

Sashiko: the creativity of rural Japan

Sashiko kimonos come, not from royalty but from the modest peasants of Japan.

Sashiko is an old form of hand sewing but it was not created in the affluent areas of Japan. On the contrary, it originated in rural Japan. In comparison to Japan's luxurious silk fabrics, sashiko is considered a “folk textile” because it was designed and worn by the underprivileged classes (Pickett Setsu, 211). Sashiko derives from the Japanese word 刺し子 which means “little swabs.” The creation of this ancient technique was quite ingenious. This textile tradition does not require industrial machinery or anything like this, the only thing people need to create these original designs is a needle, thread, and endless hours of endurance in order to create sashiko quilts and make the fabric stronger (Loudon, 30). People had the necessity to create something that will resist the winter period. Wintertime in Japan can be harsh, and people had to create resistant pieces of clothing to get through the cold. To avert the coldness of the winter and agonizing wind, peasants had to create layers of clothing to keep the warmth and reinforced the fabric (Murono, 36). Sashiko is the best example that when necessity comes, people find new approaches to resolve a problem.

Sashiko was winter clothing for hardworking women in farming or fishing families. The technique was developed during the Edo period (1615–1868). This technique was a well-established during the Meiji era (1868-1912). Sashiko gives life back to clothes by creating intricate and original patterns. The embellishments and embroidery are what make sashiko unique (Biscoe, 8). According to Professor Setsu Pickett from the University of Oregon, “Cloth and thread were precious in pre-modern Japan, and garments were carefully patched and reinforced to extend their useful life” (Pickett Setsu, 211). Particularly, the

attraction to sashiko is the meticulous hand-sewn work that displays the vivid color contrasts of deep blue Indigo and pure white cotton in geometric patterns. Yet, the now-infamous Japanese design was not well known until the 18th and 19th centuries due to the high cost of cotton (Pickett Setsu, 212). Cotton was a highly sought-after material that was attained only by the Japanese aristocracy. As the exclusivity of the cotton thread decreased, the creative manipulation of cotton grew as the thread spread throughout rural Japan (Pickett Setsu 212) The geometric patterns created with even and smooth lines of thread which overtime become one with the original fabric are visually identified as sashiko stitch work. (Murono, 37)

During prewar Japan, Traditional Japanese-style clothing has a purpose and it was much more economical and practical. A piece of sashiko can tell an entire story of a hardworking family trying to survive poverty (Briscoe, 10). The technique evolved over time incorporating new patch quilts and patterns. The mends of clothing were done by using the same fiber dyed the same color to camouflage the patch and make it blend with the other piece of clothing (Satsuki Milhaupt, 31). Later on, people use these fabrics, patterns, and colors to their advantage creating fascinating geometric shapes that interlock with exactitude and finesse. Remarkable tessellations materialize onto the fabric creating breathtaking patterns. The sashiko thread was highly cared for because of its expensive price and a knotting technique was developed. (Seward, 53)

Sashiko began from high necessity among lower-class Japanese citizens. The purpose was not to build an art form for profit, instead, it was for survival and to create a safe life (Sashi Co.). The Japanese townspeople formally assigned firemen roles in 1718, they were known as *Machibikeshi*. Seeing how sashiko thread highly strengthened simple fabric into nearly indestructible garments developed the use of specific techniques designed for the town's firemen. Whereas before the thread was carefully used to overlay the original in hopes

of reinforcing and strengthening the material, the hopes were now in the name of survival. (Shaver, 576). The design of the stitching changed as the intentions of the utility for the final material shifted. The *Machibikeshi* wore coats made with three layers of cotton which were all sustained by seven stitches per inch, vertically throughout the entirety of the garment. Sashiko stitching was so accountable that every layer the *Machibikeshi* wore entailed the sashiko thread, this included the underwear, hood, short coat, long coat, pants, and mittens (Shaver, 576). When the men arrived at the scene they poured water over their clothing, the thick absorbent thread soaked in over 70 pounds of water. This unique power of soaking in and retaining water is why the sashiko thread has been advanced into multiple applications throughout history. (Shaver, 577)

