

1994

New Twist on Shibori: How an Old Tradition Survives in the New World When Japanese Wooden Poles Are Replaced by American PVC Pipes

Yoshiko Iwamoto Wada

University of California, Berkeley, yoshiko@yoshikowada.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>

 Part of the [Art and Materials Conservation Commons](#), [Art Practice Commons](#), [Fashion Design Commons](#), [Fiber, Textile, and Weaving Arts Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), and the [Museum Studies Commons](#)

Wada, Yoshiko Iwamoto, "New Twist on Shibori: How an Old Tradition Survives in the New World When Japanese Wooden Poles Are Replaced by American PVC Pipes" (1994). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 1051.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/1051>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

NEW TWIST ON SHIBORI: HOW AN OLD TRADITION SURVIVES IN THE NEW WORLD WHEN JAPANESE WOODEN POLES ARE REPLACED BY AMERICAN PVC PIPES

YOSHIKO IWAMOTO WADA

Center for Japanese Studies, 2223 Fulton St., University of California,
Berkeley, CA 94720

The subject of my talk is *arashi shibori* or pole wrap resist. Although at times it is hard to recognize some *arashi* effects as such, technically *arashi shibori* is one of many forms of tie-dye. After thirty years of its exploration through art-to-wear, dyed and painted tapestries, three dimensional sculptures, and mixed media in the United States, various forms of tie-dye have now become part of the lexicon of American fabric design and fiberarts vocabulary.

On the one hand, there has been much effort by textile specialists to circumvent the term "tie-dye," due to its association with the Grateful Dead, the rock band cult figures with their "dead heads" dressed in tie-dyed T shirts. Or conversely, some textile scholars apply the term tie-dyed fabric to both ikat and *shibori* fabrics of various ethnic origins. However, tie-dyeing yarns to weave cloth and tie-dyeing cloth itself present two very different circumstances which require different processes, and therefore result in two dissimilar effects. *Plangi* and *tritik* have also been used to refer to some of the "tie-dyed" textiles, although I have often found an inconsistent use of the term *plangi*. As far as I can tell, the term *tritik* is always used to indicate stitch-resist technique, but *plangi* seems to refer to gathered and bound resist, or stitched and bound--sometimes capped resist, as well as to many other tie-dye processes. On the other hand, a majority of Japanese *shibori* terms are quite particular as to the process required to create a specific pattern. For those unfamiliar with Japanese terms, I choose to use English terms, such as clamp-resist, stitch and bound resist, and pole wrap resist, etc. Nonetheless, this confusion in the technical terms used in one area of surface design vocabulary is a good example of just how the "contact and crossover" of these culturally specific fiber arts practices may need further articulation to continue in a new context.

Arashi shibori is one of many processes in Japanese *shibori*, shaped resist dyeing technique, which has been explored in the US since 1975 when I first introduced *shibori* at the Fiberworks Center for the Textile Arts in Berkeley. Now it has blossomed into an innovative genre in the U.S. because of artists like Ana Lisa Hedstrom, D'Arcie Beytebiere, Chad Alice Hagan, Joan Morris, Terri Fletcher, Gundersen-Davis, and Mira Alden, to name only a few.

The *shibori* technique involves manipulating fabrics from a two dimensional plane into three dimensional shapes by, for example, crumpling, folding, stitching or twisting. Then pressure is exerted on the cloth by binding, clamping, or knotting in order to keep the three dimensional form intact throughout the dyeing process. This results in a soft- or blurry-edged pattern or a crisp, small, all-over pattern. The cloth sensitively records both the shape of and the pressure exerted on the three dimensional form; thus the "memory" of the shape remains imprinted in the cloth.

American artists have been especially inspired by the idea of the "memory" of dyed cloth and have explored it in original ways since the 70's. Their preference has been to record their personal experiences as they manipulate and dye cloth, instead of simply producing particular patterns. This approach has created a diverse collection of two- and three dimensional art works as well as clothing forms. These works demonstrate American artists' ability to learn and interpret and ingeniously adapt traditional craft methods in a contemporary setting. Among several *shibori* techniques practiced by American artists, *arashi shibori* has perhaps been the most popular, and most frequently used to create American *shibori* work.

