

## **Fiber Futures: Japan's Textile Pioneers**

### **Introduction for Educators**

"Fiber art" and "textile art" are broad, catch-all terms that, in the case of *Fiber Futures: Japan's Textile Pioneers*, refer to artworks fashioned through the use of a variety of materials and techniques common to both fine art and craft practices. You will see artworks made of an array of fibrous materials from the natural world (derived from plants and animals) and synthetic materials. Some of the materials may be easily recognizable and minimally processed. Other media are high tech and magical looking because they have undergone a transformative process. The show contains artworks made from flax, polyester yarn, cotton, paper, nylon, sisal hemp, wool, thread, gauze, wax, stainless steel filament, wood, iron, lead and more.

The artists in the exhibition employed sewing, felting, weaving, batik, *shibori*, basketry, stitching, as well as many other original and secret techniques. You may ask why we don't simply call these artworks "sculptures" or "mixed media installations"? It would not be incorrect to do so. The term fiber art is used, in part, to identify the artists that produced these works as pioneers who deviate from traditional practices (textile production, paper making, basketry, weaving, spinning, dyeing, etc.) within their country and have deliberately chosen to work outside tradition. They borrow, adapt, transform and sometimes outright revolutionize traditional techniques and materials to new and unique ends. It is instructive to examine the sources of their inspiration to appreciate the radical nature of their production, but also equally important to evaluate the assembled artworks on their own terms.

By making this break from tradition, these Japanese innovators often increase their possibilities for self-expression, sometimes expand their exhibition opportunities at home and abroad, and also connect to a larger international community of peers interested in similar topics, issues, techniques and materials.

*Fiber Futures: Japan's Textile Pioneers* is organized into four thematic sections that offer the viewer a number of lenses by which to consider the works: material, conceptual, technical, spatial and philosophical:

- Fiber Art and Textile Design
- Fiber Sculpture
- Wall Mounted Works
- Sculpture, Nature, and Environment

Use the related questions below for self-guided visits to the gallery.

#### **Categories & Classifications: Design, Fine Art, Craft, High Fashion**

*How and why do we categorize works on display in museums and galleries according to discipline and genre?*

What are the criteria for each category?

Are there examples that belong to more than one category? Explain.

#### **Hybrids: Unique Combinations of Traditional & Contemporary Techniques**

*Identify examples of artworks that put a new twist on a time-honored traditional technique and/or material.*

How might tradition be "liberating" for an artist?

"Constraining?"

What advantages are there to borrowing from tradition?

What might be the disadvantages?

#### **Nature**

*What does "nature" mean to you?*

How much does our concept of nature have to do with our culture? The time in which we live? Where we live?

What are some of the ways artists express and or reflect an interest in nature?

Compare and contrast their different strategies.

#### **Life Cycles**

*Humans, animals and plants all experience stages of life: birth, growth/development, decline and death. Identify works of art that reference stages in the life cycle.*

What associations and messages are conveyed with these stages of life? What metaphors can you find for the beginning of life? For growth?

#### **Time & Memory**

*Identify examples of work that convey a sense of time.*

What icons or symbols can you find in *Fiber Futures* that represent the eternal?

Which materials suggest ephemerality? How?

What formal choices does Rei Saitō employ to evoke her childhood memory of snow falling?

How does Emiko Nakano suggest memories of Cambodia in her piece entitled *Tsuranaru (Range) Cambodian Letters*, 2008?

## **Environmental Issues**

*Identify artists who create work focused on environmental issues and sustainability.*

What can artists achieve by creating work on these topics?

How is Dai Fujiwara's *Sun House* heated in the winter and cooled in the summer?

What material does Kyōko Ibe often recycle in her work?

Why does Kiyomi Iwata use *kibiso*?

## **Overview**

A brief overview of select influential events in the history of 20th-century fiber art follows below to provide context for the contributions of the artists in *Fiber Futures: Japan's Textile Pioneers*.

A rich weaving, dyeing and embroidery heritage has existed in Japan for millennia, particularly in Kyoto, alongside a diversity of indigenous basketry, paper-making and other related techniques. Starting in the 1880s, Western-style tapestries began to be woven in Kyoto; these were evocative of European pictorial tapestries, with lavish recreations of Japanese narrative paintings, historical scenes or still-life subjects. In 1927, the founding of a Decorative Art section in the Teiten (the official, state-controlled, juried art exhibitions controlled by the Imperial Art Academy) removed the imperative of utility and slowly allowed tapestry artists to experiment, inspired by Western artists such as Jean Lurçat (1892-1966), the celebrated revitalizer of French tapestry. Lurçat helped pave the way for reconsideration of fiber's artistic possibilities and the way it could be displayed, setting the stage for a new art form free of formal, historical or technical restrictions.

