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The Development of Quiltmaking in Japan since the 1970s

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Starting in the 1970s, traveling exhibitions of American quilts introduced Japanese audiences to what they perceived as a quintessentially American form of material culture. Since that time Japanese quiltmakers have adopted and adapted quiltmaking in ways that are highly influenced by American traditions yet simultaneously particular to Japanese culture. This paper examines the introduction, popularization, and diffusion of American quiltmaking in Japan over a period of forty years, documenting the appropriation of American aesthetics, the establishment of 'quilt schools' in the Japanese tradition, and the emergence of contemporary Japanese-style quilts through the analysis of literary evidence, fieldwork at a quilt school, and interviews with quiltmakers. Japanese women are now playing an active role in the making of a new hybrid quiltmaking culture resulting from the global circulation of quilt knowledge and information as well as the active flow of quiltmakers and quilts.

Quiltmaking is one of the most popular forms of needlework among middle-class Japanese women today.¹ Japan's estimated two to three million quiltmakers ranks it second only to the United States in the size of the quiltmaking population.² Another indication of the popularity of quiltmaking in Japan is the number of attendees at major quilt events. For example, World Quilt 98, held in Tokyo in 1998, attracted over one hundred thousand visitors in the four days of its run.³ The attendance at the Tokyo International



Great Quilt Festival, held annually since 2002, expands every year. Approximately 259,000 visitors attended the 2009 festival over the course of the eight-day period, an increase of 3 percent over the previous year.⁴ Some enthusiasts also participate in quilt-specific tours abroad.⁵ In addition, quilts by Japanese artists win prizes at various international quilt shows every year, and they are collected by major museums in the United States.⁶ In this way, Japanese quiltmakers today constitute a prominent quilt community both as participants and as workshop teachers, not only in Japan, but also outside the country.

Despite their conspicuous presence in the larger quilt market around the world, the tradition of contemporary quiltmaking in Japan is relatively new, dating only back to the early 1970s, when American quilts were widely introduced to Japanese audiences through traveling exhibitions, books, magazines, television dramas, and movies featuring snippets of quilts and quiltmaking scenes.⁷ Although patchwork and quilting traditions have existed in Japan for many centuries (plate 5), the quiltmaking style that many Japanese quiltmakers enjoy today was adopted from American quilting traditions. Since their introduction, quilts, once perceived as quintessentially American by many Japanese audiences, have become localized in the Japanese cultural context. Furthermore, Japanese women have contributed to the emergence of a new hybrid quiltmaking culture by rigorously pursuing cutting-edge designs, techniques, and materials through exhibitions, events, workshops, and publications available both in and outside of Japan.

This paper examines the history of Japanese quiltmaking tradition since the 1970s. Contemporary Japanese quiltmaking demonstrates that the American quiltmaking practice was developed and synthesized in Japan through a particularly Japanese teaching system and was transformed into a new cultural phenomenon that incorporates Japanese cultural values.⁸ Through the conventional teaching structure, Japanese women willingly embraced this newly introduced material form due to the increasing intercultural exchange of information compared to the early quiltmaking years



in the 1970s. As a result of the global circulation of quilt knowledge and information as well as the active movement of quiltmakers and quilts, Japanese quiltmakers are now playing an active role in the making of a new hybrid quiltmaking culture.

The development of quiltmaking in Japan can be divided into three general phases. The first, the 'Introduction' phase, roughly covers the period 1970 to 1980, when American quiltmaking was widely introduced to the Japanese audience for the first time. In this initial phase, many Japanese quiltmakers were drawn to both the striking visual appeal of American quilts and their historic and nostalgic associations to the American colonial past.

This introductory phase generated two major strands in the development of Japanese quiltmaking. One was the 'Popularization' strand, when the Japanese quiltmaking population increased rapidly with the availability of Japanese-language quilt magazines and the establishment of a major quilt school, which attracted a large number of students in the 1980s.⁹ Quilt schools and publications repeatedly emphasized the romantic image of American quilts to their audiences. Although the influence of quilt schools has somewhat waned in recent years, quilt schools continue to steadily attract students. The other is the 'Diffusion' strand that emerged in the 1990s and has continued into the twenty-first century, as Japanese quiltmakers began to explore individual aesthetic directions and to develop their own distinctive styles. While the romanticized image of quilts as representative of "old American culture" has by no means been superseded, the understanding of quilts in Japan today is becoming more diverse. More quiltmakers now venture into making less "traditional" quilts with individual aesthetic directions and distinctive styles that frequently fuse various cultural elements from Japan as well as the United States.

Introduction: 1970–1980

In the early 1970s, Japanese audiences accepted American quilts and quiltmaking as a traditional practice deeply rooted in the



American past. Although current scholarship refutes the origin of American quilts as emblematic of colonial American values of necessity, frugality, and resourcefulness, many Japanese quiltmakers and quilt viewers have embraced the association between American quilts and an idealized image of a simpler life in the eighteenth century. The Japanese who regarded America as one of the most modernized nations in the twentieth century paradoxically were attracted to a romanticized view of the American past.

American quilts were widely introduced to Japan for the first time in 1975 when the Jonathan Holstein and Gail van der Hoof Collection toured Tokyo and Kyoto.¹⁰ In light of a generally preconceived image in Japan of America as a technologically advanced nation, the impact of this exhibition was quite significant. Many visitors to the Shiseido Gallery in Tokyo examined the quilts in detail, paying attention to their designs and construction. Some even “came back day after day.”¹¹ Major newspapers as well as the leading contemporary art journal, *Bijutsu Techo*, gave favorable reviews of the show. According to Edward Ifshin, then the director of the Kyoto venue, visitors to this very first American quilt exhibition left comments such as “I had no idea these kinds of things were being done in America” or “We always had the idea that the U.S. was a wasteful society.”¹² The seemingly thrifty appearance of quilts contradicted the common perceptions held by many Japanese about American culture and society at the time.

Intrigued by American quilts, some Japanese women were inspired to try to make them. At this time, little information about quilting was available in the Japanese language, and only those with a strong interest in American culture and facility with the English language could access information about quilts. Some Japanese women managed to learn to quilt through trial and error by looking at magazines, movies, and television shows.¹³ Others, who were fortunate enough to take lessons directly in the United States, brought back quilting skills to Japan. In Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Erma Kirkpatrick taught quilting to the wives of Japanese graduate students for many years. Her students did not necessarily understand her *words* very well, but understood her



hands. One of her students even began teaching quilting in Japan after returning home.¹⁴ Thus, quilts also traveled to Japan via ordinary people who became interested in them during their extended stays in the United States.

