

2002

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Iwamoto Wada, Yoshiko, ““Dichotomies in Silk: Past and Future”” (2002). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 425.
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“Dichotomies in Silk: Past and Future”

by
Yoshiko Iwamoto Wada

The traditions of silk weaving and hand dyeing of silk cloth have been an integral part of the Japanese society and aesthetic, as exists in the Imperial Court of Japan. To this day, the Empress still cultivates the same strain of silkworm *koishimaru*, dating back to the Nara period (645-794).

Currently, only a fraction of the raw silk materials (reeled silk yarn and cocoons) used to produce Japanese silk textiles are actually produced by Japan. Competition from current foreign imports, textile manufacturers' indifference to the quality of raw materials, and decreasing usage of kimonos challenge the viability of labor-intensive sericulture. The Gunma Prefecture Society for Sericulture Promotion (GPSSP), formed by the Prefecture in Japan, solicited expertise from a wide range of fields to promote silk and the artistry of sericulture and filature. Two projects stemmed from this effort, resulting in the production of contemporary silk fabric made from quality indigenous silk, for artists and designers to explore.

Using Gunma silk, American artists Ana Lisa Hedstrom, Genevieve Dion, and Joan Morris have been creating new bodies of work in wearable and non-functional art. Through application of traditional and modern techniques, they exploit the unique qualities inherent in the specially designed silk fabrics, finding ways to create textures previously inapplicable to all natural fibers -- particularly silk. In Japan, innovative textile designers like Jun-ichi Arai, also an advisor to the GPSSP, Yuh Okano, and Reiko Sudo of Nuno Corporation have been producing unconventional fabrics using the new technology. These works present possibility for future interpretation and application of silk as a modern material.