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Prosperity, Longevity, and “Happily Ever-After”: Symbolism and the Sophistication of
Implication in Japanese *E-gasuri* (picture ikat) Textiles

Ann Marie Moeller

This paper explores the elegant indirectness that certain *e-gasuri* patterns exhibit while using traditional symbols to express familiar Japanese sayings and concepts. *E-gasuri* is the Japanese word for fabrics patterned with pictures created with the ikat resist dyeing technique. *Kasuri* essentially means ikat. *Kasuri* becomes *gasuri* in the compound word *e-gasuri*. *E* means picture. The ikat technique of dyeing threads before they are woven produces images with blurred outlines. This blurred appearance is a treasured aspect of the *e-gasuri* aesthetic. *E-gasuri* is usually (but not exclusively) associated today with indigo resist dyed blue and white cotton and bast fabrics.¹ The following three paragraphs describe the techniques that were most often used to create the majority of the Japanese picture ikat textiles that survive today.

By the early 19th century Japanese weavers were creating *e-gasuri* using yet unwoven warp threads, weft threads or both which were tightly wrapped by hand at predetermined intervals with a material that protected the wrapped areas of thread from absorbing dye when submerged in dye vats, usually filled with indigo.² When woven with painstaking care the precisely calculated predetermined white resist segments produced pictures in the finished cloth.

By the 1830's *e-gasuri* warp or weft threads were being patterned, again before being woven, with pairs of wooden boards carved with mirror images of a design that created a resist when clamped together over the threads. The clamped blocks could be submerged in dye vats. Often, holes were drilled into the blocks to allow dye into selected areas. Sometimes dyes were poured directly into the holes. Wax could also be poured into the holes to create a resist for subsequent dye baths.³ These textiles are called *itajime-gasuri* but they often include hand tied resist design elements as well.

In 1909 Shiraiishi Kai invented *hogushiori*, a technique using dye infused rice paste spread through stencils that produced images with a similar blurred outline appearance to *kasuri* but which allowed a much bigger color palette than is usually associated with traditional indigo and white *kasuri*. Warp or weft threads were held in place with loose temporary threads during this dyeing process. The dyed permanent threads were woven into fabric once the rice paste was dissolved and the temporary threads removed.⁴ *Niko-niko* is a common term for cotton fabrics and *meisen* is a common term for silks produced in this manner. Although *hogushiori* fabrics were rarely made in the exclusively blue and white color combinations associated with the term *e-gasuri*, I will include a *niko-niko* example in the paper. Many *niko-niko* textiles use traditional Japanese symbols as images and they were made specifically to mimic the blurred outlines of *e-gasuri*.

¹ Mary M. Dusenbury, “*Kasuri*,” in *Beyond the Tanabata Bridge*, ed. William Jay Rathbun (New York: Thames and Hudson in conjunction with the Seattle Art Museum, 1993), 59.

² Ichimichi Kazutoyo, “*San*’in *Kasuri*,” *Daruma* 34 (2002): 15.

³ Mary Dusenbury, “*Kasuri*: A Japanese Textile,” *Textile Museum Journal* (1978): 58.

⁴ Reiko Mochinaga Brandon, *Bright & Daring: Japanese Kimonos in the Taisho Mode* (Tokyo: Unsodo Publishing Co. in conjunction with the Honolulu Academy of Arts, 1996): 14.

Ancient luxury fabrics, preserved from as early as the seventh century in the Horyuji and Todaiji Temples, testify to the long history of Japanese fascination with symbolic images on cloth. By the nineteenth century Japanese society had developed a complex vocabulary of symbols that was understood by both commoners and elites.⁵ E-gasuri came to full flower at the same time and continued to develop both a visual symbolic vocabulary and ever more efficient production methods into the early Showa (1926-1989) era.⁶ During this period almost all strata of society used and admired e-gasuri.⁷ With so many examples still in existence e-gasuri fabrics provide a rich resource for examining how symbols on textiles were used to cleverly imply auspicious messages.



Figure 1. *Hippari*, Fowler Museum at UCLA, Krauss Collection. Photo: Bill Landes.

The hawks, eggplants and depictions of Mt. Fuji on the *hippari* above (Fig. 1) express wishes for a prosperous New Year. Clouds in the “fungus of immortality” form are additional auspicious symbols. It is a Japanese New Year tradition that if the first dream of the year includes Mt. Fuji, a hawk and an eggplant it portends coming good fortune.

