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ARTICLE



Sashiko needlework reborn: from functional technology to decorative art

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ABSTRACT

The term ‘sashiko’ refers to a quilting stitch used to sew together layers of material. The stitch itself is a simple running stitch, with the beauty created by complex interlocking stitching patterns. In Japan there is a long-standing tradition of layering and re-stitching material to create a thicker, warmer more durable garment. This was particularly true in the poorer regions of Tohoku during the Edo and early Meiji period where the lower classes used this stitching to create and decorate garments made out of homespun hemp and other plant fibres. After first contextualising the *sashiko* tradition, both in terms of its Edo origins and decreasing popularity in late Meiji, this paper focuses on the contemporary rebirth of *sashiko* as a form of decorative embroidery, and increasingly as a pure art form. In discussing the rekindled interest in this form of stitching, in both the contemporary quilting world and in the context of the global revival of traditional handicrafts, the paper concludes with reference to the work of contemporary *sashiko* artists and also to the use of *sashiko* garments in the final film made by the great director, Akira Kurosawa, *Yume*.

Introduction

Sashiko stitching is a form of needlework that is both functional and decorative. In the Edo era (1603–1868) and the early Meiji era (1868–1912), *sashiko*-stitched kimonos, armbands, aprons and *hanten* loose upper coats were all practical work clothes worn by groups such as agricultural workers, beggar monks, fishermen and firemen. These were people who needed functional garments that were both sturdy and warm. In the process of layering and re-stitching material to create clothing that was thicker and more durable, intricate embroidery styles also emerged, making the step from the mere functional towards the decorative. This was the origin of *sashiko* stitching.

The term *sashiko* refers to the quilting stitch used to patch or sew together layers of material. Complex interlocking stitching patterns are created with a simple running stitch, which had its origins in the unique styles of stitching that developed in the Tsugaru and Nambu districts of Aomori Prefecture in Japan’s Tohoku region. During the Edo period the wearing of silk was restricted to privileged samurai classes while commoners were forbidden to wear cotton.¹ The severe cold of the Tohoku region, moreover, made it unsuitable for cotton cultivation. Instead, hemp and other plant fibres were grown and woven for making clothing. Fabric produced from hemp is very hard and rough. Since the thread is thicker than cotton there are larger gaps between the weft and warp than is found in cotton fabric. Thick layering was necessary to keep

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¹Hara, ‘Kogin no yō to bi’.

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the cold of the bitter Tohoku climate from finding its way through these gaps. In addition to quilting layers of fabric together, stitching patterns were used to soften the fabric and thus make it easier to wear.

In the past, *sashiko* embroidery was closely linked to the social and cultural identity of those who either created or wore the clothing so decorated, with the hemp (*asa*) fabric reflecting the wearer's status as a physical labourer. While many *sashiko* items were lovingly made by the mothers and wives of working-class men, the stitching and wearing of these garments also had an interesting gender component. Since the material in items of clothing such as jackets for fishermen and firemen was extremely thick, strong hands were needed to sew the fabric together and the items were therefore often stitched by men. These were not garments of inaction and were far removed in structure from the close-fitting, richly embroidered formal *obi* and luxurious silk kimonos worn by the aristocracy. Textile researcher Goldstein-Gidoni cites a woman kimono expert who argues that while Western clothes were made for 'activity and moving', the Japanese kimono inspired 'a feeling of calmness and an urge to quit work'.² The wearers of *sashiko* stitched kimonos, aprons and *hanten*, however, enjoyed no such luxury. These garments, in fact, derived from a time when the kimono was an integral part of everyday life, well before the modern transition of this item of clothing into a decorative symbol of middle-class wealth to be displayed at weddings and coming of age ceremonies.³ Meiji-era mechanisation, however, resulted in great changes to fabric and garment making which led to a decline in and ultimately the redundancy of the weaving of hemp cloth, indigo dying and *sashiko* stitching methods.

The goal of this paper is to explore the contemporary rebirth of *sashiko* and to reflect on the healing quality of this form of needlework, each stitch a meditation on spiritual strength drawing on a wealth of patterns and designs from the natural world. From its beginnings in the Edo period through to its decreasing popularity in late Meiji, the story of *sashiko* is one of both loss and rebirth. Post-Meiji, commoners were given the right to wear cotton rather than rough handmade hemp cloth and the functional role of this form of stitching therefore became increasingly redundant. In addition, better transportation and distribution networks gave access to factory-made materials. By the end of the Taisho era (1912–1926) there were very few needle workers who had any direct experience of this style of stitching.⁴ In the last few decades, however, there has been renewed interest in *sashiko* stitching stimulated in part by the revival and popularity of quilting around the world. Following a discussion of the history of *sashiko*, the second half of the paper examines the post-1970s revival of *sashiko* as a form of quilting embroidery and folk handicraft by contemporary artists and quilters both in Japan and overseas. Since the 1970s, *sashiko* has been reborn across Japan as a form of decorative embroidery and, increasingly, as a pure art form. In discussing the rekindled interest in this form of stitching in both the contemporary quilting world and in the context of the global revival of traditional handicrafts, the paper will conclude with reference to the work of contemporary *sashiko* artists and also to the use of *sashiko* garments in the final film made by the great director, Akira Kurosawa (1910–1998), *Yume* (Dreams, 1990).

²Goldstein-Gidoni, 'Kimono and the Construction of Gendered and Cultural Identities', 354.

³Lebra, *Japanese Women: Constraint and Fulfillment*, 58–60; Goldstein-Gidoni, 'Kimono and the Construction of Gendered and Cultural Identities', 366.

⁴Koshiura, Interview with Author.

