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### **Living Treasures: textile and garment artists**

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NOTE: In Japanese, the surname/family name is first and given names second.

See List of Designations for *juyô mukei bunka-zai*, "Important Intangible Cultural Property," for all individual and group holders of textile skills.

#### **A Contagious Nickname**

The designation "Living National Treasure" is an expression of Japanese reverence for the highest level of a skill or technique in traditional arts and crafts. The system was initiated to preserve and to continue important cultural properties and assets significant to Japan's rich cultural heritage. The law designates a selected skill of an individual or group as an object of protection. Thus, for potter Shôji Hamada (1894–1978, LNT 1955), the official designation was "Shôji Hamada, holder of the Important Intangible Cultural Asset, the skill of *mingei* pottery." For artist Keisuke Serizawa (1895–1984, LNT 1956), it was for the skill of stencil dyeing.

The term "Living National Treasure" is consistently and repeatedly misunderstood. It is not an official designation, but, rather, a nickname or a title of convenience; it is a simplistic translation of the popular Japanese term *ningen kokuho*, "human national treasure." The official designation is *juyô mukei bunka-zai*, "Important Intangible Cultural Property" (or "Asset").

#### **Historical Context**

The notion of protecting culturally important assets found its way into Japan's agenda in the late nineteenth century, when several preservation directives were announced to protect ancient artifacts through public education and official documentation. The new government set these measures to help guard national identity and pride and maintain the prevailing conservatism while simultaneously driving the country towards a modernization that would mirror Western powers. In 1890, an imperial crafts acknowledgment system was created to recognize masters of unique traditional Japanese skills. In the Imperial Art Exhibition (*Teiten*), the nationally organized, prestigious, annual event that honored the country's fine artists, primarily painters and sculptors, an art-craft section was officially included in the exhibition in 1927. A decade later, the government established the *Bunka kunsho*, a cultural medal to honor those who contributed to the cultural life of Japan and raised the standards of traditional artistry. Honorees included artists, craftsmen, writers as well visual and performing artists.

In 1950, Japan enacted the Cultural Assets Protection Law, or *bunka-zai hogo-hou*. It applied not only to tangible properties but intangible ones as well – an inclusion that made this legislation unique to Japan at the time. The law was prompted largely by the heavy exportation of national cultural assets and artifacts (mainly art objects) immediately following the end of World War II, further compounded by devastating losses of seventh century treasures suffered during the 1949 fire at Horyu-ji temple in Nara.

The Cultural Assets Protection Law assigned the designation of *juyô yukei bunka-zai*, or Important Tangible Cultural Property, to objects such as documents, calligraphy, architecture, archaeological artifacts, fine paintings, sculptures, etc. As for identifying intangible assets, the law was a bit less concrete; it generally included performance art and art-crafts historically important and involving a very high level of skill. Designations were mostly assigned to skills at the utmost threat of extinction, a sort of a last ditch effort to preserve a dying craft. At the time, protecting traditional skills and techniques, though important, was not considered so pressing an issue. Many master artisans and craftspeople were still alive, society's appreciation of crafts still intact.

It was not until a few years later that the Japanese government would have the foresight to enact some

longer view of protection. So, in 1955, the Japanese Ministry of Culture inaugurated the Living National Treasures (LNT) system as an improvement on the Cultural Assets Protection Law. Annual reviews and assessments were set up to discuss and to update the list, to stay current on threatened cultural practices, and to assess candidates. Provisions were also put in place to ensure that skills be passed to upcoming generations.

### **Summary of the LNT system**

Under the LNT system, two types of skill are distinguished —art-craft (*kôgei*) and performing arts (*geinô*). Designations are also given for group skills within these two categories, such as traditional puppet dramas, local dances or dance-dramas. Evaluation of an individual or group's skill rests on three criteria: (a) artistic merit; (b) place in a particular craft's history; and (c) position as a leader in a particular school, style, or technique.

The mission of the LNT system was not only to preserve a skill but also to ensure that the skill be handed down to the next generation. Thus, it contains provisions that the person holding the recognized skill should take on pupils or apprentices and that he/she be innovative as well as partaking of tradition. The Japanese Cultural Agency actively sponsors training courses for prospective successors and regular exhibitions to help the public understand traditional crafts as well as encourage traditional craftspeople to continue. The government also grants annual stipends to Living National Treasures so they may continue to practice and to improve their skills.

