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## The System and the Development of Contemporary Quilting in Japan

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## Introduction

Within just 30 years of the first introduction of American quilts to Japan, quiltmaking has become one of the most popular forms of needlework among Japanese women. It is estimated that there are now 2 to 3 million quiltmakers in Japan, which is one of the world's largest quilt populations. Unlike American quiltmakers, who often learn to quilt through informal practice with friends, families or local communities and by attending short-term workshops, many Japanese quiltmakers learn quiltmaking within an established organizational structure that administers teaching and certification programs.

This paper examines Japan's unique approach to teaching quiltmaking through the certification programs as well as the importance of these programs for the growing quilt population. In particular, it focuses on the certification programs offered by the Japan Handicraft Instructors' Association (JHIA), one of the major needlework schools in Japan. The JHIA is a non-profit organization that has attracted a significant number of quilt-enthusiasts to its classes modeled after the Japanese traditional cultural teaching structure called the *iemoto* system.

In order to explore how this traditional teaching system was adopted and accepted in the modern quilt industry, I interviewed the founder of the JHIA as well as quilt instructors and students who were actively involved in the JHIA's certification programs. In addition, I also observed several classes to research how Japanese women actually learn quiltmaking in a rigidly structured environment.<sup>1</sup> I argue that quiltmaking in Japan effectively appropriates the existing system of cultural learning—the *iemoto* system—and that the popularization of quiltmaking in Japan owes a great deal to these certification programs offered by major quilt schools.

## Introduction of American Quilts in Japan

Although patchwork and quilting traditions existed in Japan for many centuries, the quiltmaking style that many Japanese quiltmakers enjoy today is adopted from American quilting traditions. American quilts were widely introduced to Japan for the first time when one of the major

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<sup>1</sup> Interviews and fieldwork took place in the summer of 2008 in Tokyo, Japan. I interviewed Tadanobu Seto, founder of the Japan Handicraft Instructors' Association on August 22, 2008. I participated in quilt classes on August 22 and September 1 in Tokyo where I also interviewed instructors and students.

American quilt collections toured in Tokyo and Kyoto in 1975, at a time when there was an increasing interest in crafts and folk art.<sup>2</sup> Owing much to the great success of this very first exhibition of American quilts, American quilts became widely known and many Japanese women soon became interested in making them.

There was, however, little information available about quilting in the 1970s. A few Japanese women learned to quilt through trials and errors by looking at magazines, movies, and television shows such as *Little House on the Prairie*.<sup>3</sup> One of my interviewees, who have been quilting for more than 30 years, recalled that when she first started making quilts that there were “absolutely no resources” about quilting and no teachers to learn from. She considers that current quilters are “fortunate” to have so many resources, including the Japan Handicraft Instructors’ Association’s certification programs.<sup>4</sup>

The number of quilters in Japan began to increase when the Japan Handicraft Instructors’ Association (JHIA) started the certification programs in patchwork quilts in the 1980s. The JHIA accredited by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, was established in 1969 with a vision to nurture instructors to promote a variety of needlework and crafts to a broad audience. Behind the emergence of the organization specialized in needlework lay a growing interest in handicraft among the middle-class women that was closely connected with the expansion of the commercial market for domestic hobbies, including needlework and craft.

The founder Tadanobu Seto had seen growing interests in needlework and crafts from his publishing and distant learning businesses that targeted female audience. In fact, his first distant learning program for knitting begun in the 1950s and was attracting more than 100,000 students in a year. With the success of the knitting business, he also foresaw more business opportunities in the larger needlework industry. During the interview, he proudly said that thanks to the commercial success of distant learning for knitting, he was able to build, within a matter of a decade, a twelve-story building in the prime area in Tokyo, where his current commercial businesses and the JHIA are located. In response to the question how he came up with the certification programs, he simply said that “Japanese like certificates.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Toda, letter to Jonathan Holstein, 26 November 1974, Archives/Special Collections, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE

<sup>3</sup> Jacqueline M. Atkins, “Learning to Quilt in Japan,” in *Quilters Newsletter Magazine*, Oct. 2002, 49.