Yoko, one of my interviewees who has been quilting since the early 1970s, reminisced about her excitement when she first learned about American quilts:

One of my relatives brought back a patchwork quilt from the United States. That was my first encounter with American quilts. When I saw it, I just could not believe such needlework existed there. Then, I learned about quilts more through movies and stuff. . . . I had already tried various kinds of needlework including knitting and embroidery, but I settled with patchwork in the end. I just fell in love with it.¹⁵

She further recalled that when she first started making quilts there were “absolutely no resources” about quilting and no teachers from which to learn. Despite the shortage of information, Japanese women like Yoko pursued their interest because they were deeply impressed with this new material form.

As a result of the rise of interest in quilts in the late 1970s, exhibitions, magazines, and articles on quilts and quilting in Japan appeared. These publications served as rare sources of quilt instructions and attracted a readership of young women and middle-class housewives. For example, one of the early books on American quilts in the Japanese language published in 1976, featured a dozen or so traditional quilts from the collection of Holstein and van der Hoof, along with instructions on how to make similar quilts.¹⁶ Most of the quilts in the book were what today are regarded as ‘traditional’ pieced quilts. Readers gained new ideas for decorating their modern Japanese homes with ‘old’ American decorative items that evoked charming historical scenes, such as a group of ladies merrily socializing at a quilting party.¹⁷

In addition to the quilt instructions, these publications also provided an anecdotal history of American quilts, reinforcing the image of quilts as devised out of the necessities in the daily lives of ordinary women in America:



American quilts are needlework that pioneer women began in snow-deep New England. They are thin bedcovers made for warmth during cold winter days, with patchwork and quilting. . . . It is said that quilts were patched with worn-out clothing stuffed with scrap fabrics, bird feathers, cornhusks, and even letters due to scarcity of materials. They never thought of using new fabrics because of severe poverty. . . . [T]hey were made from old clothes and scrap fabrics that were collected over a long period of time.¹⁸

It is doubtful that most readers knew where New England was or could date the colonial period. Nevertheless, the author emphasized that American quilts were reminiscent of the simple life of the past when everything was made by hand.

Similarly, the introduction to a 1977 quilt book, *Amerikan Kiruto* (American Quilt), told quaint, old tales to those who had forgotten “the joy of handcraft in the material abundance of modern days.”¹⁹ Kumai Akiko, a contributor to this book, referred to the novels, *Little House in the Big Woods* and *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, by Laura Ingalls Wilder, to explain how pioneer women gathered scrap fabrics and patched them together to make quilts out of necessity.²⁰ Many early Japanese quiltmakers also learned about quilting from novels and television dramas including the televised adaptation of Wilder’s novels, *Little House on the Prairie*, which was very popular in Japan at the time.²¹ Through these publications and television programs, Japanese housewives saw quilts as symbols of the humble lives of hardworking pioneer women.

Associations with the simple life were particularly appealing to Japanese audiences at that time. As modern technologies, many of which were introduced from the United States, were transforming their daily lives, some lamented the loss of traditional Japanese virtues of endurance and sacrifice. Many feared that affluent materialism and consumerism resulting from postwar economic growth would lead to emphasizing individual interest over collective benefit.²² Quilts were regarded as having the potential to ameliorate the social and economic uncertainties of the mid-1970s, even though these romantic and naive assumptions stood in stark contrast to the realities of contemporary American life. Furthermore, women in Japan willingly identified themselves with American ‘colonial’ quilt



history because it gave them a sense of comfort and nostalgia. Quilts seemed to offer a personal enrichment that was being lost in the increasingly mechanized way of modern living. In search for the bygone time when everything was handcrafted, Japanese quiltmakers appropriated American colonial history into their own culture by trying to faithfully reproduce traditional American quilts.

Not surprisingly, the authors of quilt books and magazine articles focused on the historical aspects of quiltmaking rather than on the contemporary or art quilts. They affirmed the significance of old, traditional patterns as *the* foundation for quiltmaking and encouraged their readers to empathize with the lives of the American women of the colonial era.²³ They suggested that in order to achieve authenticity in one's own quiltmaking, one had to understand the thoughts and feelings of the colonial women. These books and magazines repeatedly fed the romanticized image of quilts to the Japanese audience. Nohara Chuck, one of the most recognized and influential quilters in Japan, wrote in 1977, "American patchwork was developed by English settlers with scarce daily necessities. Old clothing was recycled into quilts primarily for warmth. . . . [American] quilts are still made with used clothes, thus have a distinctive appearance."²⁴ Although quilts in the American past were in fact often made with new materials, Nohara admired the frugal resourcefulness supposedly embodied in American quilts. Another article featured in a fashion magazine began with a reference to quilts depicted in *Little House on the Prairie*: "This quilt [in the novel] refers to a patchwork quilt. Female settlers brought patchwork quilts and the quilting tradition on the Mayflower. . . . During the time of material scarcity, women recycled old clothes, saved every scrap, and sewed them into quilts."²⁵

This image of the quilt as a frugal domestic object of the past is historically constructed. It began to be widely accepted during America's Colonial Revival period of the late nineteenth century.²⁶ The Colonial Revival sentiment, particularly the romanticization of quilts, has persisted well into the present day. The narrative of American colonial history, entangled with late-nineteenth-century fictionalized memories, attracted the Japanese audience. The pres-



entation of American history did not have to be accurate as long as the stories appealed to beginning quilters. This Introduction phase of the 1970s brought the attention of the general public to quilts and quilting as a form of quintessential American culture. In the following decades, as quilting gradually infiltrated into the lives of Japanese middle-class women, they began to adapt and interpret American quilting in ways that were unique to Japanese culture.

Popularization: Since 1980

By the early 1980s, the number of Japanese quilters had begun to grow significantly, due in part to the country's unique approach to teaching quilting through institutionalized programs. Unlike American quilters, who often learn to quilt through short-term classes and workshops, and from friends and relatives, many Japanese quilters learn quilting within an established organizational structure that administers teaching and certification programs. In particular, the certification programs offered by the Japan Handicraft Instructors' Association (JHIA), one of the major needlework schools in Japan, have contributed to the growth of quilting.²⁷

The JHIA, a non-profit foundation accredited by Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT), was established in 1969 to educate instructors who would promote a variety of needlework and crafts to middle-class women. In Japan, charitable corporations seeking legal status must: 1) operate for public benefit; 2) be non-profit oriented; and 3) obtain approval from the appropriate administration.²⁸ The mission of JHIA, which is to enhance cultural enrichment through handicrafts, places it under the jurisdiction of MEXT, specifically under the oversight of *Shogai Gakushu Seisaku Kyoku* (Lifelong Learning Policy Bureau).²⁹ The actual non-profit status of JHIA, however, remains somewhat ambiguous and complicated, due to the close relations it maintains with a parent commercial organization.