Traditional *arashi shibori* is one form of *bomaki* (pole wrap) *shibori*, a term for the dyeing process in which fabric is wrapped over a pole and compressed; in other words, where a pole is used as a core to protect one side of the cloth from the dye. And, by the way, there are a few other *bomaki shibori* such as *shirokage*, white shadow *shibori*, and *murakumo*, or scattered cloud *shibori*, showing my point about the specificity in *shibori* techniques and the resulting effects. In the case of traditional *arashi*, which means "storm" in Japanese, a single layer of cloth is always wrapped diagonally on a pole. However, many American artists tend to work with a pole using a diagonal orientation interchangeably with a parallel orientation. Therefore, in my discussion of American work I include *arashi* variations as well as *bomaki* variations. *Arashi* was invented by Kanezo Suzuki in 1880 and is a relatively new technique of the folk-type *shibori* which began in the 1600's in Arimatsu. Arimatsu, along with its neighboring towns Narumi and Otaka, are all situated along the old Tokaido highway which connected the Eastern capital of Edo, present day Tokyo, and Kyoto and Osaka to the West. The *shibori* industry there prospered, patronized by the travelers of all classes, especially by the commoners because of the accessible prices and high spirited designs. The artisans of folk-type *shibori* worked with the designs which were inspired by patterns seen in everyday life and with the technique each artisan was master of. This creative process definitely parallels the way American artists work. Soon after its invention, *arashi shibori* became very popular, especially for men's *yukata* (summer cotton kimonos) and *juban* (underkimonos) during the Meiji and Taisho periods, from the late 19th through the early 20th century. During the peak period of production, there were 14 workshops in the area, each using 30 to 150 poles. Since, each pole held 4 *tan*, and a *tan* is a

unit of approximately 12 1/2 yards of 14 inch wide kimono cloth, roughly 50 yards of cloth was shaped on a pole. The production of *arashi shibori* must have reached thousands of yards in a busy month. During its short history, more than 100 different *arashi* patterns which resulted from that many variations in the process were recorded, many of which now are obsolete and forgotten. Reiichi Suzuki, the last *arashi* craftsman passed away in 1990. There are still a couple of people in Arimatsu who occasionally work on some of the simpler *arashi* patterns, but the line of *arashi* craftspeople has virtually come to an end. Now it seems that the heirs to the lineage of *arashi* artisans who have an in depth understanding of the process may be found primarily in America among fiber artists, like Ana Lisa Hedstrom, and maybe a few others.

In the traditional *arashi* process, a solid wooden pole about 13' long and 6" to 8" in diameter, slightly tapered from one end to the other, is used. The craftsman, (always male) works with an assistant, who can be a woman, as he wraps a long, narrow kimono cloth diagonally around a pole, then winds a thread around it at measured intervals. The assistant cranks the handle attached to the end of the pole to turn it so that the *arashi* craftsman can wind a thread by standing in front of the pole. The rapport between the assistant and the craftsman is crucial in winding the thread at regular intervals with consistent tension. The assistant also helps the *arashi* craftsman to compress the cloth into tiny, tight folds. Using four hands over this size pole works well to push the cloth evenly. This process is repeated until a whole bolt of kimono cloth is gathered on the pole. Sometimes, up to 4 *tan* of kimono cloth is shaped on a pole and the whole pole, until the 1960's, used to be immersed in a big trough of indigo dye as many times as it was necessary to obtain the shade of blue required. This enabled the dyer to pattern a large quantity of cloth at a time. During the time Kanezo Suzuki invented the technique Japan was undergoing industrialization and an influx of Western designs. He and his fellow artisans responded to the early Meiji social and economic changes by using his version of industrial equipment, a huge wooden pole with a marginally mechanized crank to produce the design in quantity. He devised the use of a guide thread to space the winding of a resist thread on a pole regularly. The pattern he and his fellow artisans created looked quite different from traditional *shibori* effects and appeared to embrace the changing taste of the people who were making a transition from feudal society to a Western style open society. However, eventually Westernization of the country affected the clothing worn by the Japanese, especially the men, who were quick to adopt Western style garments, causing a drastic decline of the market for *arashi shibori* cloths.

Furthermore, a couple of major typhoons hit the Nagoya area in the 1950's and early 60's, and crippled many *shibori* dyers by destroying the indigo vats. This was an added blow to most of the *arashi shibori* studios. Only Ginatro Yamaguchi and

Reiichi Suzuki continued to work in this process. Yamaguchi passed away in 1972, and Reiichi Suzuki had to make a major change in the way he dyed the *arashi* cloth. The traditional indigo dye vat became uneconomical to maintain due to the rapid decline in demand in traditional kimono items, especially for everyday wear. The kimono market shifted to more expensive, special wear. Suzuki's expertise was then applied to silk materials for kimonos and men's neck ties, besides the traditional *yukata*, summer cotton kimonos. The Aichi prefecture gave him a subsidy to train an *arashi* artisan, and his son, who was an office worker, began learning this craft from Suzuki on weekends. After the older man's death in 1990, Suzuki junior and Kaei Hayakawa, another younger *shibori* artist or craftsman, are the only ones left who practice this art in Japan.