There were 44 individual and seven group textile LNT designations as of 2007. All possess skills that contribute to the making of fabric art, whether the end product is kimono; *obi*; *hakama*, a type of men's pleated culottes; *yukata*, or light cotton summer robe; or sometimes screens; *noren*, or split door curtains; and other decorative or utilitarian objects. Most of those honored find the ultimate artistic expression in the traditional clothing genre.

### **Impact on Japanese society**

In 1868, Japan's feudal system ended with the Meiji Restoration, ushering in decades of reform and "Westernization." The paradox in which Japan existed in the late 1800s – safeguarding cultural heritage while embracing Westernization, had far-reaching, deleterious effects on many Japanese traditions, but traditional Japanese dress is a case in point. Indications of this can be seen in the conflicting ideas about clothes and appearance held at that time. Many Japanese viewed Western dress as synonymous with modernity. Traditional clothes, a sign of backwardness, were cast off. Neologisms were introduced to differentiate styles of dress: *yôfuku*, meaning Western clothing, versus *wakufu*, national costumes. Emperor Meiji adopted full European regalia for ceremonial occasions to promote modernization. Effects of the Meiji era (1868-1912) continued to reverberate through the years. To understand the extent, one need only to examine the kimono.

After its devastating defeat in World War II, Japan was left in a vulnerable state. Inevitably, the Allied Occupation (i.e., the US) left its influence on the behavior and tastes of Japan.

Changes in Japan's economic infrastructure in the 1970s affected all the country's crafts in radical ways. Rapid economic growth and accompanying changes in society (rising wealth, greater desire for new growth, new goods, new buildings, more educated women, and women in office jobs) and the growing influence of foreign tastes, namely Europe and the West, detracted from the nation's appreciation of traditional art-craft. The mood was one in favor of leaving old things behind. To buffer these effects and to protect Japanese culture, the government expanded the breadth of its preservation programs by adding to its roster, for example, ethnographical cultural assets, e.g., folk dances, folk ceremonies, etc.

Sadly, the future of Japanese crafts remains at risk. A lack of young people interested in pursuing a labor-intensive craft or skill and the general disappearance of the apprentice system are important contributing factors but do not explain the full picture. An exponential rise in time and labor costs has ripped handcrafted objects out of daily life, given them market values far removed from their origins, and

deposited them into the hands of wealthy collectors. LNT crafts in particular are imbued with a kind of worshipful awe and are to be seen and “Appreciated” only in totally nonfunctional settings such as exhibitions and institutional / private art collections. The idea of using an object made by a LNT is frightening—what if it got damaged!

As happens with systems controlled by a bureaucracy, the LNT system has gradually become political and has lost its vigor and power to some degree. Becoming a LNT today effectively means that one’s work sells for high prices.

Admittedly, the system is not a perfect solution. Why? The issue is much larger than what it is able to address. How do you cope with crafts that are truly dying out, ones fully reliant or symbiotic with a specific environment that can no longer hold fast against the changes of a rapidly changing world? Traditional practices exist in a kind of cultural ecosystem: weaver depends on fiber depends on farmer. The criticalness of this ecosystem especially affects the art-crafts. Whereas performance art is a staged effort, art-crafts have to be an integrated part of everyday living. Without farmer, weaver cannot continue. Likewise, without sufficient demand for his cloth, weaver cannot continue, farmer cannot sustain. Today’s near disappearance of sericulture in Japan, despite the fact it had been the foremost silk exporting nation in 1920, illustrates this chain reaction effect. The kimono is something of a special case. As everyday wear, the silk kimono is, in effect, defunct. Yet Japan’s magnificent weaving and dyeing skills are alive, and the concern for their preservation is intense, at least in textile circles. Whether the LNT system will aid textile technique preservation remains to be seen. It may do a bit of good.

Despite its imperfections, the LNT system is necessary and certainly has its successes. At the very least, it is a good publicity tool for increasing overall awareness of important cultural ecosystems. That said, future generations need to expand their efforts.

### **International Impact**

The creation of the LNT system is testament to Japan’s sensitivity to and foresight of the inevitable changes in social attitude and behavior brought on by time and progress. When Japan created the LNT legislation, it led the way for other countries similarly coping with how to maintain their tangible and intangible cultural heritages in an increasingly industrialized and globalized world.