This grouping provides a good example of the delight that Japanese took in using complex symbolism to express felicitous sentiments with traditional textiles. There are many explanations as to why this unlikely trio took on their special significance. One of the simplest to explain presumably arose from the Edo Period (1615-1868) merchant class. The word for eggplant (*nasu*) is a homophone for “giving birth”. Hawks seize their prey. Mt. Fuji is the highest mountain in Japan and in this context represented high profits. Therefore the combination symbolized the New Year “giving birth” to captured monetary gain.⁸

⁵ Merrily Baird, *Symbols of Japan: Thematic Motifs in Art and Design* (New York: Rizzoli, 2001), 19-21.

⁶ Horiuchi Izuho, “*Kurume-gasuri*: Horiuchi Izuho Collection,” *Daruma* 44 (2004): 18.

⁷ Although *e-gasuri* is most associated with the farming communities that produced much of the cloth, I have examined numerous pre-World War II hand tied resist *e-gasuri* kimono made from finely woven, and therefore expensive, bast fibers (*jofu*) in the Krauss Collection and the Arise, Inc. inventory which indicate an appreciation of *e-gasuri* by wealthy Japanese as well.

⁸ Henry D. Smith II, *Hokusai: One Hundred Views of Mt. Fuji* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1988), 206.

Much more common than the Mt. Fuji, hawk, and eggplant motif in e-gasuri (as well as in all Japanese artistic mediums) is the combination of pine trees, bamboo and plum blossoms known as “The Three Friends in Winter.” This ancient Chinese Confucian moral grouping has been embraced by the Japanese for centuries. Pine trees stay green all winter and therefore represent faithfulness. They grow to be large, ancient trees and symbolize strength, longevity and the wisdom associated with a long life. Bamboo trees also stay green in winter, thereby representing dependability. They are symbols of strength, flexibility and resilience because they bend, rather than break, under heavy snow. Plums are the first trees to flower in the New Year. The beautiful fragrant blossoms open when it is cold, often in snow, so they represent bravery, fortitude and grace in adversity. This triad is associated with festive new beginnings like New Years and weddings. They embody the wish that the new life ahead is filled with all the noble qualities associated with these plants.



Figure 2. *Futonji (bedding cover) panel (detail), Fowler Museum at UCLA, Krauss Collection.*

Photo: Jeffrey Krauss.

The e-gasuri weaver of the *futonji* (bedding cover) panel above (Fig. 2) chose both specific images representing the “Three Friends” and contrasting e-gasuri styles to depict them. This choice embedded additional levels of meaning into the design. Hand tied resist horizontal and vertical lines represent bamboo with its segmented stalks in an abstract fashion. The plum blossoms and pine needles were rendered more realistically. By using two kasuri styles the weaver emphasized the more recognizable pine and plum in the pattern. The words for pine (*matsu*) and plum (*ume*) form a homophone for “waiting to give birth,” a most desirable symbolic suggestion for the pattern of a futonji likely to be included in a trousseau.⁹ The paired

⁹ Mary M. Dusenbury, *Flowers, Dragons and Pine Trees: Asian Textiles in the Spencer Museum of Art* (Manchester: Hudson Hills Press, 2004), 248.

needle brackets are a symbol of marital faithfulness. The ideograph for person (人) looks similar to a double needle pine bracket and in this e-gasuri motif two pine brackets, representing the couple, are entwined beneath the plum blossoms.

Another ubiquitous group that adorns e-gasuri is the pairing of cranes (*tsuru*) and tortoises (*kame*).¹⁰ Cranes, which can actually live to sixty years, were said to live a thousand years. Tortoises can live hundreds of years and were said to live ten thousand. “*Tsuru wa sennen, kame wa mannen*” which translates to “crane a thousand years, tortoise ten thousand years” is a joyful congratulatory phrase commonly used in association with weddings. On the futonji panel to the left below (Fig. 3) the crane is flanked by the ideographs for years and a thousand. The crane flies above a stylized pine branch. Pines, too, were said to live a thousand years. The tortoise is bracketed by the ideographs for years and ten thousand. The implied wish on this *futonji* was for many, many years of happiness for the couple.



Figure 3 (left). *Futonji* panel (detail) with crane, well frame (*igeta*) and tortoise, Fowler Museum at UCLA, Krauss Collection. Photo: Jeffrey Krauss.

Figure 4 (right). *Futonji* (detail) with tortoise, well frame (*igeta*) and crane, Fowler Museum at UCLA, Krauss Collection. Photo: Jeffrey Krauss.

The cranes and tortoises on Figure 4 are rendered more simply than those in Figure 3. Notable on the tortoise’s shell are three hexagons which correspond to the central sections of the shell of the real animal. Hexagons alone represent tortoises and therefore long life.

¹⁰ The animals paired with cranes in Japanese art and textiles are actually sea turtles but they are conventionally called tortoises in English. The wavy lines behind their shells represent sea weed that has attached over millennia. Supposedly it takes five thousand years to accumulate the amount of sea weed worn by each of the sea turtles woven into the *e-gasuri* examples pictured in this paper.