<sup>4</sup> Anonymous JHIA quilt instructor, interview with the author, September 1, 2008, Tokyo, Japan.

<sup>5</sup> Tadanobu Seto, interview with the author, August 22, 2008, Tokyo, Japan.

In this way, the JHIA's founder appropriated the traditional teaching system into a new business model. The male founder, who had limited interest in needlework itself at best, saw a potential business opportunity and women in Japan willingly accepted it as learning opportunities and a source of professional development. Seto further provided them with commercially successful products such as books, materials, and tools for knitting through his private company. When the popularity of knitting began to decline in the 1980s, Seto sought a new kind of needlework that would attract more people to the JHIA's certification programs. In 1986, the patchwork quilts became part of its curricula and today it enjoys the largest number of students and instructors among all other divisions of needlework.

Because it is the only institution affiliated with the Ministry of Education to offer certification programs in patchwork quilts, JHIA is regarded highly by its subscribers and has certified over 6000 patchwork quilt instructors to date.<sup>6</sup> Although the certification itself is not accredited by the Ministry, many people consider that JHIA's affiliation with the governmental office affirms the authenticity and authority of its education.

The development of contemporary quilting in Japan is tied much to the certification program of JHIA. The organization not only appropriated the existing system of cultural learning, the iemoto system, which had been in existence in Japan previously, but also, presented an attractive image of American culture to a large number of women. The JHIA effectively capitalized on the growing commercial quilt market, which, in turn, became intricately intertwined with the various activities offered by the JHIA.

### **The Iemoto System**

The Japan Handicraft Instructors' Association's unique certification program is modeled after the centuries-long iemoto system. The iemoto system is a hierarchal teaching organization that has traditionally administered education and transmission of arts and related philosophies. It is believed that this system was firmly established by the eighteenth century.<sup>7</sup> It is considered distinctively unique to Japanese culture and has been adopted in teaching of traditional arts such as *ikebana* (flower arrangement) and *sado* (tea ceremony).

The iemoto system is based on the idea that a single family may claim to be the only true authority for certain artistic forms and philosophies. The family maintains the teaching institution, and its authority is usually derived from the charismatic master teacher, or iemoto, whose expertise is initiated to his or her students through strict training. The iemoto system

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<sup>6</sup> *Handi Crafts*, Vol. 19 (2003), n.p.

<sup>7</sup> Matsunosuke Nishiyama, *Iemoto no Kenkyu* (Tokyo: Azekura Shobo), 7.

highly values the attainment of flawless art forms. The training often involves repetitious practices until fundamental techniques are perfectly mastered.

One of the most distinctive characteristics in the iemoto system is that the iemoto certifies students at various levels of experience and also issues certificates as authorized instructors to those who have achieved a certain level of skills and techniques. Once completing a course of required training, the students are eligible to receive a certificate issued by the iemoto. The certification is a proof that the iemoto approves of the individual's successful achievement of the fundamental skills of the art.

The certificate, however, is not issued by merely achieving a required education. In most iemoto institutions, individuals who wish to be recognized as certified instructors must pay fees to receive the certificate. Some institutions also require annual dues to maintain the status as their certified instructors. Thus the iemoto and certified instructors share a mutually dependent relationship. The iemoto and the institution he or she represents are supported by fees and dues from individuals who receive the certificates. It maintains the authority and the outflow of their artistry by strictly controlling who qualify to receive the certificates. In turn, the individuals who are certified by the iemoto may teach as members of a widely recognized institution, rather than trying to establish a teaching career on their own. The certificate is the tangible signifier that enables these instructors to embody the iemoto's artistic principles and authenticity.

In this way, the iemoto's artistry can be effectively diffused to a broader audience at various geographic locations throughout the country. Many Japanese cultural traditions, notably tea and flower arrangement ceremonies, have developed through this system with certified instructors who act as the intermediary between students and the iemoto.

### **The Japan Handicraft Instructors' Association's Certification Programs**

The Japan Handicraft Instructors' Association has effectively adopted this traditional teaching method into its certification programs. Its programs secure a reciprocal relationship between JHIA and its members. JHIA issues certificates that entitle individuals to teach quiltmaking using its original curriculum. In return, certified individuals pay fees to receive the certificates.

