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A Glimpse of the Japanese Quilting Community: The Influence of Quilting Schools

by Penny Nii and Shizuko Kuroha

While the Japanese had traditionally made a few patchwork and quilted articles such as small patchwork bags and futon, thick, tied sleeping mats and covers, their postwar introduction to the American quilt did not occur until 1975, when an exhibition was mounted at the Shiseido gallery in Tokyo. That exhibition, plus a smaller one derived from it and mounted the same year at the American Center in Kyoto, and a larger 1976 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Kyoto, one floor devoted to the history of quilting in America and another to the aesthetics of quilts, received a great deal of publicity in all media in Japan. Those exhibitions, assembled by Jonathan Holstein and Gail van der Hoof were followed by many others which brought to the Japanese, in whose culture textiles have always been honored, a very comprehensive introduction to American quilts. There were exhibitions of antique quilts of all types and sizes, including Amish, doll and child's quilts, and contemporary American quilts. In the following years a contemporary quilt movement began and developed in Japan and is now flourishing, manifesting a number of features unique to that country. This article explores some of the basic characteristics, and the reasons for them, of that movement.

—Editors' Note

Consider this phenomenon: Japan, an island country of 124 million people, is second in the world only to the United States in its number of active quilters. A recent estimate puts them at 800,000 to 1 million, of whom twenty-five percent are considered to be serious quiltmakers. They support quilt-related business amounting to at least 200 million dollars a year and read three major quilt magazines with a combined circulation of 300,000 readers. Their quilts are increasingly seen in major international exhibitions and competitions, where some have earned top awards. International awareness of Japanese quilts has also

been furthered by quilt books and exhibitions originating in Japan. While there are some similarities between quilting in Japan and the United States, there are also profound differences in the way people learn to quilt, how their aesthetic is formed, how quilts are exhibited, and how quiltmakers see themselves. In this article we will discuss the structure of the quilting community in Japan, focusing primarily on the quilting schools. We begin by looking at a profile of a typical Japanese quilter, and then describe some basic characteristics of Japanese society as these relate to group activities. This is followed by three case studies of quilting schools and a brief description of the craft/quilting schools, from which we draw some conclusions about the Japanese quilt community.

A typical Japanese quilter:

1. Learns to quilt at a quilting school,
2. Goes to a school or group meetings on a regular basis,
3. Exhibits quilts annually at school-sponsored shows, and,
4. Makes a particular style of quilts which her school advocates.

To be recognized as a "legitimate" quilter, a Japanese quilter needs to belong to a quilting school or a recognized quilting group whose primary function is organized teaching.

Generalizations often do not describe the activities of a particular individual with complete accuracy, but they can serve to highlight the basic characteristics of a group as a whole. Japanese quilters are

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strongly tied to a group, whereas in the United States, a quilter's associations with quilting groups are often incidental and social in nature. Although there are many influential quilt guilds in the United States, belonging to such a group does not have the import such an association has for Japanese quilters. Said another way, not belonging to a quilt group does not particularly affect the stature of an American quilter, but in Japan this has a serious negative effect.

Quilting is an American institution imported into Japan. There, however, the activity is carried out in a social context quite different from the U.S. Although Japan is a modern, democratic society, it is also a society whose basic social structures evolved over many centuries and is quite different in significant ways from those of the United States. To understand and appreciate Japanese quilters and their quilts, we need to understand the environment in which they live and create.

Background: Groups, Hierarchy, and the Individual

The Japanese are more likely than Westerners to operate in groups, or at least to see themselves as operating in this way. Certainly, no difference is more significant between Japanese and Americans than the Japanese tendency to emphasize the group at the expense of the individual. Groups of every sort abound in Japanese society, play a larger role in peoples lives, and offer them more of a sense of individual self-identification than do corresponding groups in the United States.[1] There are groups composed of old schoolmates, associates at work, women's society, students of tea ceremony, and now, quilters. The groups are all tightly organized and occupy a large role in their members' lives: they go out together and travel together. Loyalty to a group is often more important than family loyalty.

