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Interlacing Histories
Loom Technologies and Pictorial Weaving in Late-nineteenth Century Japan and France

by
Leila Wice

Starting in 1872, Japanese artisans travelled from Kyoto to Lyon, to study in the town's famed silk-weaving studios. The Jacquard mechanism which they helped to introduce to Japan the following year made the *sorabiki-bata* draw-loom obsolete within decades. Even in its most basic application as an addition to hand-loom weaving, this new technology fundamentally transformed the geography and the economy of manufacturing processes by the turn of the century, but these new methods' impact on the actual fabrics which they were used to produce has yet to be fully explored.

In both countries at this time, woven pictures were one popular venue for testing the limits old and new technologies. Drafts and samples of actual woven silks in the thesis books of students from Lyon's weaving studios of the same decades show that some late nineteenth-century Japanese pictorial weaves are quite literal adaptations of Lyon patterning vocabularies. Upon actually mapping out the mathematical relationship of surface structures within most other textiles from this period, however, extremely complicated woven images often prove to be simpler than they first appear, executed on very basic draw-loom principals.

In addition to comparing objects in the collection of the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, to articulate the extent to which various technologies' different possibilities have been employed, I will also present copies of loom diagrams in industrial training manuals published in late nineteenth-century Japan from the library at Columbia University, and slides of pictorial weaves from the Havemayer collection of Japanese fabric donated to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1896.

Leila Wice is a Ph.D. student in Columbia University's department of East Asian Languages and Cultures. She studies Japanese history, specializing in the creation of national identity through textiles and clothing in the mid-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. From Spring of 1999 she will be in Japan on a Fulbright fellowship, conducting research for her dissertation, "Dressing Japanese: How Clothes Made a Nation and a Nation Made Clothes." She has helped to organize conferences and seminars, including the Donald Keene Center's 1996 seminar, "Unraveling Japanese Textile Histories: Cloth and Clothing in Modern Transition," at which she presented "Ainu Robes in Japanese Textile History: Precedents, Problems, Possibilities." She has also worked as a costume designer for dance and performance art.