Seto Tadanobu, the founder of JHIA, became aware of public interest in needlework and crafts through his previous commercial publishing and distance-learning program, targeted toward female audiences. The commercial activity consisted of a distance-learning knitting instruction program, supported by the sales of related items such as books, materials, and tools for knitting. He came up with the idea of offering certification programs for a wider range of needlework techniques, knowing that consumers in Japan generally “like [to obtain] certificates.”³⁰ The knitting program served as the predecessor of the non-profit JHIA programs.

With the success of the knitting venture, Seto foresaw additional business opportunities for cultivating the larger needlework industry’s latent customer base. When the popularity of knitting began to decline in the 1980s, he sought a new kind of needlework that would attract more people to the JHIA’s certification programs. Seto’s educational programs resulted in an increasing number of needleworkers who, in turn, became potential consumers of his company’s products. Many women in Japan willingly accepted his program as a source of learning opportunities and professional development.

In 1986 the JHIA added patchwork quilts to its certification program, a move which contributed greatly to the development of contemporary quiltmaking in Japan. Other quilt classes were already in existence, including Japan’s first quilt school established by Nohara Chuck in the late 1970s. There were also a certain number of Japanese quiltmakers who had become well known as influential teachers among needlework enthusiasts in Japan by the 1980s.³¹ In contrast to these early teaching programs that were often sought out by those who had already developed a keen interest in quiltmaking, the JHIA’s patchwork quilts program appealed to a wider middle-class audience. Yoko, who herself was trained in a quilt school run by Nohara, remembers being invited to be a guest instructor by the JHIA:

At first, I was surprised to learn that the JHIA was starting the patchwork program. I thought it was too late [to enter the field]. After being



involved in their program as a teacher for a year, I was quite impressed with the JHIA's teaching method. . . . They did not target those who already had experience in quilting. Instead, they approached numerous ordinary women who wanted to try it. There was a great demand there. I thought, "Ah-hah. Their method and approach to quilts can really disseminate patchwork quilts."³²

Today, the JHIA quilting curriculum enjoys the largest number of students and instructors of all the needlework divisions. Because it is the only institution accredited by the Ministry of Education to offer certification programs in patchwork quilts, the JHIA is regarded highly by its subscribers and has certified over six thousand patchwork quilt instructors to date.³³

One of the most important features of the JHIA programs is its appropriation of a teaching method that has been utilized in traditional Japanese arts such as *ikebana* (flower arrangement) and *sado* (tea ceremony). JHIA bases its classes and certification programs on the model of the *iemoto* system, a traditional Japanese cultural teaching structure. The *iemoto* system is a hierarchical method that has traditionally administered the education and transmission of arts and related philosophies in Japan.³⁴ This system is based on the idea that a single family may claim to be the only true authority for certain artistic forms and philosophies. The family maintains the teaching institution, and its authority is usually derived from a charismatic master teacher, or *iemoto*, whose expertise is imparted to his or her students through strict training. The *iemoto* system highly values the attainment of flawless art forms, and training often involves repetitious practice carried out until students master fundamental techniques perfectly.

A distinctive practice of this system is that the *iemoto* not only certifies students at various levels of experience, but she or he also issues certificates to instructors. The certificate is proof that the instructor has achieved a certain level of skill and expertise. It, however, is not awarded automatically at the successful conclusion of the course of study. Once the students complete the required course training, they become eligible to receive a certificate; but, in most *iemoto* institutions, those who wish to be recognized as certi-



fied instructors must pay fees to obtain the certificate. These fees vary significantly from one art form to another, but they generally range from several hundred to tens of thousands of dollars.³⁵ Some institutions also require certified instructors to pay annual dues to maintain their status. Thus the *iemoto* and certified instructors share a mutually dependent relationship.

The *iemoto* maintains authority and ensures quality, strictly controlling who is qualified to receive certificates. In turn, the individuals who are certified to teach by the *iemoto* benefit because of their association with a well-known master teacher and a recognized institution rather than having to establish a teaching career on their own merits alone. The certificate is the tangible sign that enables these instructors to embody the *iemoto's* artistic principles and authenticity. Many Japanese cultural traditions, notably tea and flower arrangement ceremonies, have developed and diffused through this system with certified instructors who act as intermediaries between students and the *iemoto*.

Although not self-identifying as an *iemoto* system, JHIA has successfully adopted this traditional teaching method into its certification programs, including the quiltmaking program. As in the *iemoto* system, the JHIA curriculum provides students with a step-by-step instruction process so that they can acquire solid quiltmaking skills and techniques. JHIA certificates entitle individuals to teach quiltmaking using its original curriculum. The JHIA's quilt certification program remains one of the major authorities for quiltmaking instruction in Japan in the twenty-first century.

Although the popularity of the JHIA certification programs has waned in recent years, it continues to operate its school and to draw a steady number of students. In the summer of 2008, I had an opportunity to observe several quiltmaking classes and workshops offered for both beginning students and experienced instructors in Tokyo (fig. 1). The JHIA-certified instructors were teaching quiltmaking according to the same highly structured curriculum that had then been in use for more than two decades. During the coursework, students learned the fundamental technical skills required to complete a quilt, from drafting patterns and construct-



Figure 1. A lecture for the advanced instructor's program at the Japan Handicraft Instructors' Association, Tokyo, Japan. September 1, 2008.

Photo by the author

ing blocks to quilting and finishing the edges. The instruction was quite detailed. For example, the students learned how to use a calculator, compass, protractor, and mathematical formulae in order to draw geometric quilt patterns.

In fact, the emphasis on the ability to draft a perfect pattern is one of the aspects that clearly distinguishes the JHIA patchwork curriculum from average quilt classes. At an advanced workshop offered for certified instructors, experienced quiltmakers shared with me their opinions about JHIA teaching method. Reiko, who has been teaching as a JHIA-certified instructor, said she always tells prospective students to find another school if they do not want to “deal with drafting meticulous quilt patterns.” She confidently stated, “This is how my classes work, unlike other schools that may just copy patterns off the book or use commercial templates.”³⁶ Kimiko, who had gone through another quilt school's certification program before obtaining the JHIA certificate as an advanced quilt instructor, also affirms that the JHIA training is clearly different from that of her previous school in many ways. The school she first



attended “had no color study . . . but here, they even have an instructor who specializes in art. . . . [In the previous school] they let us use whatever colors we liked. It was not challenging.”³⁷

Students working toward an instructor’s certificate also seem to be content with the JHIA curriculum. After a day-long intense lesson, Yoshie, one of sixty or so students in the class, excitedly asserted that there is a stark difference between the JHIA curriculum and other quilt classes in “quality level and standard.” She continued, “Grading is quite tough. JHIA-certified teachers sometimes tell us ‘your skills are average . . . and nothing different from ordinary teachers out there.’ Such comments really motivate me to improve the level of my quiltmaking skills and techniques.”³⁸

In addition to the detailed technical aspects of quiltmaking, students also learn about the history of quilts. Their textbooks repeatedly emphasize that the quilts they are making originated in American cultural traditions. The instructors also share historical anecdotes related to the quilt patterns they are learning to make in the class. Many students learn what they know about American history and culture through quilts as described in the textbook and by the instructor. In this way, the JHIA constructs the image of quilts as quintessentially ‘American,’ and this concept becomes strongly embedded in the minds of the students as they progress through the certification program.