Terminology

In his research into the origins of *sashiko* workwear, Yamanobe Tomoyuki addresses the problematic issue of defining this mode of stitching by discussing the difference between ‘*sashiko*’ and the more general term for embroidery ‘*shishū*’. Yamanobe compares the following three terms used to describe sewing techniques: ‘*sasu*’ meaning ‘to pierce’ or ‘to stab’, referring to the stitching or quilting of a number of layers of material together; ‘*nuu*’ meaning ‘to sew’, that is to pass a needle through cloth; and ‘*shū*’, the term used for embroidery or the use of coloured thread to create decorative patterns. For Yamanobe, ‘*sashiko*’ needlework is a combination of all three techniques.⁵ However, in more traditional *sashiko* methods the style of stitching was most closely aligned, as outlined below, with the concept of vertical ‘stabbing’.

‘*Sasu*,’ to stab, is a violent verb and Yamanobe argues that it is therefore appropriate for a technique such as *sashiko*, which required considerable strength when piercing a needle through various layers of material to quilt them together. Sometimes padding was inserted between the layers, making the sewing action even more difficult. ‘*Sasu*’, as a sewing technique, specifically refers to the technique of quilting fabric by passing a needle in a ‘vertical’ motion – that is, from top to bottom – through several layers of cloth. In the case of ‘*nuu*’ style sewing, on the other hand, the needle is passed through the cloth on the ‘diagonal’. This requires less force and would not have been as effective in quilting together several layers of rough hemp material.

In contemporary *sashiko* culture there can be a disconnect between the Japanese use of the term ‘*sashiko*’ as a decorative means of re-enforcing fabric and its use by English speakers, mostly quilters, merely in reference to the white or blue stitching that makes a visible contribution to a finished quilt. *Sashiko* blogger, Jacqueline Wein notes that ‘[t]oday, although *sashiko* is used primarily as a decorative accent, its functional purpose remains: to reinforce, strengthen and make warmer, and in the process to create a useful cloth where beauty visits as an unintended consequence’.⁶ Wein’s comments confirm the statement made at the opening of this paper that *sashiko* is a combination of the functional and the decorative.

Links to Jōmon culture and Buddhist tradition

Tokunaga Kiku, a *sashiko* practitioner and textile researcher working in the 1980s at Yamagata’s Yonezawa Women’s University, argued that *sashiko* stitching has its origins in Jōmon culture and is therefore closely tied to the cultural practice and spiritual beliefs of the people of the Tohoku region. As the Yayoi culture spread east and north across Japan, Jōmon culture was pushed into the Tohoku area where elements of that culture remain evident today. The red firing of Jōmon pottery came to symbolise lifeblood and, since it was believed to both give life to the cloth and to protect the wearer from harm, this same red colour was used in clothing. Tokunaga argues that, given the harshness and poverty of life in the North, the relationship between clothing and spiritual protection continued to be an important element in Tohoku culture up until the modern era.⁷ She further suggested that while each *sashiko* stitch enhanced the

⁵Yamanobe, ‘Sashiko: shigotogi no genten’, 6.

⁶Wein, ‘Artist Spotlight: Kazuko Yoshiura and Sashiko Fever’.

⁷Tokunaga, *Sashiko no kenkyū*, 41–42.

practical strength of fabric, it was also a prayer for spiritual strength. To Tokunaga, a new garment created by the laborious stitching together of old scraps of rags is arguably a perfect symbol of the cycle of life and death.⁸ Many of the design patterns born in this period, such as the interlocking *kagome* and *sayagata* patterns, became common motifs in traditional Japanese textiles, as well as popular *sashiko* stitching patterns.⁹

Yamanobe, on the other hand, argues that *sashiko* stitching has its origins the ‘*funzoe*’ tradition of Buddhist priests. According to the *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Zen Buddhism*, a *funzoe* is ‘[a] robe made by patching together discarded rags’. The term is the Japanese translation for the Sanskrit ‘*pamsu-kula kesa*’ which means ‘a robe (made from) rags off a dust heap’. The much stronger Japanese expression literally means ‘excrement wiping cloth’.¹⁰ The *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Zen Buddhism* notes:

Dogen Kigen (1200–1253) explains that Buddhas have always preferred to use rag robes rather than robes made from finer material. ... The historical Buddha and his disciples initially constructed their robes from discarded rags that they collected from the streets or from cremation areas. They washed the rages and pieced them together to fashion monastic robes. For health reasons, the Buddha later allowed monks and nuns to accept donations of new clothes from lay people.¹¹

The Pali text, *Pamsukūlānisamsam*, relates the origin of *funzoe* to the tale of a rich merchant whose daughter died giving birth to a stillborn infant. After wrapping the dead foetus and afterbirth in a length of expensive cloth, which he kept for seven days, the merchant placed the cloth and its contents on a road where he knew the Buddha would pass. Eventually,

The Buddha [saw the cloth and] thought, ‘This is the first pāmsukūla ... The Buddhas of the past wore pāmsukūla; I, therefore, will wear one, too.’ He picked it up; the decaying foetus and afterbirth fell on the ground, which then shook and trembled to mark ... this momentous occasion.¹²

The cloth was then washed, dried and dyed by the Buddha with the divine help of Indra, the leader of the Hindu pantheon, whereupon ‘the Buddha’s old robe disappeared and he became a pāmsukūlila’ (wearer of the pāmsukūla).¹³ Strong notes that the Buddha exalted the wearing of pāmsukūla and, since ‘it is while wearing [the ragheap robes] that [previous] Buddhas have liberated all creatures’, exhorted all monks to wear these garments as he did himself.¹⁴

Yamanobe notes that, as with the practice of eating only food received by begging, the act of making robes from scraps of material discarded by others expressed a monk’s ‘beggar spirit’.¹⁵ There is also a sense of spirituality in the prayerful construction of these religious garments. The Seishōji Temple website, for example, observes that ‘sewing stitch after stitch into a robe is a way of both mastering the art of stitching and building up limitless karma’ in

⁸Ibid, 41.