There are different types of patterns in sashiko and one of the elements that all of these designs have in common is stitch consistency. Each region has a different style, the most prominent examples are *shippo* (seven treasures of Buddha), *seigaiha* (blue ocean wave), and *asa no ha* (hemp leaf). The main purpose of these stitch patterns was to make the fabric thicker and stronger (Briscoe, 22). Each area had a different stitch length and space which varied from five to ten inches and required a steady hand as well as precise craftsmanship. During the Edo era, people did not have much skill to create well-elaborated designs. Sewing techniques were rushed. They were in a time crunch to create clothing that would last them the winter and their sewing was rushed (Briscoe, 23). Contemporary sashiko uses a slow stitch to create a more uniform pattern that has the same stitch size as the space making the suture one by one. If in the past, peasants used this slow stitching process to mend their clothes, they would have suffered during the wintertime. (Sashi Co.)

Each region of Japan has different examples of sashiko due to its diffusion and innovation. The most prominent regions that confection the different types of sashiko are

Tsugaru, Nanbu, Shimokita, and Shonai. Their creativity and originality in this craft are why sashiko is still relevant in Japanese culture. Therefore, sashiko is a recollection of the history, tradition, and customs of Japanese culture. (Shaver, 571)

Tsugaru is located in western Japan, the scorching heat makes this city an optimal year-round farming location for rice, apples, and soybeans. This means that Japanese farmers are constantly moving around and need flexible clothing to complete their daily tasks. This explains why farming men have developed working vests using the *Kogin* stitching style. (Shaver, 573). The *Kogin* stitching style results in a tough cloth, which resists wear and tear from the sun, fertilizers, and sharp working tools. The *Kogin* stitching style is so heavily relied on that for over a century during the Meiji Period (1868-1912). The hemp cloth was the only material allowed for use while the farmers worked on the plantations (Shaver, 573) The white geometric patterns are unique to the Japanese farmers by representing the strength necessary to farm through the excellence of strength in the stitch. The weaving technique used in Tsugaru is so durable and accountable for protecting the Japanese farmers during the Meiji period that the techniques along with the materials have now been applied to handbags, shoes, cigarette cases, and wallets (Shaver, 574). The technique is especially entrusted because longitudinal stitches known as warps are manipulated for strength by stitching them over and under an odd number of times. The applied uses have changed throughout time but the reliance on the durability of the technique will never change. Interestingly, a reverse change to the stitching technique of over and under an odd number of times completely shifts the use of the final material. (Briscoe, 20)

When the stitch is over and under on an even count, the final uses of the material will be delicate. This style of over and under an even number of times is seen in the Nanbu region as *hishizashi*. The most differential and notable aspect of the *hishizashi sashiko* is the color.

This is because the style was created with standing out from the natural surroundings in mind. The land was dry with earth-toned colors and therefore the kimonos stitched in the *hishizashi* style were bright blue and light blue (Shaver, 574). Whereas other Japanese regions sought a more classic style of combining colors by preserving the natural white color of the cotton. People of the Nanbu region had the opportunity to get creative in their dying warps and wefts (Shaver, 575). The creative opportunity arose in the early twentieth century when the trade of goods by sea increased and Nanbu found itself as the main port for surrounding cities. Being the first to receive potent dyes which replaced the need for natural indigo, safflower, gromwell, and gall nuts was liberation and enhanced the quality of life for the Japanese. (Shaver, 575)

This time in history is when the Japanese began applying high importance to color. The now-famous Yin and Yang were assigned black and white colors to express harmony and balance in every aspect of our lives. The two colors are total opposites of each other but totally necessary to form the sign, therefore visually representing the theory of dualism (Briscoe, 12). Even further as the colors were readily available and stable to reach it awakened the logical minds of the Japanese emperors and the military rulers to assign color by rank. Assigned to Emperor Kotoku's likings, the first and second ranks wore purple, the third wore lavender, the fourth wore red, and the fifth rank was to wear navy blue. In addition to paying special attention to the environment when choosing the colors for kimonos and vests, Japanese designers also understand the importance of human anatomy in relation to fashion. (Kamachi, 123)