After completing the basic and advanced programs, individuals who wish to become certified quilt instructors—or simply want to further improve their techniques and skills—proceed to the instructor certification program. Regardless of their previous experience, students must have completed the basic and advanced courses before the instructor certification program. This is because the certification program is not only designed to teach technical skills in quiltmaking, but also to make students fully conform to the JHIA curriculum and philosophy when they start to teach quiltmaking as certified JHIA quilt instructors. Students in the instructor certification program also learn more complicated patterns and advanced techniques to perfect their patchwork skills. During the course of the program, the instructor is required to keep a report card for



Figure 2. A pile of assignments submitted as partial fulfillment to obtain the advanced instructor's certificate, Tokyo, Japan. September 1, 2008.

Photo by the author

each student. In this report card, the instructor assigns grades and offers comments on each assigned project. Students must get straight As through the entire coursework to be eligible to receive the instructor certificate. If the instructor gives a B, the student must redo the assignment in order to complete the coursework (fig. 2). Individuals who go through the certification programs devote themselves to quilting both physically and financially. If one wishes to receive the instructor's certificate by taking the intensive ten-month program at JHIA, the coursework fees are 100,000 yen (approximately \$1,000), and suggested material costs are 80,000 yen (\$800).³⁹ In total, it is likely to cost more than \$2,000 to become a certified quilt instructor. In addition to the cost of classes and materials, most students who complete the programs also apply for and pay for the certificate. The certificate for the basic program is 6,000 yen (approximately \$60), 8,000 yen (\$80) for the advanced program, and 30,000 yen (\$300) for the instructor program. These are just the prices for the physical certificate. While getting the instructor's certificate is more expensive than simply taking the course, many students value having visible proof of their successful completion of the required JHIA curriculum. From the



students' point of view, the certificate has various meanings. For some, it is a confirmation of their skills and techniques in quiltmaking. For others, it establishes the credibility and authenticity of their teaching.

The certification programs modeled after the *iemoto* system have had a great influence on Japanese quiltmaking. This incorporation of American quiltmaking into the *iemoto* system in Japan was perfected in the 1990s and remains firmly in place to this day, enabling the JHIA to produce a number of instructors and an even larger number of students. Most of these students continue to make quilts that closely adhere to the uniform curriculum, producing conventional quilts that resemble their American prototypes. However, during this popularization phase in the 1980s, while many quiltmakers preferred to emulate traditional American quilts (plate 6), others began to explore new artistic expressions, and quiltmaking in Japan expanded into new directions in the following decades.

Diffusion: Since 1990

As the popularity of quiltmaking continued to grow, creative and innovative Japanese quiltmakers looked beyond traditional American influences in search of different ways to express their craftsmanship and artistic abilities. Some explored design aesthetics inspired by their own culture. They began to incorporate traditional Japanese motifs, fabrics, and techniques—for example, *sashiko*, a traditional Japanese quilting technique—in their work.⁴⁰ Quilts made with old and new Japanese fabrics have transformed the familiar appearance of American-style quilts. Other quiltmakers also moved away from traditional hand-stitching and hand-quilting and started to experiment with machine work. Japanese quilts began to reflect designs, materials, and techniques drawn from Japanese indigenous textile traditions as well as fine craftsmanship cultivated through structured teaching.

A new category emerged in the Japanese quiltmaking setting:



Wa quilts (plate 7). *Wa* literally translates as harmony, but it also means Japanese-ness. It is difficult to define what constitutes a *Wa* quilt, but the sense of *Wa* is often manifested in the use of color and fabrics in quilting.⁴¹ They are often made from local materials such as delicate *kimono* silks or rich indigo-dyed fabrics, or are pieced or appliquéd with motifs such as cherry blossoms (representing the spring season in Japan), or cranes and turtles (traditional Japanese symbols of longevity). For example, “One Hundred Japanese Quilts: An Exhibition of New Works by Quilt Artists in Japan,” featured quilts which were entirely made from Japanese traditional fabrics.⁴² The exhibition toured not only throughout Japan, but selected pieces also traveled to twelve venues in Australia, Denmark, France, Korea, the Netherlands, and the United States, drawing more than one hundred and fifty thousand visitors.⁴³ These *Wa* quilts are recognized as quintessentially Japanese by both Japanese makers and international viewers; they have attracted diverse audiences through traveling exhibitions and publications, just as American quilts did in Japan in the 1970s.

When quilting was introduced in Japan in the 1970s, some Japanese writers insisted that everyone should emulate American quilts. They claimed that American quilts embodied a rich cultural history, while Japanese textile objects conveyed no history whatsoever. An article published in a major quilt magazine even stated that American quilts enabled people to learn about the circumstances, society, and life of people when particular quilts were made, while Japanese counterparts—bedding, *kimono*, and other textiles—in contrast conveyed nothing about Japanese history.⁴⁴ However, Japanese women have since learned through their own quilting practices that Japanese textile items, including quilts, do express the values of the culture in which they were made.

This shift in Japanese quilting was clearly noticed and appreciated by non-Japanese quilters. Karey Bresenhan, the founder and director of the International Quilt Festival, has observed the impact of Japanese quilters and their quilts at the Festival and other quilt events since the mid-1980s. She remarked, “Japanese quilters are still placing a great deal of emphasis on



handwork, whereas quilters in many other countries, including the U.S., are turning to machine quilting.” But she also acknowledges changes she has seen in Japanese quilts. “I’d say that the first quilts [entered for the contest in early years] were perhaps more strict interpretations of the traditional [American quilts], but today we are seeing wonderful art quilts—original designs—coming out of Japan.”⁴⁵

Some Japanese quiltmakers continually explore their artistic expression through new quilting styles and techniques. Sachiko, a certified JHIA instructor who is regarded as one of the leading quilt instructors in Japan, has mastered the art of machine-quilting. She first learned traditional quiltmaking, then became fascinated with contemporary quilts when she encountered the beauty of machine-quilted pieces at the International Quilt Festival in Houston, Texas:

I switched to machine-quilting about ten years ago. When I first saw [machine-quilted quilts] in Houston in 1997, I thought that the sewing machine could make quilts as equally beautiful [as hand-quilted pieces]. Then, I bought my first sewing machine in 1998. I had done all my quilts by hand until then. Japanese quilters are like that. They like handwork. They still prefer hand-piecing and hand-quilting. But my hands were getting sore by that time, so I make all my work by machine now.⁴⁶

Lamenting that many Japanese women do not appreciate machine-quilted work, Sachiko expressed her desire to share her skills and techniques in machine-quilting with a larger Japanese audience. In order to improve her artistry and skills, she actively participates in workshops taught by international artists not only in Japan, but also in the United States. She strives to acquire new techniques from leading artists and quiltmakers so that she may share them with her students and colleagues in Japan.