This emphasis on the group has had a pervasive influence on the Japanese character and lifestyle. A group player is more appreciated than the solo star. Where an American might seek to emphasize his or her independence and originality, the Japanese will do the reverse. An old Japanese saying goes, "A nail that sticks out will be hammered down." This characteristic has a profoundly negative effect in the art world, of which quilting can be considered a part. "One impasse for many artists is the problem of artistic individuality. . . However democratic the society has become, stepping out of line still invites censure." [2]

With a recent feudal background and a society that emphasizes particular relationships, it is inevitable there will be ranks and status among Japanese. Their interpersonal relations and the groups to which they belong are usually structured hierarchically. [3] Thus, an individual's participation in a group confers status, not only within the group, but within the society as a whole; the higher the status of the group, the higher is the individual status. The ability to confer status is one aspect of the growing popularity of art. [4]

The Iemoto system

The Iemoto system is a school system used in the world of traditional Japanese arts such as music, dance, flower arrangement and tea ceremony. "Ie" means household, the primary unit of social organization in Japan. The concept of Ie also serves as a structural basis for contemporary Japanese groups. The notion of a head of a household who looks after its members and to whom they, in turn, pledge loyalty, is carried over to group organization.

The Iemoto is the founder or the current head of the school. The Iemoto of each school inherits the secret traditions of the previous Iemoto; he is the final arbiter of the school's practices and has the authority to pass them on. He has also the sole right to award *certificates of achievement*, to publish the school's secret techniques, and to expel members of the school in order *to maintain doctrinal orthodoxy*. Each Iemoto is followed by disciples who are recognized by him or her as accredited teachers and who in turn are the masters of their own disciples. Many of the Iemoto-led schools are hierarchical organization of considerable magnitude.2 [5]

The Iemoto system, which has been a feature of Japanese life since the 17th century, was used in the context of teaching various martial and courtly arts (such as tea ceremony and music). Until around 1955, those who participated in this system were mostly male. Starting around 1955 variants of the Iemoto school system began to be used by various craft fields, together with flower arranging and tea ceremony.[6]

Quilting, a recently imported art/craft, has not yet been placed in a single uniform school system by its practitioners. Some quilting schools use the traditional Iemoto system while in other schools there is no vestige of the old system. However, because of the basic nature of Japanese society, all schools are organized following the hierarchical, paternalistic pattern, characteristic of all organized Japanese groups. Even among the most modern group loyalty is expected, and the head teacher is expected to take care for the quilters' welfare. We will look now at three representative Japanese quilting schools and make brief mention of the craft/quilting schools.

Example 1: A school in the style of the Iemoto system3

The first school we will consider, and which we will call the "Iemoto" school, is the largest quilting school in Japan. It has an organizational structure resembling the Iemoto system and is the most traditional of the three schools under study.

The headmaster of this school is a well-known quilter in her own right. The Iemoto school maintains that the only "true" quilts are those that have the look of American antique quilts. Its quilters use only traditional patterns and printed fabrics, and all quilts must be hand sewn and hand quilted. Innovations in patterns and the use of solid fabrics are forbidden. The school focuses on sewing and quilting techniques producing quilters with great technical skills. Quilters from this school have a recognizable style, which is definitely a traditional antique look.

The school's curriculum is divided into four courses, each lasting one year, Basic, Intermediate, Advanced, and Instructor courses. To sign up for a course, a student must pay a registration fee as well as monthly tuition. For example, the registration fee for the Beginner course is 20,000 yen⁴ (15,000 yen for the Intermediate course), and the monthly tuition is 9000 yen/month for the Beginner course. In addition to the tuition, the students must buy text books and required materials from the school. The basic contents of the courses are:

Beginner: Sewing techniques; make traditional blocks and small pouches

Intermediate: Sampler blocks; make a memorial quilt

Advanced (called "Research"): Individual projects

Instructor: Course contents and teaching techniques

After the completion of each course a certificate is issued. A student must pay between 15,000 to 20,000 yen to receive the certificate. After graduating from the Advanced course, students can remain affiliated with the school by paying a "membership" fee of approximately 10,000 yen per year. Some may continue on to get teaching certificates.