⁹Kishimoto and Natori, ‘Hierarchical Modular Systems with Elements of Folk Art’, 68.

¹⁰Baroni, *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Zen Buddhism*, 104.

¹¹Ibid, 104.

¹²Strong, *The Legend and Cult of Upagupta*, 72.

¹³Ibid, 72.

¹⁴Ibid, 72.

¹⁵Yamanobe, ‘Sashiko: shigotogi no genten’, 8.

the manner handed down by the Buddha himself.¹⁶ In addition to noting the practical application of *sashiko* stitching, both Tokunaga's Jōmon origin narrative and Yamanobe's Buddhist account stress the non-material aspects of this mode of handicraft.

Regional designs – Tsugaru *kogin sashiko* and Nanbu *hishizashi*

The Tsugaru region, on the northwestern tip of the coast in the Tohoku's Aomori Prefecture, has given its name to a form of *kogin* stitching that can be defined as 'counted stitch embroidery'. In Tsugaru *kogin*, 'stitching is done by inserting the threads only horizontally along the weft threads over and under odd numbered warp threads of the fabric. The length of the stitches varies [from short to longer] creating a geometric pattern, based on diamond units'.¹⁷

During the Edo period the term '*sashikoginu*', meaning 'unlined work clothes made of hemp' was used to refer to the stitching found on the hemp fabric and garments of the Tsugaru region. When discussing these items, Hara draws on the 1788 Edo text, *Omin Zui* (Illustrated Records of the Peoples of the Northern Provinces) written by Sadahiko Hirano, which provided illustrations of both the stitching patterns used to decorate garments and information on how the garments were worn by villagers in Tsugaru. Through time, the term '*sashikoginu*' was simplified to *koginu* and finally *kogin*. Keiko Hara notes that although the terms *kogin* and *koginu* refer today only to fabrics and garments from the

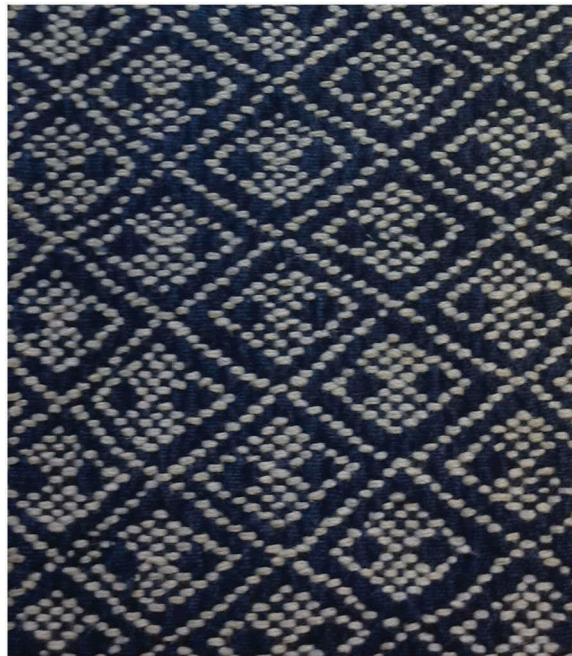


Figure 1. *Kogin* stitching detail. Photo: Carol Hayes.¹⁸

¹⁶Seishōji Temple. 'Okesa o nuu kai'.

¹⁷Hara, 'Kogin' no yō to bi'.

¹⁸Figure 1 is a detail from an antique piece owned by Yoshiura Sensei.



Figure 2. Tsugaru *kogin* kimono. Photo: Carol Hayes, taken with the kind permission of the Aomori Folk Museum.

Tsugaru region, in the past these terms were used from Kyushu to northern Honshu to refer to all stitching of hemp fabric. As a kimono aged and was downgraded from formal attire to work clothing, the material which formed the '*kata*' (shoulder), that is the front and back yoke panel (to which the sleeves, the back and the two front panels of a kimono were then attached) was repeatedly re-stitched. Sleeves were narrowed as they wore out. Eventually, after the white threads of the *kogin* stitching had darkened, new vertical stitching was added, after which the whole garment was often re-dyed with indigo.¹⁹

While much kimono embroidery, such as the silk stitching of family crests on formal garments, was outsourced to specialist artisans, *kogin* kimono were made from hemp grown in a family's own field and sewn by members of the family that wore the garments (see Figure 2). Since hemp was harvested, spun and woven at home, it took between two weeks to a month to make just one *kogin* kimono. Most farming families were only able to make about four *tan* of cloth (one *tan* equals about ten metres of cloth) in one year, restricting the number of garments that could be produced. After weaving, the fabric was taken to a professional dyer to be dyed with indigo, and then brought home to be sewn into a garment and decorated with *sashiko*. In the Tsugaru region *kogin* kimono were an essential part of a bridal trousseau and so mothers began teaching their daughters to sew at an early age.

¹⁹Hara, 'Kogin' no yō to bi'.

In his introduction to *Tsugaru kogin sashi: gihō to zuanshū* (Tsugaru Kogin Sashiko: Techniques and Designs), Takeuchi Shūkichi, the then governor of Aichi Prefecture, spoke with great nostalgia about the beauty of *kogin sashiko* and expressed his regret at the social changes which meant that, by the end of the Taisho era, very few women from farming families were able to produce this style of stitching.²⁰ Takeuchi also lamented the fact that, when the summer ‘*kogin*’ courting season came about, very few women were to be seen wearing *kogin* decorated garments.²¹ From one perspective, Takeuchi’s comments might be regarded as the classical masculine longing for a mythical past grounded in the labour of women, similar to, as Miho Matsugu notes, Kawabata Yasunari’s valourisation of the weaving of *chijimi* linen in the novel, *Snow Country*.²² Nevertheless, the desire to retrieve lost *sashiko* methods is clearly something that resonates with the many contemporary women who engage in this craft. The practice of *sashiko* stitching allows interested women to gather together in a supportive group environment in which they are able to take a step back from the stresses of everyday life as they revisit the simplicity of hand-sewing an item stitch by stitch.

