist.
Late Edo/Meiji Period, 19th century.



Under Kimono (detail), Japan.
Cotton, katasome stencil resist.
Meiji Period, late 19th/early 20th century.

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