Sashiko is still relevant in modern societies and it has been incorporated into the fashion industry. There is a special style of dress for the Japanese-American bride. The dress is a non-traditional dress as it is designed as a blend of American and Japanese styles. This is

unique to any other application of sashiko as the specific intentions of the dress are that it must be worn by a Japanese woman who is marrying an American man (Kallal, 56). Visually, the giveaway to identifying sashiko is white thread embedded into the indigo-dyed cloth but in sashiko for bridal dresses; there is no color contrast. In lieu of indigo thread, the original white cotton thread color is preserved (Kallal, 59) “A detachable three-section sleeve can be worn on the upper right arm to modify the visual image” (Kallal, 57). The dress is elegant and light with a sheer translucent fabric that is protected by China silk underneath. The dress sways in the wind as the bride moves around freely and comfortably. The trusted sashiko stitching techniques allow the bride to feel comfortable while looking marvelous on her special day (Kallal, 57). The bridal dress is more than one piece, it has added layers on the sides of the hips that extend through the length of the bride’s legs. It is also unique in that the sleeves are removable and the length of the sleeves is adjustable. The sashiko bridal dress is perfectly applied to American culture as the dress is simple and agrees with the custom of dressing in all white (Kallal, 58). As with most clothing that is sown with sashiko thread and in the sashiko stitching style the garment must be made by hand and custom fit to the individual. This is an advantage for the designer because it allows for stylistic creativity, and the bride’s dress is unique to her. Designer M. Jo Kallal presented the final bridal dress to his customer after many discussions of how the dress would be created with a modern flair yet be accepted by both the American and Japanese families of the bride and groom (Kallal, 59). Wedding dresses in America usually smooth silk bodices from the chest to the ankles of the bride, the same aspect is to be kept in the design of the Sashiko bridal dress (Kallal, 57). Therefore, Kallal explains in his article on the Excellence of Design that “custom torso and sleeve blocks were constructed and fitted on the client” (Kallal, 58).

As sashiko patchwork and quilting ornaments were more known by westerners, people intend to use this technique to make fabrics more appealing. The pattern that will be woven into the cloth depends on the use of the final material, for two reasons. The first is the intended final look and the second is the strength that is needed for the intended use of the item. (Seward, 12). In homes all around the world, it is common to find table coasters, mats, cushions, and curtains spread throughout the house as decoration and for purposeful uses. The items that decorate the home must be aesthetically appealing and withstand the wear and tear of use over time. The home cushions have texturized sashiko thread embroidered into large patterns with alternating colors (Briscoe, 30). All of the highly detailed work must be done by hand, demonstrating special attention to the placement of the thread and the overall combination of colors.

How is sashiko relevant today? Sashiko is stitching fabric with a higher purpose. It is a form and a process of stitching that recycles, repurposes, and re-innovates the standard clothing it takes the ordinary and recycles it into the extraordinary. Sashiko is an art form that evolved throughout time, it is not limited by rules (Sashi Co.). Instead, sashiko suits the objective and style of the artist. The mass appeal for the sashiko style of threading is the ability of self-expression, which has now gained a liking in Western culture. Sashiko is now popularized in the Western Fashion Industry (Briscoe 24-25). Expensive brands such as Okayama Denim are influenced by the Shonai sashiko style of Yamagata Prefecture. The brand has revolutionized the American fashion industry by incorporating high-quality sashiko thread into American basics. Clothing such as jeans, colorful men's socks, and men's button-down long-sleeve shirts are now decorated with thread. (Briscoe, 110)

By the 1950s, the introduction of other types of fabrics and techniques resulted in the decline of sashiko in rural Japan. Sashiko began its revival by the 1970s, it's increased popularity was demonstrated in Japan when people changed the way they dress. Sashiko began to be valued by the people tied to its origin. Throughout its timeline, sashiko has been an integral part of Japanese culture and fashion art (Briscoe, 15). It began from being simplistic and rustically designed and is now diffused throughout Japan, allowing people to be creative and innovative. There are over 500 patterns and designs for sashiko, such as Hishizashi, Kogin, Kotoku, Shippo, Seigaiha, and Asa No Ha. What is most interesting about all the diverse applications and styles of Sashiko is the stylistic designs. These designs were created in several regions spreading throughout Japan by many different people for many different purposes (Briscoe, 22). Today, the attraction to Sashiko is still in its power to create an everlasting piece for everyday use. Sashiko has become a part of the Japanese culture, it was first taught in the 1600s and the technique is still being passed on through generations. (Kamachi, 122)

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