Today, examples of *kogin* stitching on items such as small purses, eyeglass cases and bags can be found in most upmarket souvenir shops in the Tohoku region. When travelling several years ago through the Tsugaru region, however, this writer encountered few people who knew of anyone who, in fact, practiced *kogin* stitching. Nor could they remember anyone in their family doing this form of stitching. At both the Aomori Central Citizen’s Centre (Chūo shimin sentaa) in Aomori city, and the Aomori City Folk Museum, there was only a small corner dedicated to *kogin sashiko*. At the Central Citizen’s Centre, the elderly teacher said that she had been doing *kogin sashiko* for 15 years and had learnt from Maeda Setsu who, in her mind, was the last ‘real’ *kogin* stitcher. Born in Tsugaru in 1919, *sashiko* practitioner Maeda Setsu was named a National Living Treasure in 1962. Together with Yanagi Soetsu (1889–1961) and collector/designer Sōma Teizo, she was a leader in the twentieth century mingei movement.²³ Hirosaki City in Aomori boasts the Hirosaki *Kogin* Research Centre which offers *kogin* lessons and provides an extensive array of online ordering for *kogin* stitched goods.

Another form of *sashiko* stitching is *hishizashi* from the Nanbu region in the southeast of Aomori. Since the Nanbu region practiced dry field farming, the work kimono was a combination of shorter upper-coat and close-fitting trousers. In these garments, ‘[s]titching was done for reinforcement and decoration on the shoulder part of the work clothes, on trousers called *tattsuke* that were narrowed around the shins, and on aprons called *maedare*’.²⁴ Similarly to *kogin*, ‘the stitching is done along the weft threads, but since the thread is crossed over and under an even number of warps, as opposed to the odd number used in the *kogin* style, the pattern results in wider horizontal diamond shapes’.²⁵

²⁰Hirosaki Kogin Kenkyūjo, *Tsugaru kogin sashi*, 10.

²¹Ibid, 10.

²²Matsugu, ‘The Fusing of Labor and Love in Snow Country’, 135–143.

²³Hirosaki Kogin Kenkyūjo, *Tsugaru kogin sashi*, 10. See Maeda, *Tsugaru kogin sashi* for more information on her work.

²⁴Hara, ‘Kogin’ no yō to bi’.

²⁵Hara, ‘Kogin’ no yō to bi’.



Figure 3. Nanbu apron stitching. Photo: Carol Hayes, taken with the kind permission of the Amuse Museum.

Compared to the white stitching on the dark blue indigo dyed fabric of *kogin*, *hishizashi* uses both white and dark blue thread on pale blue *asa*, or linen, fabric. Interestingly, when coloured wool became available in the Meiji era, multi-coloured *hishizashi* apron stitching patterns, as seen in [Figure 3](#), appeared.

Shomin sashiko

The term, '*shomin*', means common people and *shomin sashiko* was the 'commoner' stitching used by the urban working classes. Probably the most well-known was the use of *sashiko* stitching in *hanten* work coats, particularly those used by firemen in the Edo period. Cynthia Shaver quotes a 1913 *Miyako Shimbun* (Capital City News) article which mentions the use of *sashiko* stitching to make the cotton coats for Edo firemen.²⁶ In a popular tale, a *sashiko* coat saved the life of Osawa Shōten of Nihonbashi in central Edo. It is said that after his near-death experience, Osawa began to sell his services as a *sashiko* stitcher to firemen for making their clothing. Shaver argues, however, that even in the late Edo era, firemen's coats were stitched by the fireman himself or his wife, rather than being manufactured commercially, and that it was only in the Meiji era that the stitching of these special *hanten* became the work of paid *sashiko* stitchers. The style

²⁶Shaver, 'Spectacular Garments and Colorful Customs', 6.

of *sashiko* stitching used in the creation of these *hanten* for workmen required two strands of thread, which created a much thicker and therefore stronger stitch, as shown in Figure 4, than the *sashiko* used on other garments.²⁷

In a typical garment, ‘three layers of cloth of the same thickness and quality were held together with three to four stitches per inch’,²⁸ and virtually the entire surface of a uniform was stitched to ensure the durability and thickness needed to protect the wearer from fire.²⁹ During the early Meiji era, the practice of wetting down the firemen for added protection became common. Since a heavily stitched and ‘fully water-soaked outfit could weigh as much as 40 kilograms’,³⁰ a fireman needed to be an individual of unusual strength. The full fire-fighting ensemble included a masked hood so that all that was visible of the body of the firemen wearing a *sashiko hanten* were the eyes. These figures surely cut a very impressive sight and it is not surprising that the Edo era firefighter was both revered and feared by the townspeople of the time.

Somewhat surprisingly, however, it appears that the thick *sashiko*-stitched *hanten* came to be worn less and less during actual firefighting.³¹ This was because both central and

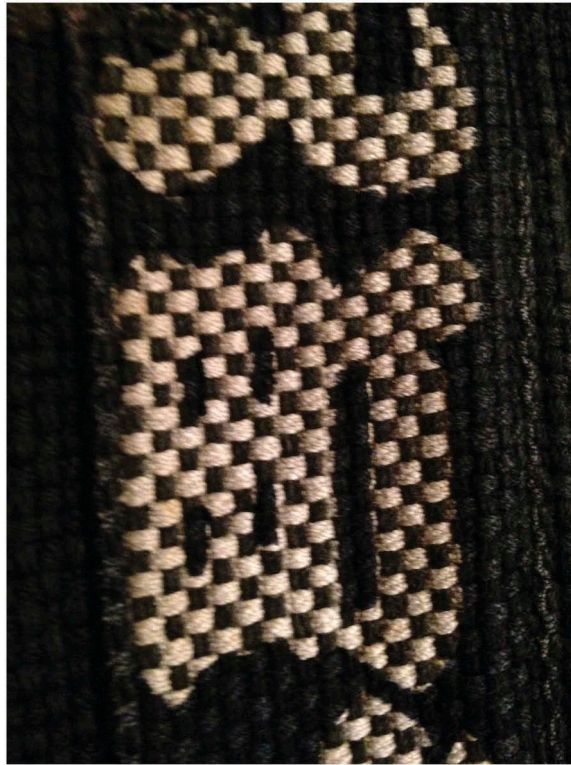


Figure 4. Fireman's *hanten* stitching detail. Photo: Carol Hayes, taken with the kind permission of the Amuse Museum.