The school holds an annual exhibition of quilts made by the headmaster, the instructors, the students, and the members during the year. Because of the large number of students, a committee composed of the instructors selects the quilts to be exhibited.

In order to promote the style and methodology practiced at the Iemoto school, it licenses franchise schools. Franchise schools are set up as fabric stores with classroom facilities for quilting classes. Each franchisee is given a territory, and she can teach and sell quilt-related products free from competition from other franchises. To become an owner of a franchise school, a student must take an additional course above and beyond the instructor course, pay a fee of approximately 500,000 yen, and agree to purchase a specified amount of fabrics and other quilt-related material from a company associated with the school. (The headmaster is also the president of this company.)

All franchise schools must teach the same courses as those taught at the head school. They may award various certificates of completion, which are issued by the head school. Sixty percent of the certificate fee goes to the head school. One reason for the popularity of the school and its franchised schools is transferable credits; that is, students can get credit at the head school for courses taken at a franchise school and vice versa. There are currently over 60 Iemoto franchise schools throughout Japan.

In addition to the franchising arrangement, the school awards (or sells) a status called "partners." Partners can teach the Basic course anywhere in the country without a commitment to store ownership. The school also runs correspondence courses so people in remote areas can learn to quilt. Students are mailed text books and instructions on how to make a quilt block or

small quilted items. A completed project is mailed back to the school for critique. These correspondence courses focus primarily on sewing methods and techniques.'

We described this school in some detail not only because it is one of the biggest and the most popular quilting schools in Japan today, but because many of the other large quilting schools are run in a similar manner. Over three thousand students are registered in the Iemoto school system, including the franchise schools and partner classes. The annual income of the school, including the income from the associated company selling fabrics and notions, is estimated to be between three to five hundred million yen.

The Iemoto school's organizational structure is very hierarchical, with a propagation of teachers and students down the branches of the hierarchy and the fees moving back towards the head school. As in the traditional Iemoto system used in flower arranging and traditional dance schools, the school teaches and propagates an identifiable style of quilts and construction techniques.

Example 2: An apprenticeship-oriented school

The second example, which we will call the "apprentice" school, is very popular among the beginner students. In addition to the school, the headmaster owns a large quilting supply store. She is a quilter well-known for her contemporary style quilts. She is also an author of a popular how-to quilt book which is used extensively in her school.

The entrance fee to the apprentice school is 20,000 yen and the tuition is 30,000 yen every six months. The classes meet twice a week, and the courses follow a fixed pattern based on a text book written by the headmaster. In this school, no credit is given for courses taken at other schools. Thus, regardless of her experience level, a new student must start in the beginner class. For the first five years, the students take courses from instructors who are former students of the school. A certificate is awarded after the completion of five years of study.

The students get the opportunity to meet with the headmaster to discuss their work only after they have been studying at the school for four to five years. Certified students continue to learn the art of quilting by apprenticing with the instructor or the headmaster. The headmaster designs her own quilts, but most of the work is executed by her apprentices and the instructors.

An exhibition of new quilts made by the headmaster and the instructors is held annually. Certified students may enter their quilts in the exhibit after paying an "approval" fee and getting a nod of approval.

The apprentice school follows a pattern reminiscent of the old painting and craft schools in which apprentices learned to copy the master's style exactly, not unlike the European guild system. There, in many instances, the apprentices' products were signed with the master's name and their work was indistinguishable from the master's work.

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Example 3: A school with individualized instruction

There are some schools and groups, though not many, that are organized to encourage the development of individual tastes and styles. In our final example the headmaster meets with a number of small groups in which the students may be at different skill levels. With an assistant, the headmaster gives individual lessons and allows each student to progress at her own pace. The headmaster is a well-known quilter and author who believes in encouraging creativity along with teaching the basic skills in sewing and quilting.

The entrance fee is 20,000 yen with a monthly fee of 7,000 yen. Each student group meets twice a month, once with the headmaster and once with an instructor, for three years. In the fourth year the students meet once a month. No certificate is awarded, and the classes have a collegial atmosphere.

In the annual exhibit held by this school, all quilts completed by the headmaster and all the students and instructors are exhibited. These exhibits come closest to the American quilt shows in the variety of styles and skill levels of the quilts exhibited. The quilts made by students of the individual school and its headmaster are winning recognition at international shows where they are seen as equals to quilts made in other countries.