Like the iemoto system, JHIA's curriculum provides students with a step-by-step instruction process so that they may gain solid quiltmaking skills and techniques. During the coursework, students learn the fundamental technical skills required to complete a quilt, from drafting patterns and constructing blocks to quilting and finishing the edges. The instruction is quite detailed. For example, it shows the students how to use a calculator, compass, protractor, and mathematical formula in order to draw geometric quilt patterns.

In fact, the emphasis on the ability to draft a perfect pattern and to understand the history of that pattern is one of the strong aspects that distinguishes JHIA's patchwork curriculum from other "average" quilt classes. When I attended one of the classes, the instructor emphasized that it was essential to learn the history of quilt patterns to become a certified instructor, while explaining the history of the bow-tie pattern. She said:

"There are so many people who can make any quilts out of a book, but that's just that. You might be able to make a quilt with a pre-printed pattern, but you don't gain the ability to draft the pattern into the exact size you want. You don't learn historical background about the pattern."<sup>8</sup>

In the class, students were encouraged, or rather required, to use the JHIA brand gridded template for cutting out patterns. Such advice and suggestions by the instructor urged the students to buy. During the short breaks, students made a long line at the back of the classroom to purchase additional books, fabrics, materials and tools to complete their projects.

In addition to the detailed technical aspects of quilting, students also learn history of quilts and various quilt patterns from textbooks that repeatedly emphasize that the quilts they are making originated in the American culture and traditions. The instructor also shared historical anecdotes related to the quilt patterns they were learning in the class. Many students learned about American history and culture through quilts as described in the textbook and by the instructor. In this way, JHIA constructs the image of quilts as quintessentially "American" and this becomes strongly embedded in the mind of the students as they progress through the certification programs.

After completing the basic and advanced programs, individuals who wish to become a certified quilt instructor or simply want to further improve their techniques and skills proceed to the instructor certification program. In order to proceed to this level, students must have completed the basic and advanced courses regardless of their previous experience. This is because the certification program is not only designed to teach technical skills in quilting, but it also helps students to fully understand and be able to follow JHIA's curriculum and philosophies when they teach quilting as its certified quilt instructors.

Students in the instructor certification program also learn more complicated patterns and advanced techniques to perfect their techniques in patchwork quilts. During the course of this program, the instructor is required to keep "report cards" for each student. In this report card, the instructor gives grades and comments for each assigned project. Students must get straight As

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<sup>8</sup> The author, field notes, September 1, 2008.

through the entire coursework to be eligible to get the instructor certificate. If the instructor gives a B, they must re-do the assignment in order to complete the coursework.

The three levels of coursework—basic, advanced, and instructor programs—are usually offered at local quilt schools, quilt shops, or cultural community centers. In addition, JHIA also offers an intensive program for those who cannot afford to spend three years to become a certified instructor. The intensive 10-month program, which combines all three levels, is offered once a year in major cities including Tokyo and Osaka. The program is composed of two-day sessions for 10 consecutive months and requires a serious commitment. If a student misses a class, they have to make up for it the next year when the same session is offered before they can be certified.

Individuals who go through the certification programs devote themselves to quilting both physically and financially. In addition to the cost of classes and materials, most students who complete the programs apply for the certificate. The certificate for the basic program is 6,000 yen (about \$60), 8,000 yen (\$80) for the advanced program, and 30,000 yen (\$300) for the instructor program. These are just the prices for the physical certificate. The costs of classes vary by instructors. If one wishes to receive the instructor's certificate at the intensive 10-months program at JHIA, the coursework fees are 100,000 yen (\$1,000) and suggested material costs are 80,000 yen (\$800). In total, it could cost more than \$2000 to become a certified quilt instructor. However, while getting the instructor's certificate is more expensive, it means more to many students because it is a tangible proof that the person has successfully completed the JHIA's required curriculum.