Like Sachiko, many avid quiltmakers now travel outside of Japan—generally to the United States—to learn new techniques and methods, view exhibitions, and purchase quilt-related products and publications. Bresenhan observed that when the Japanese quiltmakers first began attending the International Quilt Festival in the 1980s, they were mostly interested in buying “fabrics and supplies”



rather than participating in quilt workshops, primarily because of language difficulties. However, in subsequent years, as their numbers increased, the International Quilt Festival in Houston was “able to arrange special classes for them, many times with U.S. teachers and translators . . . at the request of tour organizers.”⁴⁷ Through their experiences at quilt-related events, Japanese quiltmakers have observed cultural differences between Japan and America, then reinterpreted and reflected their understanding of American culture in their works.

In addition to individual quiltmakers who visit the United States for quilt-related events and programs, quilt competitions and exhibitions organized in Japan also influence the global movement of quilts. In 1990 the JHIA inaugurated the first quilt competition in Japan. The “Quilt *Nihon*” exhibition, a biennial quilt competition, attracted more than four hundred submissions from all over Japan. The entries were selected by a panel of Japanese jurors with backgrounds in art, quilting, and related fields, with the addition of Michael James, an internationally recognized American artist.⁴⁸ The inclusion of James as one of the jurors for this inaugural Japanese exhibition served as a marker of its authority and credibility. Japanese quiltmakers experienced an unprecedented opportunity to present their quilts in a competitive exhibition juried by Japanese and American judges in their home country.

The “Quilt *Nihon*” exhibition’s success and reputation began to draw more attention from international audiences. In 1995 selected pieces from the first four exhibitions were exhibited at the International Quilt Festival in Houston. Asada Harumi, whose quilt received the Bronze Award in the fourth “Quilt *Nihon*” exhibition, attended the Houston Festival when her quilt was shown. She observed that many Americans were “carefully examining my quilts,” proudly displayed under the national flag of Japan. Her quilt, *Torima no Kami: Ougon no Kunikara* (The Gods of Tolima: From the Land of Gold)—an arrangement of traditional geometric blocks using fabrics sent to her by her friends in Japan, the United States, and Britain—depicted her memories of the time when she lived in the nation of Columbia. She was deeply moved when



Houston viewers asked a lot of questions about her work.⁴⁹ Within about two decades, Japanese quiltmakers have managed to localize the tradition that they once regarded as American and create works that appeal to people in other countries, including those whose cultures have had a much longer tradition of quiltmaking.

Forty years after the introduction of American quilts, some Japanese women are now making quilts with traditional Japanese design motifs, using fabrics such as elegant *kimono* silks and rich indigo cottons, and incorporating indigenous quilting techniques such as *sashiko*. Others are striving to utilize new skills and techniques that they have learned abroad in order to produce more innovative and creative artworks, often resulting in contemporary, or art quilts (plate 8). Quilts, therefore, have taken root in Japanese culture, as Japanese women developed personal and national connections to quiltmaking, incorporating familiar materials and designs into what used to be an entirely unfamiliar craft.

International audiences now have opportunities to view high-quality and prize-winning quilts from Japan, and to examine Japanese perspectives on quiltmaking at traveling exhibitions. Juried events such as the “Quilt *Nihon*” exhibition offer a glimpse into the artistic and technical standards expected in quilt competitions organized in Japan. Special exhibitions that specifically feature Japanese traditional motifs and textiles, such as the “One Hundred Japanese Quilts” exhibition, present ways in which Japanese quiltmakers interpret and express their own culture through quilts that reflect traditional Japanese textile tradition. Karey Bresenhan notes that quilt submissions from Japan in recent years reflect more Japanese aesthetics—in their innovative interpretation of traditional American quilt patterns and their subtle color palettes. Through the process of internalization of a new material culture, the practice of quiltmaking has now become a widely accepted form that reflects values and qualities of Japanese culture. The increasing global movement of quiltmakers and the exchange of knowledge between Japanese and American quiltmakers through exhibitions, publications, workshops, and events are transforming the meaning of quiltmaking in the larger quilt community.



Although Japanese textile traditions include a long history of appliqué, patchwork, and quilting, the beginning of contemporary Japanese quiltmaking developed based from American traditions. The first two decades after the introduction of American quilts to Japan saw the establishment of a firm groundwork for a new quiltmaking tradition in Japan. The establishment of highly structured quilt schools popularized and disseminated the knowledge of quiltmaking to a broader audience. Many women still prefer traditional patterns and hand-stitching because they believe that old pieced patterns and handwork are more authentic to the American quilt tradition. At the same time, some Japanese quiltmakers are exploring new ways to express their artistry and craftsmanship. Some began to incorporate traditional Japanese aesthetics and textiles into a new category of *Wa* quilts. Others broke out of the shell of conventional quiltmaking by exploring new techniques and innovative designs using extensive machine work.

This paper indicates that the development of Japanese quiltmaking can be further explored within the context of cultural hybridity and hybridization.⁵⁰ Néstor García Canclini has defined hybridization as “socio-cultural processes in which discrete structures or practices, previously existing in separate form, are combined to generate new structures, objects, and practices.”⁵¹ Deborah Anne Kapchan has argued that when “applied to expressive forms, hybridization may be defined as aesthetic process” that enables diverse cultural elements to coexist or combine, as well as to blend or to transform, into a new material or concept. In this process, makers of such hybrid forms are actively engaged and motivated in creative activity while accepting and incorporating both existing and familiar ideas.⁵² In the case of Japanese quiltmaking, the adoption of this needlework tradition was not a unilateral process in which American culture simply flowed into Japanese cultural settings. Rather, Japanese quiltmakers have taken an active role in the transformation and re-conceptualization of American quiltmaking due to the increasing intercultural exchange of information. Japanese women enthusiastically adopted American quilts, and then adapted and transformed them into Japanese quilts firmly



grounded in their own cultural settings.

Where does the Japanese quiltmaking tradition stand now? Are Japanese quiltmakers still producing quilts that reflect both American and Japanese (and possibly other) cultural influences? Have Japanese quilts become a category that can be recognized as a distinctive Japanese cultural product? How have Japanese quilts influenced quiltmaking in the United States and other countries? Much remains to be explored about the complexities involved in the development of Japanese quiltmaking practices. Further analysis of aesthetic changes in the actual quilts made by Japanese quiltmakers, as well as the traffic in Japanese quilts and quiltmakers around international quilt exhibitions, events, and workshops will contribute to a better understanding of the complex processes that have produced contemporary Japanese quiltmaking.