Example 4: Craft schools

In addition to the quilting schools, there are many large craft schools that offer quilting courses. These courses are organized in much the same manner as the Iemoto school. There are, however, fewer rigidly identifiable styles associated with the craft schools; and they focus more on sewing skills and basic quilting techniques. Students to whom quilting becomes more than a passing hobby will move on to one of the better known quilting schools.

Conclusion

Although quilting is essentially an American institution, it has become a popular activity in Japan, spawning new businesses that continue to grow. The Iemoto system of school pervades the quilting community. It is one of the many manifestations of the hierarchical pattern of relationships based on the Ie, or household, structure that exists whenever Japanese organize themselves into a group. A strong superior-subordinate relationship reminiscent of the feudal bond between lord and follower continues to prevail.

The quilting schools and groups form a sort of in-group for those who participate in them. As a member of a group a woman can both establish a self-identity and find a means of self expression. The strong influence of the Iemoto system, however, has its downside. Thomas Havens made the following observation: "Students are obliged to perpetuate the teacher's approach and may not switch to another school or even another instructor in the same school. For their part, teachers

reward their pupil's loyalty by patronizing them. The result is that authority is an even more important attribute than skill. . . [Schools] grant licenses and certificates at regular intervals, not necessarily to recognize artistic achievement but to reward longevity with symbols of membership in the group." [7]

Fortunately, the emergence of schools and groups such as the "individual" type in Example 3 are serving to counteract this unfortunate tendency in the quilting community. It remains to be seen if Japanese quilters can move away from the traditional pattern of the Iemoto system and emerge as independent, creative quiltmakers.

Penny Nii, who was born in Japan and educated in the United States, was until 1993 a Senior Research Scientist in the Computer Science Department at Stanford University, doing research in artificial intelligence. In that field she published many articles and co-authored a book on expert systems, software which is capable of facilitating complex, human-like reasoning. The visual arts were always a parallel interest for her. Penny discovered quilting in the early 1980s, and though her research career left her with little time to make quilts, her most recent effort was accepted for "New Faces," a juried exhibition of contemporary quilts organized by the American Museum of Quilts and Textiles. She is now a partner in the Leone-Nii Gallery in Mountain View, California, which exhibits both antique and contemporary quilts.

Shizuko Kuroha is a quiltmaker, author, and teacher in her native Japan. She discovered quilting during a two-year stay in Bethesda, Maryland, from 1975-1976. Upon her return to Japan, she founded the Kuroha Quilt Circle, which has now an enrollment of 200 students in seven Japanese cities. Her own quilts, which characteristically are made from antique, indigo-dyed Japanese fabric, were first seen in the United States at an exhibition, "Indigo," organized by the Nippon Club in New York City in 1985. In 1989 she was invited to exhibit her circle's work at the Quilt Festival in New York, sponsored by the Museum of American Folk Art. Since then her quilts have been extensively exhibited internationally, notably at the "Feeling 1990" festival in the Netherlands, where her quilt won the "Most Artistic" award, and in 1992 in South Korea and Taiwan. In 1993 she was invited to lecture and teach at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, Indiana, in conjunction with an exhibition of Japanese quilts.

Endnotes

- ¹Italics are the authors'.
²Two of the largest flower arrangement schools consist of 1.5 million members each, with local chapters throughout Japan and cities abroad.
³The information about the schools is based on written materials from the schools listed in the reference section under 'schools' and from discussions with current teachers and students.
⁴100 yen is approximately one dollar.
⁵All the schools in the case studies run their own correspondence courses.

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1. Edwin O. Reischauer. *The Japanese Today: Change and Continuity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1988, pp. 128.
2. Thomas R. Havens. *Artist and Patron in Postwar Japan: Dance, Music, Theater, and the Visual Arts, 1955-1980*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1982, pp. 19-20.
3. Reischauer, p. 154.
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7. Havens, pp. 23.

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 Vogue School. Vogue Bldg., 3-23 Ichigaya-Honmura-cho, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 162-91.

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