Despite the declining practice of *arashi* in Japan, it is noteworthy that the number of American *arashi* artisans in the U.S. has grown and many of them can subsist on this craft. Some of the reasons why *arashi shibori* became so much more popular outside of Japan than other *shibori* processes like stitching, minute binding, and hand pleating, is that the process is easier to learn and faster to produce a relatively large quantity of patterned fabric. Because of the use of a pole which gives a kind of structure to work fabric with or against, the process becomes more physical and fun than traditional meticulous skilled work, such as the technique of using tiny *kanoko* dots to pattern fabric, like *hon-hitta shibori*, which takes 10 years to master. Japanese *arashi shibori* requires a long narrow cloth which works well with a 13 foot long solid wooden pole of about 20 inches in circumference, slightly tapered from one end to the other. Americans, on the other hand, use wider cloth of various widths of up to 60 inches, but shorter in length, on a hollow short PVC pipe. Judith Content, inventing her own variation, uses a wine bottle, while another American artist, D'Arcie Beytebiere, uses cardboard drum cans for the original Japanese pole. These American poles or pipes are much lighter and easier to handle than the original 13 foot long wooden pole. For example, if the fabric being wrapped around the traditional pole was wider than 14 inches, then cloth would be wound on the pole so that it overlapped, making some areas 2 layers thick which results in the bottom layer having either no pattern or an obscure one. This very specific relationship between the width of the cloth wound on the pole and the circumference of the pole presents a limitation to the Americans who wish to work with wider width fabrics. Yet these non-traditional artists turned the limitation into possibilities for more variations in design by narrowing the wide cloth in a number of ways. The most common way is to pleat the fabric across the width by hand or by machine. Other means include pinch and bound resist units arranged across the cloth, or stitch resist applied horizontally. Both cases cause the extra fabric to be taken up from the width, thus making it narrower to fit around the pole in a single layer, and at the same time they add a new dimension to the process and design. The pole wrap allows the process of

shaping a cloth to move quickly, which of course appeals to fast-paced Americans.

Unlike the traditional *arashi* men who set the pole horizontally on a stand, many Americans hold the pipe and wrap the cloth on it, winding the thread by themselves without an assistant and without using a guide thread. This results in a less precise and more inconsistent pattern. Again conversely, the new *arashi* practitioners see the limitations they face as positive. By producing different images every time, their design is not repetitive or they can use a small amount of each pattern to construct a larger piece. In the case of Hedstrom, although she has the competency to produce a consistent pattern, she chooses to create a smaller quantity of patterned fabric with special effects and fresh images each time she works with the *shibori* process. Then she assembles these dyed or discharged fabrics into the composition of a garment which carries an exceptional visual statement with color, shape, and pattern.

And, last but not least of the reasons why Americans have chosen to work with *arashi shibori* is the fascination Americans have towards the fine pleating the *arashi* dyed fabric retains, that is, the memory of the shape imprinted in the cloth, especially when silk is dyed with hot dye or steamed to set the pleats. This process provides results which go beyond two dimensional surface design, thus providing expanded possibilities for creative expression, allowing for a kind of textile sculpture. Joan McGee, for example, uses a huge tube which necessitates a stand to hold it horizontally over a bath tub which is heated by a gas burner underneath. This creates a texture which is similar to the Fortuny pleats and it has been emphasized as a surface design element or as a sculptural element in a number of artists' works.

Another notable phenomenon in fiberarts and related fields is that mixing of media which is also seen in the work of Terri Fletcher. Fletcher uses *arashi shibori* to dye sheets of velum in modules; then on a patterned surface she paints, draws, and sometimes stitches. Recently she started exploring the clamp resist technique as well. Lynn Kline, who is known as a printmaker, uses thin silk fabric *shibori* dyed with various simple techniques including *arashi* in her *chine colle*. Chad Alice Hagan who creates huge felt collages, dyes small pieces of felt with *bomaki* or sometimes *arashi* processes, and makes compositions with these modules.

Arashi shibori, while facing extinction in its original, traditional setting, continues its legacy on American soil. After American artists made an initial contact with this traditional technique, they responded to the uniqueness of the *arashi* patterns and its processes. Americans adapted the *arashi* process by turning its limitations into a positive force by expanding its applications to a contemporary setting. The fact that this process began as a response to the Westernization of Japan by an *arashi* artisan provides an interesting parallel to the way American fiber artists in the late 60's and 70's responded to non-Western textiles, their techniques and

symbolism. By adapting *arashi shibori*, many American fiber artists gained a facility to create unique images, in a relatively short time, and in large quantity. Therefore, not only are they perpetuating an art form that was in danger of disappearing, but in its translated American form it is demonstrating expanded artistic possibilities and is redefining surface design vocabulary and processes, perhaps most notably in its manifestation in art-to-wear.

Select Bibliography

Bullis, Douglas. "An Eloquent Array: Ana Lisa Hedstrom." *Ornament* 16, no. 4 (summer 1993): 40-45.

Takeda Kahei. *Arimatsu shibori*. Arismatsu: Arimatsu Shibori Gijutsu Hozon Shinkokai, 1996.

----- *Nihon no shibori zome kireji cho* (Sample Book of Japanese Shibori). Limited edition of 100. Mingei Orimono Zukan Kankokai, 1970.

Wada, Yoshiko Wada. "New Twist on Resist: Western Dye Artists Try Japanese Methods of *Arashi Shibori*." *Threads* 8 (December 1986-January 1987): 20-27.

Wada, Yoshiko, Mary Kellogg Rice and Jane Barton. *Shibori: The Inventive Art of Japanese Shaped Resist Dyeing*. Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1983.