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1992

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SASHIKO: A STITCHERY OF JAPAN

The term *sashiko* refers to the stitching of one or more layers of cloth with a simple running stitch and can also apply to the completed fabric. *Sashiko* is the noun of the verb *sasu*, meaning to pierce. *Sashiko* probably was initially a way to recycle or extend the life of cloth. Among the textiles in the Shoso-in, the Imperial Repository built circa 752 to preserve thousands of objects of art and other belongings of the Emperor Shomu, is an 8th Century "distant mountain" pattern monk's robe covered with a purple silk running stitch. This running stitch is superfluous to the actual structure of the robe. This is a development of an earlier ritual robe, evolved to the point where the stitches have lost their original function to strengthen and attach the patches of cloth, but retained to give the appearance of the original "robe of rags." This is the oldest example of *sashiko* extant in Japan. There is a gap in recorded history from this point until the 17th Century when other *sashiko* are mentioned.

Sashiko was done throughout Japan, primarily by women. It is not known to have been done commercially with the possible exception of some of the firemen clothing. Often it was done by and for people who were too poor to buy new cloth. *Sashiko* developed from necessity rather than as a luxury, so the art of *sashiko* wasn't highly competitive, with some exceptions. That is, the product was not regarded as a statement of fashion. Originally a practical technique for making cloth thicker, warmer, and more durable, *sashiko* can also be purely decorative. Clothing that has been over stitched is not only very strong, but warm. Therefore, it was reasonable to reinforce the cloth by stitching before the cloth wore out. Presently it is done on new cloth, for garments and textiles to be sold in folk craft shops.

Typically, *sashiko* stitching is done with white cotton thread on an indigo-dyed fabric. Most *sashiko* uses one strand of thread through the needle, doubled so that both strands account for the

stitch although it can be done with a single strand. The length of the stitch varies with the number of layers being stitched together. Keeping the stitches even in length, as well as straight, requires skill and practise. There are approximately five to ten stitches per inch (five to ten stitches per 2.5 cm.) with certain districts noted for having particularly fine stitching. *Sashiko* was done on balanced weave textiles, that is the warp and weft are the same thickness and weight of thread. Although the ground fabric threads were not usually counted, the stitches were. Within a pattern, per line, the same number and length of stitch is held constant and is consistent (from point A to B are always x number of stitches and the length of each stitch is held constant). Many patterns consist of straight lines that intersect at right angles, so counting the stitches made the patterns quite exact. At the point of intersection either the stitching threads cross creating a pattern, or the absence of the threads create a pattern such as a star or the center of a flower. *Sashiko* can be either a single repeating pattern or a combination of several patterns on one fabric.

The most notable *sashiko* styles developed in Tohoku, the northern part of Japan's main island (including Aomori, Iwate and Yamagata Prefectures). Historically, in this area most of the cloth was made from ramie or hemp. The climate of much of Tohoku was suitable for growing ramie or hemp rather than cotton, so the people were often restricted to the fibers they could grow. This was due to the cost of importing cloth from a different region, as well as government laws restricting the use of certain fibers within social classes. "...in 1643 the government issued a proclamation concerning farmers' clothing which limited...ordinary farmers to hemp¹ [ed. note: and ramie?] and cotton..."² There are regional and technical distinctions of *sashiko* styles within the Tohoku area, often reflecting differing social and economic conditions. This essay discusses four of these distinctions, as well as the *sashiko* of the firemen clothing.

1 Although this publication was in English, translated from Japanese, I assume the character being translated for hemp was *asa*. This refers to a bast fiber, such as hemp (*Cannabis Sativa*) or ramie (*Boehmeria Nivea*) and can be read either way. This confusion is frequent, and often mistakes are made.

2 Terry, Charles (trans.), *Japanese Life and Culture in the Meiji Era*, ed. Keizo

Shibusawa (Tokyo, Japan: The Toyo Bunko, 1969), Vol. V *Life and Culture*, p. 21

TSUGARU SASHIKO

Tsugaru is a mountainous area with a wet climate, quite suitable for growing rice. This ability added considerable economic stability and helped the area become prosperous. The people had money so were able to trade with the more cosmopolitan southern area (Tokyo), and this included cloth. The expense of "imported" cloth from other areas in Japan was not an obstacle. Ramie, hemp and cotton were used for the base fabric, often with a variety of techniques (tie dye, ikat, stencil dyeing).³ The thread of Tsugaru *sashiko* was white cotton in either a horizontal or vertical running stitch or a combination of both. The main color of the base fabric was dark indigo blue. The darkness of indigo depends on how many times the threads have been dipped in an indigo dye vat. Although the Japanese used a group of indigo vats with multiple dippings rather than one strong vat, a large quantity of indigo was needed to achieve a deep color. This greater expense for indigo didn't bother the people of this area of relative wealth. The *sashiko* was over two layers of fabric, usually with new cloth on the outside and old cloth on the inside. Most of the *sashiko* clothing of Tsugaru were kimono (this term is used to represent an outer wrap such as a coat) or vests.