²⁷Ibid, 42.

²⁸Ibid, 6.

²⁹Kyoto Fūzoku Hakubutsukan, 'Edomachi hikiishi, kaji shōzoku'.

³⁰Ibid, 6.

³¹Ibid, 42.

neighbourhood regulations demanded that all firemen clearly displayed visible affiliation markings, a practice not compatible with the detailed stitching patterns on *sashiko* coats. Instead, the highly decorated jackets came to be worn by the prominent merchants or community representatives who were responsible for paying formal condolence visits in the aftermath of a fire. Shaver also points out that 'Edo municipal firemen were often tattooed. Since the elaborately painted coats the townsmen wore mimicked tattoos, the local townsmen actually dressed more like fire fighters seen in Ukiyoe prints than the real fire fighters did'.³² Painted *sashiko hanten* were also popular among fashionable Edo townsmen. Designs on many of these coats were based on anecdotes from novels such as *Suikoden* (The Water Margin), the Japanese translation of the famous Song dynasty (960–1296) Chinese classic, *Shui hu zhuan*, which in 1805 had been illustrated with tattooed heroes by the well-known ukiyo-e artist, Hokusai Katsushika (1760–1849). Firefighters and warriors drawn by woodblock artist Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1839–1892) were also popular as a source of images on the painted *sashiko hanten* worn by townsmen.³³

Sashiko reborn

Although, as profiled in Tokunaga Kiku's extensive research, some forms of *sashiko* were practiced by samurai and merchant classes, there is no doubt that *sashiko* was largely the province of 'the common folk'. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that, in the early Showa era (1926–1989), *sashiko* drew the attention of Yanagi Muneyoshi (also known as Yanagi Sōetsu) (1889–1961), the founder of the 'mingei' or folk art movement. Yanagi's declaration of the beauty of the stitching traditions of Tsugaru *kogin* and Nambu region's *hishizashi* was an important development in the revival of this traditional form of art. However, when *sashiko* artist, teacher and author, Kazuko Yoshiura, first began to do *sashiko* needlework in 1979, she discovered that many of the old patterns and needlework skills had been lost. Since that time, Yoshiura has worked to rediscover these *sashiko* traditions and to pass them on through her teaching to future generations.³⁴ She conducted her first class in Tokyo's Azabu Juban district in 1983, and continues to teach today at Blue and White, a shop and teaching studio specialising in contemporary Japanese arts and crafts. Established in 1980, Blue and White is owned and run by Amy Katoh who moved to Japan from the United States in the 1960s,³⁵ when it was much less fashionable to collect Japanese traditional textiles and handicraft.³⁶

In a blog-post on a 2010 exhibition held by Yoshiura in the studio gallery of Blue and White, Jacqueline Wein notes that although Yoshiura's technique is firmly placed within *sashiko* stitching traditions, she had in fact not been trained in this art in the traditional manner, handed down by mother to daughter:

[Her work], is an incredible sampler of different *sashiko* patterns. The word *sashiko* itself means 'little stabs' and key to its methodology is the tiny regular stitches. While results can

³²Ibid, 5.

³³The Fitzwilliam Museum, 'Yoshitoshi'.

³⁴Yoshiura, Interview with Author. See also Yoshiura's books, *Tanoshii Sashiko and Shin-sashiko*, 70.

³⁵Beimel. 'Amy Katoh Celebrating Found Japan', 26 July 2011; Katoh, *Blue and White Japan* and *Japan The Art of Living*. Also see Blue and White Website, <https://blueandwhitetokyo.com/>.

³⁶Wein, 'Kazuko Yoshiura and Sashiko Fever', Tokyo Jinja Blog, 2010.

look elaborate, the basic technique consists of simple running stitches sewn in repeating *tate-jima* (vertical lines) or *yoko-jima* (horizontal lines) and combinations of the two.

Ironically, Yoshiura first learned *sashiko* at Blue & White 30 years ago!³⁷

To Yoshiura, the rediscovery of the beauty of once-forgotten traditional *sashiko* stitching provides an antidote to the impersonality and speed of our contemporary lives. While the stitching was undoubtedly laborious, it is likely that it nonetheless also gave great pleasure to the women in the farming and fishing villages of the past. Having developed the traditional patterns, these women used *sashiko* stitching not only to strengthen the points at which work clothes and every-day wear wore out, but also to showcase their skills in design and stitching. In her 1988 book *Shin-sashiko* (New Sashiko), Yoshiura highlights the decorative artistry of *sashiko* modifications as follows:

As [a garment] became worn, it was converted to work clothing. When it ripped [the garment] was patched with *sashiko* stitching. Because it was so smooth, needles moved freely through the cotton fabric. With ingenuity, modification became possible and many beautiful new patterns were born. [...] The *sashiko* made by our ancestors reminds us of the importance of things, of gentleness and of strength. [...] [In] the hustle, bustle and impersonal sterility of modern life, wouldn't you like to try and bring to life the beauty of traditional *sashiko*? There is nothing difficult about this technique. All that you need is a needle and thread.³⁸

Contemporary *sashiko* artist, Saito Rei, makes a similar appeal, exhorting women and men to take a break from the stresses of life to enjoy the pleasure of *sashiko*.³⁹ Clearly, there are many both inside and outside Japan, including the current writer, who join Yoshiura and Saito in feeling great joy when decorating an item with *sashiko* stitching.