Acknowledgments

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Notes and References

1. While bed coverings are, of course, a universal form of material expression, in this paper, I use the term quilt, and its Japanese equivalent, *kiruto*, to refer to a particularly American form of material culture. I recognize that there are many Japanese quiltmakers who are based outside Japan and non-Japanese quiltmakers who produce Japan-inspired works, but for the purpose of my discussion, I use the term Japanese quiltmakers to refer to those who are primarily based in Japan, and Japanese quilts to refer to pieces produced by these Japanese quiltmakers. In this paper, Japanese personal names are written with the family name first followed by the given name in accordance with Japanese convention. Some interviewees are identified only by their first names. I presented an earlier version of the “Introduction” section at The Global Quilt: Cultural Contexts symposium at the International Quilt Study Center and Museum, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, April 3, 2009. I presented earlier versions of the “Popularization” section at the Traditions and Trajectories: Education and the Quiltmaker symposium at the International Quilt Study Center and Museum, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, March 2, 2007, and at the Textiles as Cultural Expression symposium, Textile Society of America, Honolulu, HI, September 27, 2008. Research for this paper included participant observation at quilt workshops and classes, and interviews with quilt instructors, students, and the founder of the Japan Handicraft Instructors’ Association in the summer of 2008. I conducted additional fieldwork and interviews in the summer of 2009 in Lincoln, NE, where a group of Japanese quiltmakers participated in quilt workshops. Interviews were conducted in Japanese, and I have translated these into English.

2. Sakata Hiromi, “Hedonic Consumptions about Patchwork Quilt 1: Research Question,” *Fudai Keizai Ronshu: The Journal of Economic Studies*, 52, no. 3 (2007): 489–90. Although this statistic has not been verified, several authors often use this number when referring to the population of quiltmakers in Japan.

3. Japan Handicraft Instructors’ Association, “History,” www.jhia.org/about/history.html (accessed February 21, 2010).

4. NHK Educational Corporation, Annual Report 2009, www.nhk-ed.co.jp/corporate/pdf/report_20.pdf (accessed February 21, 2010)

5. Popular quilt destinations include Paducah, Kentucky, and Houston, Texas, in the United States; Birmingham, England, and Lyon, France.

6. The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston acquired ten contemporary quilts by Nagano Tomie of Hokkaido, Japan, in 2008. Major quilt museums, such as the International Quilt Study Center and Museum, Lincoln, Nebraska, and the New England Quilt Museum, Lowell, Massachusetts, house Japanese quilts in their permanent collections.

7. Jacqueline M. Atkins, “Learning to Quilt in Japan,” *Quilters Newsletter Magazine*, no. 346 (October 2002), 49.



8. While it is impossible to generalize cultures, cultural processes, or cultural productions, all of which are influenced by complex factors, in this paper, I use the terms such as American culture, Japanese culture, American quilts, and Japanese quilts for the purpose of my discussion.
9. I use the term quilt school to refer to institutions and individuals that offer quilting lessons in somewhat systematic ways. While organizations such as Japan Handicraft Instructors' Association may have dedicated classrooms, individual teachers often run a quilt school in their home or at a cultural center.
10. The "American Pieced Quilts" exhibition was on view at the Shiseido Gallery in Tokyo for ten days in March 1975, and at American Center Kyoto for eight days in June 1975.
11. Jonathan Holstein, *Abstract Design in American Quilts: A Biography of an Exhibition* (Louisville: Kentucky Quilt Project, 1991), 100.
12. Edward Ifshin, letter to Jonathan Holstein and Gail van der Hoof, June 16, 1975. Jonathan Holstein, Quilt Papers, (MS 305). Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska, Lincoln Libraries.
13. Matsuura, one of the most recognized quiltmakers in Japan, discovered quilts through American movies such as *The Yearling* (1946) and *Little Women* (1949). Matsuura Kanae, *Momen no Shugei: Pacchiwaaku de Heya Zukuri* (Cotton Handicraft: Interior Decoration with Patchwork) (Tokyo: Fujingahosha, 1974), 120–21. Nohara Chuck, another famous quiltmaker and collector, also intently watched old American films looking for quilts. Nohara Chuck, *Pacchiwaaku Bukku* (Patchwork Book) (Tokyo: Seikatsu no Ehonsha, 1977), 5.
14. Erma H. Kirkpatrick, "Quilting is Taking a Trip around the World," *Lady's Circle Patchwork Quilts*, no. 20 (1980): 32, 60–1.
15. Yoko, JHIA quilt instructor, interview with author, September 1, 2008.
16. *Pacchiwaku Kiruto* [Patchwork Quilt] (Tokyo: Bunka Shuppanyoku, 1976).
17. Onoue Masano, *Tanoshii Pacchiwaaku* (Delightful Patchwork) (Tokyo: Ondorisha, 1976), 116.
18. Holthaus Fusako, "Amerikan Pacchiwaku Kiruto [American Patchwork Quilt]," in *Pacchiwaku Kiruto*, 36.
19. *Amerikan Kiruto* (American Quilt) (Tokyo: Bunka Shuppanyoku, 1977), 2.
20. Kumai Akiko, "Pacchiwaaku Kiruto ni Ai wo Nuikomete [Stitching Patchwork Quilts with Love]" in *Amerikan Kiruto*, 37–8.
21. The television series *Little House on the Prairie* aired from 1975 to 1982 on NHK, the Japanese equivalent of PBS. The series was so popular that it was made into an animated feature targeting a juvenile audience. Other novels popular among Japanese quiltmakers include L. M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* and its sequels.
22. Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present* (New York: Oxford University, 2003), 267–68.
23. "Mariner's Compass," *Kiruto Japan*, no. 3 (June 1987): 16–17; "Flower Basket," *Kiruto Japan*, no. 4 (September 1987): 14–15.