Why are so many Japanese quiltmakers interested in getting the certificates in patchwork quilts? There are many individuals who have been quilting for 10 or 20 years and finally getting the certificate to check the level of their technical skills. One of my interviewees said that she just “did not feel right” to teach quilting for a fee when she did not have any certificates or qualifications even though she had already been making quilts for several years.<sup>9</sup> Another interviewee who is currently taking the intensive instructor program quit her job to fully devote herself to the 10-months coursework. She told me that she would like to enter quilt contests after she receives the certificate. Most of my interviewees also expressed interest in teaching quilting once they receive the certificate.

Although 50% of the program participants are involved in teaching to some extent, there are actually very few people who can make their own living by teaching quilting or as an artist.

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<sup>9</sup> Anonymous quiltmaker, interview with the author, August 22, 2008, Tokyo, Japan.

Most of certificate-seekers as well as quilt instructors are middle-class housewives who can afford to concentrate on earning the certificate for several years.<sup>10</sup> Some of my interviewees who actively teach quilting said that the support and understanding of the family is absolutely necessary in quilting because they are often away from home traveling long distance to attend workshops and exhibitions. They may teach some classes during the week, but they try not to teach on weekends for their families to fulfill their tasks as a homemaker. Even though many quilters repeatedly mentioned that the certificates and qualifications are a must in the current competitive society, they do not actively seek an independent career path as professional quilt instructors.

All my interviewees seemed quite comfortable with absorbing quilting through the strictly structured system. It also seemed quite natural for them to go through this certification process during their quilting career. One of the most experienced and popular quilt instructors at JHIA said that many Japanese prefer to master basic technical skills and forms in a structured system before they start making quilts in their own style. In fact, the textbooks do not encourage free self-expression, except for those that are targeted for advanced instructors. Instead, they suggest adding a little personal touch within the given guidelines. JHIA's curriculum with strict instructions in quilting—from the selection of colors, fabrics and patterns that they can use, to the deadline to submit their assignments—suit many Japanese quilters' learning attitudes. This is partly how prize-winning Japanese quilts in contests in the United States are produced.

## **Conclusion**

The traditional iemoto system produces intermediate instructors who transmit the iemoto's artistic forms, techniques and related philosophies. The iemoto and certified instructors maintain a strong mutual relationship through this system. The iemoto is able to diffuse his or her specialized artistry through certified instructors who will faithfully pass on the artistic forms and philosophies to their students. Certified instructors are able to present the credibility of their technical skills with the certificate issued by the famous master teacher. Many Japanese traditional arts have prospered with this ingenious teaching system.

Similarly, quilting in Japan has developed with the structured teaching system modeled after the iemoto system. The Japan Handicraft Instructors' Association has produced over 6000 certified patchwork quilt instructors with the help of its certification programs in the past twenty years. While many instructors may be middle-class housewives, some manage to teach a few classes. It indicates that there are many people who are learning quilting from these certified

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<sup>10</sup> Anonymous Japan Handicraft Instructors' Association staff member, interview with the author, August 22, 2008, Tokyo, Japan.



instructors. Thus, the certified instructors have further contributed to the education of prospective quilters and to the development of the quilt population in Japan.

From the students' point of view, the certificate may have various meanings. For some, it means the confirmation of their skills and techniques in quilting. For others, it means the credibility and authenticity of their teaching. The certification programs modeled after the iemoto system had a great influence on Japanese quilting by reaching the wide range of audiences who have different reasons and purposes for obtaining the certificates in patchwork quilts. Japan has incorporated American quilting traditions into its own culture by appropriating the existing teaching structure.

What distinguishes the contemporary quilt certification from the conventional iemoto system is that there are no designated personnel as the iemoto in the "quilt iemoto" system. It is the commercial teaching as well as lucrative quilt industries that spur the certification programs. Today many Japanese quilters who have emerged from the certification programs actively participate in quilt events, exhibitions, and contests in the United States. Some even began to give workshops at major international quilt events. These Japanese women reinterpret and reflect their understanding of American tradition in their quilts. Through quilting, the notion of American tradition now circulates transnationally with Japanese quilters as an active agent. The global movement of quilters and exchange of knowledge between Japanese and American quilters may re-conceptualize the meaning of quilting in the coming future.

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