The 'boro' tradition and *sashiko*

In recent years there has been global interest among stitchers and collectors in what is referred to as 'boro' *sashiko*. Although 'boro' literally means 'old rags,' Tokunaga Kiku defines this variety of *sashiko* as follows: 'Boro *sashiko* is a way of recreating a single bolt of cloth from layered scraps of material that have lost their strength as fabric. Each piece is laid flat and then compressed by being stitched together using the *sashiko* quilting stitch'.⁴⁰ This definition is the essence of the 'boro' tradition of the Northern regions of Japan where, in times when fabric was in very short supply, there was a need to create functional work garments for impoverished farming families. Until the modern era, this process of developing a method of stitching to rework something 'boro' into a re-useable item was part of the value system of these northern regions.⁴¹ However, with the lifestyle changes that accompanied modernisation, there was an inevitable change in clothing and in attitudes to clothing in the region.⁴² As a result, the commitment to re-using and re-stitching every available scrap of fabric diminished. Furthermore, with the availability of factory-made cotton and wool, young women no longer needed to showcase their handcraft skills to prospective husbands by wearing

³⁷Ibid, 2013.

³⁸Yoshiura. *Shin-sashiko*, 1.

³⁹Saito, Interview with author. See Saito, *Sashiko Zukushi*.

⁴⁰Tokunaga, *Sashiko no kenkyū*, 42.

⁴¹Ibid, 42.

⁴²Ibid, 42.

handmade *sashiko*-decorated kimonos on special festival days. Gradually the old methods of garment-making and the stitching used to decorate these garments died out.

Tanaka Chūzaburō (1933–2013), a scholar and collector of *boro*, was the folklore advisor to the 1974 film, *Denen ni Shisu* (Pastoral: To Die in the Country), by the avant-garde director, Terayama Shūji (1935–1983). The collection of the Amuse Museum in Tokyo's Asakusa precinct includes a permanent exhibition, the *Boro: Chūzaburō Tanaka Collection*, of Tanaka's collection of 'boro' *sashiko* and *kogin* embroidery. This exhibition displays 'boro' garments and textiles from the villages of Aomori, from the mountains, through the farms to the sea. Some items on display have been stitched, re-layered and re-stitched over as many as four generations reaching back into the Edo period. This style of 'boro' stitching is now increasingly valued within the field of 'art textile design' and has become highly sought after by European and American textile and contemporary art collectors. Far removed from the beautiful specialised fabrics used in quilting and patchwork circles today, these garments were made by patching together and layering whatever was available with the aim of making a warmer, more durable garment. One such garment was the 'donja' (see [Figure 5](#)).

Donja were large heavy padded kimono made out of worn-out clothes quilted together. While rougher cloth was used as the outer layers, the harder hemp fabrics were used on the underside. Straw was strewn over the floor upon which a *boro* futon

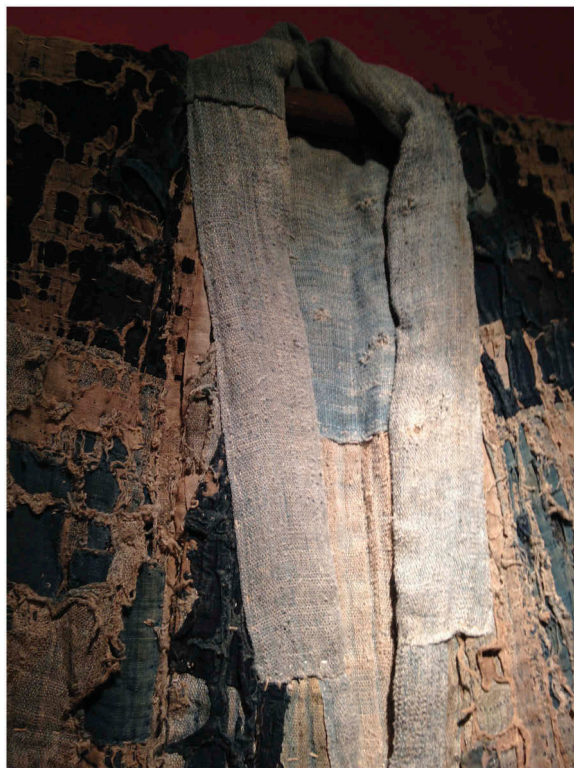


Figure 5. *Donja* neck stitching detail. Photo: Carol Hayes, taken with the kind permission of the Amuse Museum.

was laid down. The whole family would then sleep together, usually naked for warmth, wrapped inside the heavy *donja*. Tanaka Chūzaburō reminds visitors to the exhibition of the popular saying ‘Wear a *donja* which can stand by itself when thrown’,⁴³ an aphorism that clearly demonstrates the strength of the re-stitched fabric used to make these communal garments.

Sashiko embroidery and Kurosawa’s vision of rural Utopia

The capacity of *sashiko* to act as an antidote to the ills of modern life was profiled in *Yume* (Dreams), a 1990 film and the final work of the great director, Kurosawa Akira. This film presents a series of eight surreal vignettes, ending with the pastoral utopia of the ‘Village of the Watermills’. This final tale is set in the Tsugaru region of Aomori where the villagers wear traditional Tsugaru and Nanbu *kogin* embroidered garments.