24. Nohara, *Pacchiwaaku Bukku*, 5–6.
25. “Yomigaeru Pacchiwaaku no Miryoku [The Fascination of the Revival of Patchwork],” *Saison de Non-no*, no. 10 (April 1976): 12–13. *Saison de Non-no* was a bimonthly fashion magazine published in Japan from 1974 to 1983.
26. For the Colonial Revival, see Alan Axelrod, ed., *The Colonial Revival in America* (New York: W. W. Norton, for the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1985); Geoffrey L. Rossano, ed., *Creating a Dignified Past: Museums and the Colonial Revival* (Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1991); Richard Guy Wilson, Shaun Eyring, and Kenny Morotta, eds., *Re-creating the American Past: Essays on the Colonial Revival* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2001). On the Colonial Revival and needlework, see Beverly Gordon, “Spinning Wheels, Samplers, and the Modern Priscilla: The Images and Paradoxes of Colonial Revival Needlework,” *Winterthur Portfolio*, vol. 33, nos. 2 and 3 (Summer/Autumn 1998): 163–94.
27. Seto Tadanobu, founder of the Japan Handicraft Instructors’ Association, interview with author, August 22, 2008.
28. Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication, Annual Report on Charitable Corporation 2004, at www.soumu.go.jp/menu_seisaku/hakusyo/pdf/koueki/040730_1_g1.pdf (accessed February 1, 2010).
29. www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/koueki/syougai/04.htm.
30. Seto interview, August 22, 2008. Seto started a for-profit distance-learning knitting instruction program in 1954 that attracted more than one hundred thousand students in its first year. The JHIA’s inaugural certification programs included knitting, lace making, and leather craft.
31. Nohara Chuck opened the first quilt school, Chuck’s Patchwork School, in 1977. Other quilt schools include Quilt Circle Kei, begun by Goke Keiko at her home in 1978; and Quilt Party, opened in 1985 by Saito Yoko, who began her career as quilt teacher at Chuck’s Patchwork School. These quilt school owners are also prominent quiltmakers.
32. Yoko interview.
33. Seto Tadanobu, “Attention to Our Members,” *Handi Crafts*, no. 19 (2003): 14. *Handi Crafts* is a monthly periodical published by the Japan Handicraft Instructors’ Association for its members. The June and December issues focus on quilts.
34. This distinctly Japanese teaching method is believed to have become firmly established by the eighteenth century. See, Nishiyama Matsunosuke, *Iemoto no Kenkyu* (A Study of the Iemoto System) (Tokyo: Azekura Shobo, 1982), 7.
35. “Gendai Iemoto Ko [Modern Thoughts on the *Iemoto* System],” www.kyoto-np.co.jp/kp/special/dento/dento206.html (accessed June 30, 2009).
36. Reiko, interview with author, August 22, 2008.
37. Kimiko, interview with author, August 22, 2008.
38. Yoshie interview.
39. The JHIA instructor’s certificate can be also obtained by completing the

Plate 1 (text reference page 33). Cover of the Spring 1928 issue of *McCall Needlework and Decorative Arts*, featuring a child's "Picture Patch Quilt," a transfer pattern designed by the Patchcraft Corporation (McCall pattern no. 1633).

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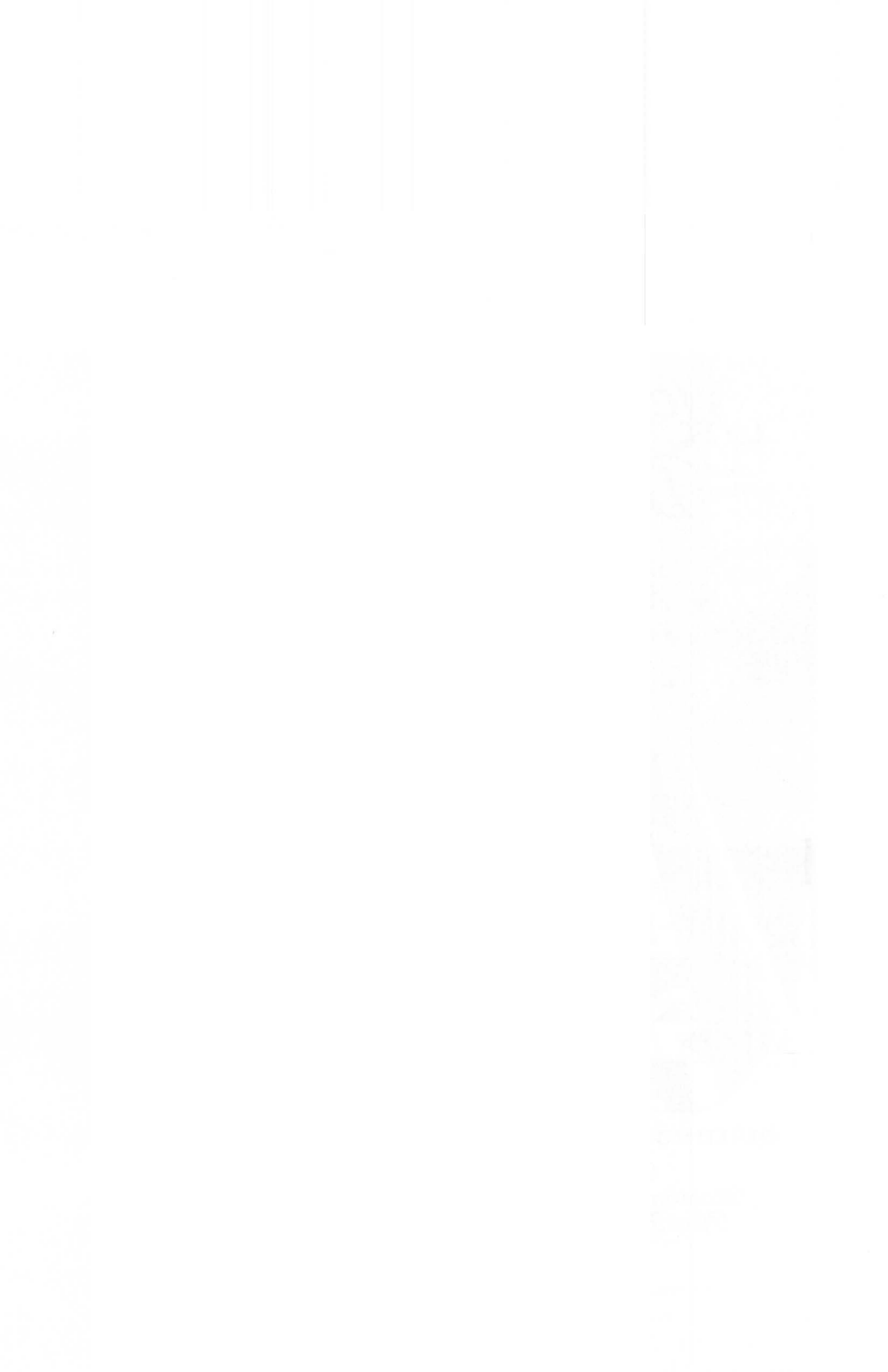


Plate 2 (*text reference page 65*). The indigo resist print at top shows the characteristic shade produced by the natural dye. The Prussian blue steam print at bottom shows the vibrancy of the mineral dye. *Collection of the author*

Plate 3 (*text reference page 75*). Tumbling Blocks bedcover, c. 1835. This unquilted, printed patchwork spread features the combination of buff and blue popular in this era.
Collection of the author

Plate 4 (text reference page 84). The quality of detail and color of the Connecticut cotton rainbow print from the Ward Signature Quilt, 1847 (top), is far inferior to that of a French cotton print from the Schlumberger sample book, 1844 (bottom).

