Yoshiko I. Wada’s name is familiar to most Surface Design Association members as the Japanese-born textile scholar and teacher who introduced the techniques of shibori and kasuri to the Western public. In the 1970s, she taught these subjects at Berkeley’s Fiberworks Center for Textile Arts. For 40 years, her vision has widened and her influence has continued to grow.


Wada published *Memory on Cloth: Shibori Now* in 2002, covering a broad variety of contemporary works created by shibori artists and designers worldwide, many of whom were influenced by her earlier publications and teaching. This book introduced newer techniques, such as metal melt-off, lye shrinkage, selective felting, and devoré.

In order to help Japanese shibori artisans assure the continued commercial viability of their centuries-old techniques into the 21st century, Wada organized the *International Shibori Symposium* (ISS) in Nagoya, Japan, in 1992. This led to the formation of the *World Shibori Network*, and subsequent ISS have been held in India, Chile, UK, Australia, France, Tokyo, Hong Kong, and China. Each one has delved into the local traditions and provided a platform for sharing ideas on an

OPPOSITE PAGE: YOSHIKO I. WADA in Munnar, India, at Aranya Naturals in 2015 with a tree she planted on a Slow Fiber Studios (SFS) Tour 9 years ago.
ABOVE: Yoshiko I. Wada teaching boro at KANEKO art center in Omaha, NE, 2015.


BOTTOM: Participants of the 9th ISS observe the stirring of a large indigo vat at an indigo farm in Wenzhou, China, 2014. Photo: Yoshiko I. Wada.

international level. The 10th ISS will be in 2016 in Oaxaca, Mexico, with a strong emphasis on indigenous practices in natural dyeing and the importance of organic cotton and local wool. Ever inclusive, Wada encourages suggestions from other countries or institutions willing to host these symposia.

Wada has led educational textile tours to Japan and beyond for decades. Since 2009, her Slow Fiber Studios™ (SFS) trips have included in-depth hands-on workshops and exploration of traditional crafts still being produced. Tours include visits to sites where contemporary industrial practices for the modern fashion industry have evolved in an intelligent manner from traditional crafts. The SFS study tour I took in 2014 included all aspects of silk production from silk-worm farming to reeling, red silk under kimono dyeing, fashion design and marketing in Japan, experiences in traditional papermaking, and even ceramics. The heart of the tour was five days of intense shibori workshops led by such masters in their field as Tsuyoshi Kuno and Hiroshi Murase in Arimatsu, and Hiroyuki Shindo in Miyama Village.

“Slow Fiber Studios tours offer real-world insight into the multifaceted and holistic practice of textile making through hands-on field study in diverse areas of the world where textile culture runs deep,” Wada explains. “The best way to understand a philosophy is to see it being lived. ...How it is done by the indigenous artisan working the culture that originally produced the technique is of more lasting value than a quick and easy how-to approach.” It was Wada’s desire that SFS tours would lead to collaborative and reciprocal learning between visiting artists and local teachers and artisans. “The dialogue has been fruitful in both directions,” she assures. “SFS exchanges spark imagination!”

By taking participants to regions where the work was traditionally done, Wada hopes to show how the culture and the environment affected the development of the craft. She feels we cannot truly understand the Japanese mending technique of boro, for example, without knowing the cold isolation of a northern Japan winter. Understanding comes from physically feeling the difference between the locally available but rougher and less insulating bast fiber cloth compared to warm, soft, and precious cotton rags imported from warmer regions of Japan. Cotton was not native to Japan, and this is the basis for the development of those creatively patched boro garments and covers.

Wada admits no idealization of “quaint frugality” in her explanation. She firmly believes in clarifying our understanding of the past, insisting, for example, that “shibori resists were never wrapped around grains of rice. It would get soggy in the dye bath! And silk, not human hair; was used to strengthen katazome stencils!”