A small room in the *boro* exhibition at the Amuse Museum, with a display entitled ‘Traces of Kurosawa Akira’s and Tanaka Chūzaburō’s Dream’, is dedicated to the ‘Village of the Watermills’ segment of Kurosawa’s film. When approached by Kurosawa with a request to source ‘real’ farmers’ costumes, Tanaka collected 350 pieces of clothing which he lent to the director for use in the film. Just before production began, much of Tanaka’s own collection was designated as National Important Cultural Assets, and so he lost the right to film those items, and had to gather a whole new collection of garments specifically for Kurosawa’s use while filming. Happily, once production was completed, Kurosawa returned the items to Tanaka. These are the items now on exhibit at the Amuse Museum.⁴⁴

To Kurosawa, dreams were the very essence of ‘pure and sincere human desires’, and when filming he aimed to capture the ‘bold, audacious forms of representation that featured in dreams’.⁴⁵ In a letter to Tanaka Chūzaburō displayed in the exhibition, Kurosawa writes of ‘The Village of the Waterwheels’ as follows:

[Fifty years ago], my mentor, director Yamamoto Kajiro had a beautiful hat on display [...]. Attracted by the beauty of the local customs, Yamamoto had bought this ‘*tsumaori*,’ meaning brimmed or pleated, hat as a reminder of when, with me as assistant, he was in the Tsugaru region of Aomori directing *Uma* (1941, Horse). Now 50 years later, planning my new film *Dreams*, I remembered that hat and decided to use both the hat and the traditional folk customs of Tsugaru in one of the episodes of the film. I felt certain that this would allow me to create a sense of nostalgia for the good old days of a Japan of the past. ... ‘*The older something handmade is, the more beautiful it becomes, and so we must all protect and care for old things*’. I say this at every opportunity. This has become my personal motto and I believe that, as the curator of this museum, you, too, share this sentiment. ... Here in this museum collection, we are able to still come and see the beauty of the lost customs and traditions of Tsugaru. Nothing gives me more pleasure.⁴⁶

Clearly, the preservation of folk art and customs was very important to Kurosawa and the director was eager to profile in his final film both the beauty of the *sashiko* stitching styles of Tsugaru and the garments so decorated.

⁴³Tanaka, ‘Tsugaru Kogin to Nambu warazashi’, 61–69.

⁴⁴Amuse Museum Curators, ‘Kurosawa Akira to Tanaka Chūzaburō no ‘Yume no ato’ ni tsuite’.

⁴⁵Kurosawa, ‘Letter to Tanaka Chūzaburō’ [I’ve added this to reference list].

⁴⁶Kurosawa, ‘Letter to Tanaka Chūzaburō’.

Dreams opens with nostalgic pastoral music. In a direct reference to Natsume Soseki's *Yumejūya* (1908, *Ten Nights of Dreams*), each of the anecdotes opens with the line 'This was the dream I saw' written on a silent black screen in cursive white calligraphy. The first tale tells of a small boy who disobeys his mother's direction not to watch the wedding procession of foxes, while the second tells of Hina Matsuri dolls (displayed annually by families on 3 March to celebrate female children and to pray for their health that happiness) that come to life to speak for peach trees that have been callously felled. Through these first tales, Kurosawa establishes a sense of loss and nostalgia for a past that has been lost to swift and often brutal modernisation. The tales that follow also focus on death and memory, as four mountaineers barely survive a blizzard, and a military officer returning home after a tour of duty during the war is revisited by the ghosts of the many soldiers who died under his command. 'Mount Fuji in Red' and 'The Weeping Demon' (tales six and seven) are the darkest in the series. The former presents a horrific radio-active world in which six nuclear reactors situated on Mt Fuji erupt into a molten apocalypse, while the latter is set against a bleak, rocky scree-covered landscape where the protagonist meets a man-demon who declares that, in this post-nuclear world, all is mutation. Here, humans are gradually morphing into *oni* (demons), whose variously numbered horns represent their own internal corruption.

Each of these preceding tales sets the scene for the final story, 'The Village of the Watermills', which also opens with the line 'This was the dream I saw' again written on a silent black screen in cursive white calligraphy. Almost immediately, viewers hear the sounds of running water and small birds chirping, as a man, wearing blue jeans, a blue cloth hat and a check shirt, sets out across a narrow, low-set wooden bridge that spans an idyllic river to a pastoral landscape. Played by the actor, Terao Akira, who has been the protagonist in each of the previous dreams, this man, with nothing more than an old canvas backpack, represents the 'everyman' figure who is a feature of Kurosawa's works. Crossing the bridge, the man meets a group of carefree children, all clad traditionally in *zori* sandals, short knee-length kimono and over-aprons decorated with Tsugaru *kogin* embroidery. Following the children to the other side of the bridge, the protagonist eventually meets an old man, played by Ryū Chishū (1904–1993), wearing an indigo dyed *sashiko* stitched kimono, work pants and work armbands. As the pair converse, the visitor expresses concern about life in the village without modern conveniences such as electricity, but the old man responds:

We try to live the way man used to. That's the natural way of life. People today have forgotten ... that they're really just a part of nature. They destroy the nature ... even though their lives depend on it. They always think they can make things better. Especially scientists. [...] They invent things that in the end only make people unhappy. And yet they're so proud of their inventions. What's worse, most people think the same way. They view these inventions ... as if they were miracles. They worship them. They don't realise that they're losing nature. They even don't see that they're all going to perish. The most important things for human beings are clean air and clear water ... and the trees and grass that produce them. Everything is being dirtied. Polluted forever. The dirty air and dirty water ends up dirtying the very hearts of men.⁴⁷

⁴⁷Kurosawa, *Yume*.