Kogin stitching developed from *sashiko* and is found only in Tsugaru. It is a counted thread embroidery based on the diamond unit, and is over and under an odd number of warps. In order for the elongated diamond to be created, the base fabric must be an uneven weave: there are more warps per inch than wefts. *Kogin* can refer to both the action and the finished fabric. *Kogin*, initially *koginu* or *kogino*, is a word native to the Tsugaru Peninsula, and referred to a rough woven cloth, dyed with indigo, with or without stitches.⁴ To distinguish those cloths with stitching, they were called *sashi-kogin*. *Kogin* stitching was done on ramie or hemp fabrics. In the Tsugaru area, ramie grew wild and eventually became cultivated, as was hemp.⁵ Muraoka, among others, has said that the first *kogin* were reported to be hemp or ramie thread on a base fabric of hemp or ramie. Cotton threads appear after the Kyoho era (1716-1736).⁶ Cotton is easier to sew with than ramie or hemp and much softer.

³ Horiuchi, Toshiko. "Tsugaru to Nanbu no Sashiko (Sashiko from Tsugaru and Nanbu)" *Senshoku no Bi* (Textile Art Magazine), (Vol. 9; Kyoto, Japan: Shikosha) 1981. p 90

⁴ Muraoka, Kageo. "Tsugaru no Kogin (Sashi-kogin from Tsugaru)", *Kogei* (Craft), (Vol. 14; Tokyo, Japan) 1932. p 21.

⁵ Ibid.. p. 27

⁶ Ibid., p. 27.

⁷ Muraoka, op. cit., p 35.

Although people wore layers, to have a garment reinforced with cotton threads certainly added warmth and comfort. *Kogin* stitchery became quite formalized and is said to have become quite competitive, or a garment of fashion. *Kogin* embroidery traditionally was only done on kimono, although today one can find door curtains, placemats, bags and slippers with a number of threads and fabrics used. A woman's dowry would always include five to seven finished *kogin* garments. *Kogin* kimono were worn both for everyday and festivals. *Kogin* patterns have regional distinctions. There are three regional styles of *kogin* garments: east, west, and three stripe. These distinctions refer to east of, west of or at the mouth of the river Iwaki, a river running through the center of the Tsugaru Peninsula. East *kogin* garments use a combination of large patterns and west *kogin* garments use a combination of small patterns with horizontal stripes on the shoulder. West *kogin* garments usually have different patterns on the front chest area, sometimes as many as six. The three stripe style also has different patterns on each chest area and three stripes on the back. Muraoka discusses the design distinction, writing that the cat's foot pattern (*neko no ashi*) and the sword blade pattern (*sayagata*) were particular to the east side and the abacus stitch (*soroban zashi*) was particular to the west side. It usually took about 7 to 10 days to stitch a *kogin* panel approximately 13" by 40" (33 cm x 100 cm).⁷

NANBU SASHIKO

The *sashiko* of the Nanbu area of northeast Aomori and northern Iwate Prefectures was bright and simple. The land is very dry and not conducive to growing rice. Rice contributed significantly to a region's wealth, and hence this area was quite poor. The base fabric of Nanbu *sashiko* was a light blue ramie or hemp.⁸ The light color, (produced by only a few dippings in the indigo vat) was an economy measure. A deep blue fabric, usually cotton, was often layered over the shoulders and edges of a garment. This area of two layers of fabric, and the entire garment, was stitched with a dark blue cotton, ramie or hemp thread. The contrast of the dark blue fabric and thread on a light blue base fabric creates the feeling of a very light and modern design. The *sashiko* was done

⁸ Horiuchi, op. cit., p. 89

in a simple horizontal running stitch and was done on trousers, kimono and vests.

Another type of *sashiko* that comes from the Nanbu area around Hachinohe is *hishizashi*. It is a counted thread embroidery based on the diamond unit, as is *kogin*, but it is over and under an even number of counted warps. Originally three colors were used with this technique: the base fabric a light blue ramie or hemp and the stitching done with dark blue and white cotton threads.⁹ Only one layer of fabric was ever used. Hachinohe was a port, a "gateway", to the north (Hokkaido) and the south (Tokyo and Osaka). Being on the trade route brought many different items. In the early twentieth century, chemical dyes and wool yarns were introduced to the Nanbu area.¹⁰ The land around Hachinohe was very dry, with many earth tone colors. The contrast of the bright colors available with chemical dyes, and the browns of the land, was quite striking. Examples of these brightly colored aprons are often disregarded by people in the West as being garish and as a result this category of *sashiko* is rarely seen outside of Japan. As was all the *sashiko* of Nanbu, the technique of *hishizashi* was used on a variety of garments, and sometimes covered the entire garment. It became increasingly formalized and competitive in the same manner as *kogin* embroidery.