“Tsuru wa sennen, kame wa mannen” is implied on the niko-niko panels (Fig. 5). Hexagons represent tortoises. The cranes are in origami form. Cranes mate for life and represent marital fidelity. Origami cranes are often folded as a prayer-like form of making a wish.¹¹ By the design choice of incorporating origami cranes the earnestness of the desire for a long and happy marriage was emphasized.



Figure 5. *Futonji panels (detail) with origami cranes, tortoise shell hexagons (kikko) and chrysanthemums, Fowler Museum at UCLA, Krauss Collection. Photo: Jeffrey Krauss.*

Cranes and tortoises are often depicted with “The Three Friends in Winter” on e-gasuri textiles (Fig. 6). This grouping represents the “Island of the Immortals,” Mt. Horai. The mythical island was said to be a marvelous place covered with waterfalls and bejeweled mansions for the Immortal gods. Long-lived animals like cranes and tortoises made it their habitation. Eventually Japanese mythology included “The Three Friends in Winter” as well and the combination of these five symbols became short hand for Mt. Horai. Miniature versions of Mt. Horai have been

¹¹ Strings of a thousand origami cranes made in request of a wish to be granted are commonly found hung in temples.

made and displayed at auspicious occasions for over a thousand years.¹² They can still be seen at Japanese wedding celebrations and are strongly associated with happy marriages as well as long and prosperous lives.



Figure 6. *Futonji panel (detail), Fowler Museum at UCLA, Krauss Collection. Photo: Bill Landes*

Figure 7. *Futonji panel (detail), Fowler Museum at UCLA, Krauss Collection. Photo: Jeffrey Krauss.*

The person who designed the futonji panel fragment in Figure 7 used more sophistication in the design elements depicting Mt. Horai and the blessings represented by this island than those seen in Figure 6. Although the cranes and plum blossoms are rendered straightforwardly in Figure 7, pine trees are represented by cones and needles. The tortoise shows up as the hexagon in a lattice of bamboo. In an additional level of implication the designer lets the hexagon become completed in the viewer's mind.

The final group of e-gasuri patterns relate to the legend of the “Old Couple of Takasago.” It is said that on misty nights you can still see a happy old man and woman sweeping pine needles on the Takasago shore of the Inland Sea. There is a famous Noh play, *Aioi no Matsu* (Pines of Abiding Love), about how the couple reveals to a passing priest that they are the spirits of two pine trees on the shore. They were transformed into these trees after having lived a long and happy lifetime together. Unsurprisingly this couple is symbolic of long life and marital happiness.

¹² John Dower, *The Elements of Japanese Design: A Handbook of Family Crests, Heraldry & Symbolism* (New York: Weatherhill, 1971), 29.



Figure 8 (left). Futonji panel (detail) with “Old Couple of Takasago” and geometric motif, Fowler Museum of UCLA, Krauss Collection. Photo: Bill Landes.

Figure 9 (right). Futonji (detail), Fowler Museum of UCLA, Krauss Collection. Photo: Jeffrey Krauss.

On the futonji panel (Fig. 8), Uba, the wife, is holding her broom and standing on the left side of the top segment. Jo, her husband, is on the right with his rake over his shoulder. Just the place name of Takasago is written on the futonji (Fig.9). The name alone implies a wish for a long and happy marriage.



Figure 10. Ningyo (figures) of the “Old Couple of Takasago,” Author’s collection. Photo: Author.

Images of the couple, like the one above (Fig. 10), are often displayed at weddings and anniversaries. Usually they are accompanied by a crane and tortoise (the tortoise has a gold shell in this example).



Figure 11. *Child's patch work kimono (detail), Fowler Museum at UCLA, Krauss Collection.
Photo: Jeffrey Krauss.*

In the e-gasuri above (Fig.11) all the symbols that signal the Takasago legend have been brought together to imply the wish for a long and happy marriage. There is Jo's rake, said to rake in good fortune. Uba's broom, which sweeps away troubles, is pictured as well. The pine trees that the couple becomes are surrounded by auspicious clouds in the form of the "fungus of immortality." The crane and tortoise that commonly accompany figures of Jo and Uba appear as well. The implied tortoise shows up as a hexagonal pine bark design.

In the hands of an inspired craftsperson e-gasuri textiles became the perfect vehicle for expressing implied communication. There are, of course, many easier ways of patterning fabric. Dying the threads before weaving requires precision and time. A weaver needs great skill to ensure these imprecise images come out in a recognizable form. E-gasuri textiles, with their indistinct illustrations, provided a medium well suited for expressing ingenious variations of everyday symbols that inferred familiar sayings and concepts.

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