Just like the Lorax from the Dr Seuss work *The Lorax*, this old man talks for the trees, for an older, more traditional life in tune with the natural world. Kurosawa chose to clothe the actors from this watermill village in Tsugaru *kogin* kimonos and embroidered headscarves and aprons to add symbolic impact to this dream of an idyllic life in which a community rejects the polluting effect of the modern machine for a simpler and more sustainable existence. In this final sequence of Kurosawa's film, *sashiko* embroidery becomes a metaphor for the utopian life that modern man has let slip from his grasp. *Dreams* received mixed reviews and few commentators referred to the costumes specifically.⁴⁸ However given developments in global warming since the film's release, we might see the final tale in Kurosawa's film, and particularly the old man's soliloquy, as a particularly perspicacious foretelling of the consequences of the twenty-first century world's over-reliance on human exceptionalism. Like Governor Takeuchi's valorisation of *kogin sashiko*, Kurosawa's nostalgia for a 'village of the waterwheels' can be dismissed as masculine longing for something that never quite existed. Nevertheless, many women and also men participate in the resurgent handmade movement precisely because, as implied by the words of the Ryū Chishū character, they feel a strong sense of rupture from nature in a hyper-modern world. Owen Hatherley has been trenchantly critical of the political naivety of what he terms 'austerity nostalgia'.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, in the same way that Kurosawa found inspiration for his film in the beauty of Tsugaru *kogin sashiko*, countless women and many men around the globe are reviving these stitching forms as a means of salving their own sense of disconnect from the world profiled in the last sequence of the director's final masterpiece.⁵⁰ Hobbycraft, Britain's largest craft supplier notes in their 2018 Craft Report, that 54% of the UK population currently 'use craft to relax and feel good' and the fact that Hobbycraft's online search engine receives 60,000 monthly searches for the term 'mindfulness' further evidences this trend.⁵¹ This has led to 'the rise of the "slow stitch" movement: designed to induce a state of mindfulness, [that] switches focus to the process of making, rather than the finished product itself'.⁵² Writing for the lifestyle section of *The Observer*, Karen Kay also reports on this increasing popularity, especially among men, flagging the impact of Jamie Chamber's 'Mr X Stitch' as one example, of young hip men and women exploring textile crafts: his social media followers number more than 17,000.⁵³

⁴⁸The *New York Times*' Vincent Canby found the style of the 'Village of the Watermills' to be 'lyrical' and 'the mood intended to be healing', Canby, 'Kurosawa's Magical Tales of Art, Time and Death'. The *Washington Post*'s Hal Hinson thought the movie in its entirety was 'featureless and undistinguished', Hinson, 'Akira Kurosawa's *Dreams*'.

⁴⁹Hatherley, *Ministry of Nostalgia*, 10.

⁵⁰While *sashiko*-specific statistics are difficult to provide, the great variety of articles, blogs and Facebook pages attest to its popularity, both in Japan and in other countries. For example, popular online blog, *Craft Business* highlights the dramatic increase in interest in *sashiko* over recent years, (<https://www.craftbusiness.com/editorial-blog/view/sashiko-and-personalisation-are-popular-stitching-trends>).

⁵¹Pierre-Davis, 'Let's get making'.

⁵²Craft Business Editorial Blog, 'Discover the Key Sewing Trends for 2018'.

⁵³Kay, 'A stitch in time saves stress down the line'. See Jamie Chamber's Tedtalk, 'Why X Stitch is important' can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kr154jHDeLY> and the Mr X Stitch website at <https://www.mrxstitch.com/>. Other facebook groups of enthusiasts include, *Sashiko's* 3860 followers (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/sashiko/>), *Sashiko Stitchers's* 3,025 followers (<https://www.facebook.com/sashikostitchers/>). *Watts Sashiko* Blog at <https://www.wattssashiko.com/blog>.

Conclusion

In addition to giving an account in this paper of the emergence of *sashiko* as a stitching form that was both functional and decorative, I argue that this form of handwork has a healing and consoling role for contemporary stitchers whose daily lives are less embedded in the routines and cycles of natural life. It is useful in this context to remember that the original *sashiko* patterns, devised by stitchers from the past, often replicated shapes and designs found in the natural world and also in everyday cultural life. Furthermore, Yamanobe's suggestion that *sashiko* embroidery at least partly had its antecedents in the practices of Buddhist monks underlines a spiritual element to this form of stitching.

There is a coda to this spiritual aspect of the *sashiko* tradition. In line with the Buddha's teachings about the humility and 'beggar spirit' of the 'funzoe' or rag-pile robe, the Buddhist tradition of hand-sewing a monk's or nun's robe, and of reinforcing and decorating the fabric of the robe with *sashiko* stitching, continues today as a spiritual strengthening of both the garment and the wearer. One example of a temple in Japan at which this practice is carried out is the Seiryōzan Koyōin in Shizuoka Prefecture.⁵⁴ Monks here posted details of this activity on their blog, noting how a number of temple parishioners had carefully sewn the robe featured using sections of old kimono. The Zen Buddhist Shao Shan Temple in Vermont, USA, founded in 1997, provides a similar example outside Japan.⁵⁵ Here, a group of parishioners worked together to create a hand stitched 'funzoe' for the 2013 installation ceremony of the incoming abbot. To construct this garment, parish members created a series of mountain panels which were then quilted together with *sashiko* stitching to form the robe.

As noted at the outset of this paper, the story of *sashiko* stitching is one of both loss and rebirth. Having all but disappeared in the early 1900s, this stitching technique has been reborn in the contemporary craft and quilting world. With its other-worldly associations, *sashiko* stitching offers a powerful form of consolation to those who negotiate daily the increasingly invasive demands of contemporary life, and together with other quilting traditions provides an important 'example of the perseverance of tradition in the face of a rapidly shifting global society'.⁵⁶

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⁵⁴Seiryōzan Koyōin Exhibition Blog, 'O-kesa'.

⁵⁵Shan Shan Temple, 'Fun sewing funzoe robe'.

⁵⁶Murakami, 'A stitch in time is much more than nine'.

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