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Betsy Sterling Benjamin

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Historical Buddhist *Kesa* Robes as Inspiration for Contemporary Fiber Art

by Betsy Sterling Benjamin

The Japanese *kesa* or *kasaya* in Sanskrit, originated in India in 4th century BC as a robe for the devotees of Buddha Sakyamuni. Created in the brick-like pattern of the Asian rice-field, the original *kasaya* were constructed of discarded fabric that was cleansed, redyed and stitched together with prayers as a devotional act. When Buddhism came to Japan in the 6th century AD the *kesa* followed, a treasured manifestation of the Buddhist dharma. One of the earliest extant Japanese *kesa*, composed of seven layers of silk, in nine vibrant colors, bound together with tiny stitches belonged to Emperor Shomu (701 - 756 AD, and is still housed in the Nara Shoso-in Repository.

While *kesa* are unfamiliar to many outside of the Buddhist community, they are in the collections of many museums outside of Japan. Five US museums have holdings of 100 *kesa* or more (MFA Boston, RISD, Metropolitan, Yale University and the Nelson-Atkins Museum).

As a fiber artist living in Japan for more than 18 years, I enjoyed the opportunity of basing my studio work on Japanese textile research. In 1999 I began a project to create a contemporary *kesa* for each of the seven continents in the proscribed manner of the Buddhist tradition. With extensive research and planning, seven robes were created from layers of Asian silk, using the resist dye technique of *roketsu-zome* as well as *shishu* (embroidery), *kata-kinsai* (stenciled gold powders) and quilting. The seven *kesa* I created were sent to sites on each continent where they were introduced as a contemporary form of a 2500 year old tradition. They were worn at the millennium in ceremonies of healing, unity and peace and continue now as a traveling exhibition.