SFS tours emphasize natural dyeing since “that is how it was done for centuries, synthetic dyes having only a short presence in the long history of textiles.” Wada is acutely aware of the great environmental and human suffering since the late 19th century advent of synthetic dyes and the industrialization of textile production. She believes “There is a better way to go forward, and we all, especially the affluent western consumer world, need to accept the challenge to vote with our wallets for more ethically produced clothing, such as what Christina Kim’s Dosa Inc. produces with minimum waste. Standard commercial clothing production engenders an unbelievable 30% wasted fabric that ends up as landfill. We all need to be mindful of the energy and natural resources that go into textile and fashion production—and the consequences of the consumption of those goods.”

Wada’s interest in promoting low impact natural dyeing has increased as she has learned about the damage that wasteful industrial processes have wreaked on the environment. In preparing for the 2008 ISS 7 in France, she sought out French dye chemist and botanist Michel García, a strong advocate for sustainable practices, to teach two workshops at the conference. These changed forever my own indigo practices.

Impressed by García’s years of research into the science behind the cultivation and use of plant and insect-based dyes, Wada produced a DVD series called Natural Dye Workshop with...
**Michel Garcia.** Cinematographer Andrew Galli captured the essence of three extensive study sessions where Garcia focused on the botany, climate, fiber types, local dye sources, and dye practices of the South of France and Mexico. These DVDs present a 21st century approach to past practices suitable for contemporary use of natural dyes and pigments. Traveling with Garcia in Mexico to produce the film on dyeing wool and to explore local museums, botanical gardens, and arts institutions led to the 2016 ISS in Oaxaca.

In addition to international tours, recent local activities of SFS in Berkeley, California, have included an animated conversation and trunk show with Jean Howe and William Ingram of *Threads of Life*, an Indonesian fair-trade organization. Michel Garcia was instrumental in *Threads of Life*’s development of a natural powdered symplocos plant mordant for use by local dyers and for global sale. The naturally occurring alum mordant is obtained from fallen leaves and thus does not damage the trees. Sales benefit a local poverty alleviation program established by Bebali Foundation. SFS also recently hosted a series of basketry workshops with Japanese bamboo artist Jiro Yonezawa for American craftsmen.
Wada’s projects always encourage collaboration between “the artisans and designers who manufacture products in a mindful and sustainable manner and the rest of us who must be willing to re-establish our priorities and values as consumers.” She sees beyond “flashy branding of so-called ‘ecco’ fashion,” choosing instead to promote truly sustainable practices that honor centuries of tradition adapted successfully to modern times.

Artist, author, exhibition curator, textile researcher, and film producer, Wada’s open mind and tireless commitment encourages both deeper and wider understanding of how and why textile techniques have developed through the centuries. SFS is the latest and most all-encompassing embodiment of that spirit. I encourage you to share her vision and participate in bringing it to fruition in your own creative practice!

1 All quotes are from Barbara Shapiro’s interview with Yoshiko I. Wada on March 28, 2015.
2 Barbara Shapiro’s reviews of the Natural Dye Workshop with Michel Garcia DVD series were published in the Spring 2013 and Fall 2014 issues of Surface Design Journal.

Yoshiko I. Wada will be a featured speaker at the 2015 SDA Made/Aware Intensive at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts in Gatlinburg, Tennessee (October 8-11, 2015). To view the full program and register, visit: surfacedesign.org/conference-2015

To learn more about SFS, visit: www.slowfiberstudios.com

To learn more about the 2016 10th International Shibori Symposium in Oaxaca, Mexico, visit: www.shibori.org

To read Barbara Shapiro’s SDA NewsBlog article about a recent SFS tour to Japan, visit: surfacedesign.org/newsblog

Symlocus plant mordant can be ordered online from:
Slow Fiber Studios www.slowfiberstudios.com
Maiwa at www.maiwa.com

— Barbara Shapiro is a San Francisco Bay Area weaver, dyer, basket maker, and textile arts educator who is frequently exhibited and published. www.barbara-shapiro.com