Barkhamsted, Connecticut, Historical Society, 2007.032.001 (top); Musée de l'Impression sur Etoffes 2369 (bottom); photographs by the author

Plate 5 (text reference page 106). A remnant of bedding (detail),
early twentieth century, Japan.
Courtesy of Marin Hanson

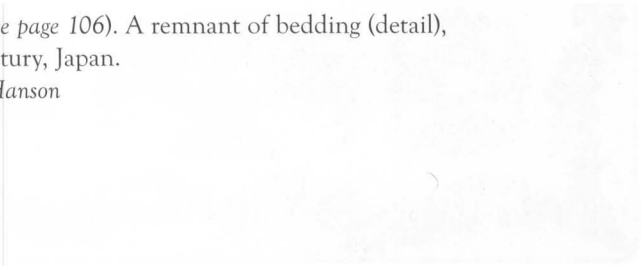


Plate 6 (*text reference page 119*). Baltimore Album Quilt II, Hirano Yukiko,
c. 2000, Kanagawa, Japan.

Image courtesy of the Japan Handicraft Instructors' Association

Plate 7 (text reference page 120). *Waon* (Musical Chords), Okamoto Yoko, 2004, Osaka, Japan.

Image courtesy of the Japan Handicraft Instructors' Association

Plate 8 (text reference page 123). Cosmos #6, Hatano Shoko, c. 2009,
Tokyo, Japan.

Image courtesy of the Japan Handicraft Instructors' Association

Plate 9 (*text reference page 133*). Silk Potholder Quilt, Sarah A Leavitt,
December 16, 1847. Silk and cotton; hand pieced and hand appliquéd;
58 x 64 inches.

Collection of the author; David Bohl, photographer

Plate 10 (*text reference page 140*). Log Cabin Potholder Quilt, Maine, c. 1880.
Cotton and wool; hand pieced and quilted; 81 1/2 x 81 1/2 inches.
Collection of the author; David Bohl, photographer

Plate 11 (*text reference page 147*). Locke quilt; inscribed dates range from December 1837 to March 1838. Cotton and linen; hand pieced, appliquéd, and quilted; 50 x 71 inches.

Concord Museum collection, Concord, MA, #T1822; David Bohl, photographer

Plate 12 (*text reference page 155*). Portland Ladies' Aid Society Civil War potholder quilt, 1865. Cotton, silk, and silk embroidery; hand and machine pieced, appliquéd, and quilted; 78 x 88 inches. *Brick Store Museum collection, Kennebunk, ME, #2543; C. A. Smith Photography*

Plate 13 (text reference page 169). Marine Comfort Quilt, 2007.
Inscribed, machine pieced, and tied; 72 x 60 in.
Photograph by the author

Plate 14 (*text reference page 173*). Operation Homefront Quilt, 2008.
Machine pieced and quilted.
Photograph by the author

Plate 15, opposite (*text reference page 178*). Home of the Brave Quilt
Project quilt, 2010. Inscribed, machine pieced, and quilted; 84 x 48 in.
Photograph by Jonathan Strait; courtesy of Donald Beld



same curriculum with JHIA certified advanced quilt instructors. In that case, the costs for classes and the length of the certification program vary by instructors.

40. Sasiko is characterized by the use of large stitches with thick thread, used to hold layers of fabric to provide extra strength. Jacqueline M. Atkins, "Japanese Imagery in Contemporary Quilts," in *Japanese Imagery in One Hundred Quilts* (Tokyo: Kokusai Art, 2004): 10–11.

41. Jacqueline M. Atkins, "The *Wa* Factor: An American Perspective on Japanese Quilts," oral presentation, "The Global Quilt: Cultural Contexts" symposium, International Quilt Study Center and Museum, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, April 4, 2009.

42. *Handi Crafts*, 32 (2004). 4. The Japanese title for this exhibition is *Wa no Kiruto 100 Nin Ten* (Wa Quilts by One Hundred Artists).

43. Recent exhibitions of *Wa* or Japanese-style quilts include "One Hundred Japanese Quilts: An Exhibition of New Works by Quilt Artists in Japan," and "Wagire: Rhapsody en Soie." Selected pieces from the former exhibition traveled to the United States: May 12–July 12, 2003, Rocky Mountain Quilt Museum, Golden, Colorado; May 15–July 15, Foothills Art Center, Golden, Colorado; February 2–March 13, 2004, California State University, Northridge; October 16, 2004–January 2, 2005, Indiana State Museum, Indianapolis, Indiana. Pieces were exhibited in Australia in the following institutions: June 25–30, 2003, Sydney Convention and Exhibition Centre; July 24–27, 2003, Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre; August 7–10, 2003, Canberra Exhibition Park. In Korea an exhibition was held October 13–18, 2003, at the Ewha Womans University Museum and in Europe April 29–May 2, 2004, Quilt Expo, Den Haag, the Netherlands; June 12–August 15, 2004, Textile Forum, Herning, Denmark; August 25–September 25, 2004, Museum of Printed Textiles of Mulhouse, France. The Wagire exhibition displayed quilts made of *kimono* silk fabrics by the late Fujishiro Ikuko at Quilt Expo, Lyon, France (June 22–25, 2006), and at the International Quilt Festival in Houston, Texas (November 2–5, 2006). These exhibitions were well received by the international audiences. For example, over one thousand copies of the "One Hundred Japanese Quilts" exhibition catalog were sold over the course of four days at the Netherlands venue.

44. Mitani Kizuki, "Imeji Noto [Image Notes]," *Kiruto Japan*, no. 3 (June 1987), 40.

45. Karey Bresenhan, e-mail to author, March 1, 2010.

46. Sachiko, interview with author, June 27, 2009. Sachiko has been a finalist for many quilt shows and also has won awards in contests, including Quilt Visions in 2004, both in Japan and the United States. She is now one of the few instructors who are qualified to teach in JHIA's machine-quilting certification programs.

47. Bresenhan e-mail.

48. Michael James served as a juror for the "Quilt *Nihon*" exhibition until the ninth exhibition (2008) and now serves as an honorable juror for the exhibition.



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49. *The Fourth Quilt Nihon Exhibition '95: Memories* (Tokyo: Nihon Vogue, 1996), 4, 37.

50. The metaphor of hybridity is somewhat ambiguous because of its root in biology. For a discussion of the use of the term in a cultural context, see Deborah A. Kapchan and Pauline Turner Strong, "Theorizing the Hybrid," *Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 112, no. 445 (Summer 1999): 239–53.

51. Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, trans. Christopher L. Chiappari and Silvia L. López (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1995), xxv.

52. Deborah A. Kapchan, *Gender on the Market: Moroccan Women and the Revoicing of Tradition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1996), 21.