The wholesale reconsideration and expansion of art-making practices, conventions of display, viewer participation and acceptable media, coupled with the post-World War II global craft movement, provided a strong impetus for Japanese artists to break with tradition. Just as ceramic artists re-envisioned the potential of ceramics as sculpture, weavers, dyers and others working with fibers and textiles in the 1960s and 1970s developed a new discipline, informed by art movements that incorporated non-traditional materials such as sand, plaster, wax, tar, rags, broken glass, or scrap metal, as well as the burgeoning fiber art scene in Eastern Europe and the United States.

Notable figures in the establishment of fiber art as a distinct practice in America include Anni Albers, a former instructor at the Bauhaus who came from Germany to

the U.S. at the behest of Philip Johnson in 1933 to teach at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. She was the first weaver to exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in 1949, in a show that toured the U.S. from 1951-53. Lenore Tawney, an artist who studied sculpture with Alexander Archipenko, drawing with Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and weaving with Marli Ehrman (another Bauhaus émigrée), created large, abstract and free-standing sculptural forms that united the formal and intellectual concerns of all three practices. She and Albers were agents in the expansion and ultimate dissolution of boundaries between craft and artistic disciplines. Tawney's first solo exhibition, at the Staten Island Museum in 1961, was later heralded by Mildred Constantine of the Museum of Modern Art and textile designer legend Jack Lenor Larsen as being "the point at which Art Fabric was healthfully and joyously launched in America." Tawney's show formed the nucleus of the seminal 1963 exhibition *Woven Forms* at New York's Museum of Contemporary Crafts, and in 1964 it was exhibited at the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Zurich with works by Sheila Hicks, another influential textile artist who was a student of Josef Albers (Anni's husband). Hicks re-envisioned textiles as a basis for three-dimensional sculpture and synthesized aspects of architecture, sculpture, painting and textile-making techniques in her work.

In 1962, the first International Biennale of Tapestry in Lausanne, Switzerland marked a watershed for many textile and fiber artists, when artist Magdalena Abakanowicz entered a group of textile objects that were awarded a category of their own by the judges because they did not fit into any of the show's established groups. The structures were assembled from pieces and hung from the ceiling to create a uniquely expressive environment, described as "cocoon," "underwater vegetation," "rain-swollen clouds," "cloaks," "chambers," "forests" and "shells." *Fiber Futures* artist Kyōko Kumai cites Abakanowicz and Hicks as influences.

Within Japan, Toshiko Takagi, a trained tapestry weaver who became a pioneer in fiber art, came into contact with new trends in contemporary art while teaching part time at Kyoto City University of Arts in the 1960s. Gradually her work became more abstract and she began to experiment with flax, a material more suited to her three-dimensional work inspired by origami.

Fifteen subsequent Lausanne Biennales, up to 1995, played an important role in showcasing the movement's leading practitioners, including those from Japan.

## Key Events in the Early Years of Japan's Fiber Art History

- 1971** *New Textile Artists* exhibition at Kyoto National Museum of Modern Art introduced the experimental endeavors of young Japanese textile artists and ushered in the first formal recognition of the fiber art movement in Japan.
- 1973** First Japanese textile artists admitted to the Sixth International Biennale of Tapestry at Lausanne.
- 1975** Masakazu Kobayashi won first prize at the First Triennale of Tapestry held in Lodz, Poland.  
*Fiber Futures* artist Shigeo Kubota first participated in the International Biennale of Tapestry at Lausanne.
- 1976** *Fiber Works—Europe and Japan* held at Kyoto National Museum of Modern Art.
- 1977** *Fiber Futures* artists Shigeo Kubota, Akio Hamatami, Tetsuo Kusama and Hiroko Watanabe participated in the International Biennale of Tapestry at Lausanne.  
*Fiber Works—America and Japan* held at Kyoto National Museum of Modern Art.

During the boom time of the 1980s, fiber artists were regularly commissioned to create large-scale works for public spaces and corporate offices throughout Japan. This, in addition to the continuous presence of Japanese fiber artists in major international exhibitions and museum collections, has confirmed their long-lasting and significant contribution to contemporary art at home and abroad.

## BOOKS FOR EDUCATORS

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- Shaw, Madelyn and Irvin, Kate. *Beyond Weaving: International Art Textiles*. Wilton, CT: browngrotta arts, 2006.
- Wada, Yoshiko Iwamoto; Rice, Mary Kellog; and Barton, Jane J. *Shibori: The Inventive Art of Japanese Shaped Resist Dyeing*. New York: Kodansha USA, 1999.