SHIMOKITA SASHIKO

The *sashiko* of Shimokita Peninsula, in Aomori Prefecture, was made by and for the people of the fishing industry. It typically was dark blue cotton stitching on dark blue cotton fabric. The needle is pushed perpendicular to the base fabric, coming out of the fabric with each stitch.¹¹ This is in contrast to the method of in and out of the fabric several times with one push of the needle. This manner used more thread for *sashiko* and gave the garments a thick, heavy feeling. This area was economically sound in the 19th Century and could afford extra thread for stitching, as well as the large quantity of indigo needed for dyeing the threads and the base fabric a deep color.

⁹ Muraoka, op. cit., p 46.

¹⁰ Muraoka, op. cit., p. 46.

¹¹ Horiuchi, op. cit., p 90.

SHONAI SASHIKO

The characteristic feature of the Shonai Plain *sashiko* in Yamagata Prefecture are the geometric designs. The base fabric is a plain, dark blue cotton and the *sashiko* stitching, over one or two layers of fabric, is either white or dark blue cotton. When facing the textile, first the stitching is done right to left and then top to bottom, the same way the printed page in Japanese would be read.

SASHIKO OF THE FIREMEN CLOTHING

The *sashiko* of the firemen coats, and accompanying clothing, is particular to the use of the garment rather than to a district distinction. Firemen coats are two or three layers of cotton, stitched with a vertical running stitch over 100% of the garment, generally with six or seven stitches per inch. Fires in Tokyo were fought by samurai fire fighters, feudal lord fire fighters, retainer fire fighters and townspeople fire fighters. Only the townspeople fire fighters (the *machibikeshi*) wore stitched garments. These townspeople fire fighters were established in 1718 and the outfit gradually developed from that time. They wore underwear, a hood, a short coat, long coat, pants, and mittens. The entire outfit was covered with *sashiko* stitching. "...they put on quilted protective underwear, a quilted long coat which covers their bodies through their knees, a regular coat over it, long socks on their feet, quilted mittens on their hands, and a 'cat' hood which covers the whole head and chest except eyes and has especially thick cloth at the top."¹² When the firemen arrived at the scene of a fire "they poured water over themselves...A total weight [of the soaked clothing] at this time was said to be about 70 pounds."¹³ This measure greatly reduced the heat felt while fighting the fire as the method for firefighting was to pull the building down with long hooks to prevent the fire from spreading. The extra fabric and stitching was absorbant and cooling. The fabric of this clothing, except for the advisors and the team head garments, was cotton and predominantly dark blue as was the stitching thread. Sometimes the base fabric is brown or gray, with brown or gray stitching thread. There is an example of the thread used for stitching changing color from blue to brown, to give the effect of a striped base fabric in the collection of Harold and

¹² Kuniyasui, Sakai. *Edo No Hanabana Towazu Katari* (Speaking On All Matters of Edo Fire Fighting), (Tokyo, Japan: Nikkeijigyo Shuppansha, 1980), p. 100.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 100

Gertrud Parker of California. The underwear was shirt length, and was one layer of cotton with a vertical *sashiko* stitch. On the lower third of the underwear, the stitching was often in large X patterns. The hood and mittens were two layers of cotton generally with four stitches per inch. The pants were one layer of fabric with dense *sashiko* stitching over the legs.

From its conception, *sashiko* was a practical technique, an economic necessity in extending the life of a garment or cloth. Initially, no *sashiko* was done solely for decorative purposes. Regardless of the *sashiko* style, the garments were never made for sale. Second hand clothing was not considered an option, so the wearer reflected the pride of the stitcher, someone within the family. In this way, the stitching could boast of the makers skill and mental ability. With *kogin* and *hishizashi*, the stitching had precise rules, partly governed by the counting of the stitches. This led to a more formalized style of stitching. A woman's dowry would always include five to seven finished *kogin*. These *kogin* were thought to reflect the attitudes and mental skills of a potential bride. With an economically successful marriage at stake, a stitcher would strive to make the *sashiko* better than anyone else. As government regulations relaxed and people became wealthier, cotton and wool were brought to the area and stitched garments became old fashioned and represented poverty. For the last sixty years, *sashiko* has been a hobby rather than an important necessity of life. It can be found on new garments and textiles made from a variety of materials including synthetic and metallic threads. Today it is found for sale in folk-craft shops following the tradition of *mingei*. It is also incorporated into designers clothing, adapting to use in a modern, technological world.

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This paper is taken from an essay, "Sashiko: A Stitching of Japan", to be published in the catalogue **Beyond The Tanabata Bridge: Textile Journey In Japan**, an exhibiton organized by the Seattle Art Museum opening in the Fall of 1993.