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Bureaucratic Ideals and Artisanal Reality
Survival Strategies in the Production of Echigo *J u*
Melissa M. Rinne

The production of Echigo *j u*, a fine Japanese ramie textile, is in crisis. Woven on a body-tension loom from hand-plied threads and often incorporating detailed warp and weft *kasuri (ikat)*, Echigo *j u* is arguably one of the most sophisticated extant bast-fiber traditions in Japan, and perhaps the world. Media and researchers alike regularly laud its ancient production processes, but contemporary makers are facing the almost insurmountable challenge of remaining financially solvent in a rapidly diminishing kimono market, with an increasing scarcity of artisans. One reason that Echigo *j u* survives today is because it has been designated an important Intangible Cultural Property by the government of Japan. This designation, given only to a small number of outstanding craft traditions, stipulates adherence to a set of specific highly skilled and non-mechanized production processes. It is significant to note that four out of the five woven textile industries to which the government has granted this status require the use of labor-intensive hand-plied or hand-spun thread in both the warp and the weft. While the recognition and subsidies accompanying the Important Intangible Cultural Property designation have unquestionably benefited Echigo *j u* as a tradition, the high standards and expectations they have set for the industry have not always concurred with practical reality. At the crux of the problem is the fact that Echigo *j u* is made not by one artisan but by a complex system of divided labor. Each time even a single link is cut from the production chain of craftspeople, makers are forced to either discretely find alternative means and sources or face the very real prospect of losing their livelihood. Only after I had worked side-by-side for months with weavers and textile producers was it admitted to me that a dearth of local artisans has forced thread merchants to look abroad for hand-plied thread. Such alternative solutions are strictly guarded trade secrets known by almost no one outside the industry including the government, creating an ironic gap between surface image and inner reality. This paper will examine the significance of these changes and analyze their social and economic causes. It will then consider possible future directions and alternatives for Echigo *j u* and other Japanese bast-fiber textiles.

Melissa M. Rinne is curatorial assistant and Web site director at the Kyoto National Museum and research associate at the Nara National Museum's Buddhist Art Foundation. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Japanese Art History at Kyoto University, specializing in medieval Japanese Buddhist textiles and portraiture. Her interest in textiles began at Brown University, where she studied Guatemalan *huipiles* at the Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology. She spent two years in Japan as an undergraduate student, living in a small village for six months to study the bleached ramie cloth Nara *sarashi*. After graduation in 1992, she returned to Japan on a Mombusho scholarship to study Japanese bast-fiber textiles at Kyoto City University of Arts. During this time she was able to enroll in a select training course for weaving the fine ramie textile Echigo *j u* and lived for six months in the snow country of Japan Niigata Prefecture. She became the first foreigner to weave a bolt of the Important Intangible Cultural Property-designated cloth, the subject of her subsequent Masters thesis in Japanese. She received her M.A. in Art History from Kyoto City University of Arts in 1996.