Several countries have followed suit with their own official programs, including South Korea, France, Thailand, Philippines and Romania. In France, the medal of honor system known as *L’Ordre des arts et des lettres* was established in 1957. In Korea, a similar term, Intangible National Treasure, is used. The world community’s recognition of the importance of preserving intangible traditions is evident by the recent involvement of the United Nation’s Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). In 2003, the General Conference of UNESCO adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and put forth an official “Guidelines for the Establishment of National Living Human Treasures Systems.”

### **Case studies**

The last part of the 20th and first years of the 21st century saw consumerism and globalism intensify in Japan. There was economic impetus to become global; international travel was readily available, eyes were fixed on places abroad. Younger generations, raised in a period of innovation and worldliness, had no inclination to absorb their own cultural traditions let alone appreciate the laborious skills of art-craft. Mothers from the baby-boom generation were poorly equipped to imbue daughters and granddaughters with a love for the elegance of a past world, its social accords and kimono codes of aesthetics. Following the deflation of the 1980s’ bubble economy, the demand for kimono declined drastically.

The market for traditional textiles is facing serious problems, including contradictory efforts to make products appeal to younger generations and popular tastes by shifting production offshore. Thus begins a cycle that results in diminishing quality, loss of artistic vigor and eventually an inability to perpetuate a native craft tradition. The present LNT system does well to isolate a small group of artists and artisans,

acknowledge their contributions and skills, inspire appreciation, and provide some monetary benefit so that they may continue with their practice. The cases presented here illuminate specific situations in which artisans persevered and continued to work. Each artist and artisan's life story gives hope as well as points to the fragile edge on which they balance.

## Case 1

### Group and individual designation: Ise *Katagami* stencil paper cutting

A group LNT designation was awarded in 1993 to the Society for Preservation of Ise *Katagami* along with six individual designations to artisans in the stencil carving region of Ise. *Katagami* is an example in which a specific craft skill is essential to a particular art-craft process—stencil dyeing, such as silk Edo *komon* or dyeing of cotton kimono cloth. LNT recognition of this group reflects an understanding that without a beautifully designed, perfectly cut *katagami*, the resulting stencil-dyed textile, be it kimono or yukata or whatever, will be pedestrian and without vibrancy or life. Conversely, without a skilled dyer to apply paste resist to the stencil and dye it expertly, the perfect kimono is not possible.

The paper stencils themselves beg to be viewed as complete works of art. This is particularly true for the large, dramatic designs made for dyeing *yukata*, or summer cotton kimono, in the process known as *nagaita chûgata* practiced by **Matsubara Sadakichi** (1893–1955, LNT 1955) and **Shimizu Kôtarô** (1897–1988, LNT 1955). A bit of folklore maintained by art historians is that art nouveau designs were in part inspired by the organic, curvilinear Japanese dyeing stencils displayed at various expositions in Europe in the latter 19th century. Since that century, collectors of Japanese art in the West and design enthusiasts have appreciated and collected *katagami*, including major museums like the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, New York, and Musée du Quai Branly, Paris. The interesting and rather disturbing fact to textile lovers and scholars is that such collections rarely own and almost never exhibit any examples of dyed kimono fabric or finished garments that use LNT-produced stencils. One can understand why *yukata* are not in the collections of fine museums. These cotton summer robes were worn by common folk. Old extant examples of indigo-dyed cotton *yukata* in good condition may be difficult to find or may appear too humble for art museum interest. They are appreciated more as folk objects than as an art form.

However, in the case of Edo *komon* (those amazing overall minute-motif patterns) and the works of **Komiya Kosuke** (1882–1961, LNT 1955) and his son, **Komiya Yasutaka** (b.1925–, LNT 1978), it is hard to dismiss the lack of textile examples. The original ramie cloth, dyed in the characteristic overall *komon* pattern of tiny elements, was worn by the ruling warrior class as official attire—a suit of long pleated culottes and upper garment embellished with family crests and worn over a kimono at the shogun's court. *Komon* patterns tend to be so fine that a complete *komon* costume lacks the kind of dramatic graphic visual presence often favored by collectors and museums.

Numerous hidden supportive skills exist in the art-craft process, each artisan contributing a necessary step to a larger process and influencing the final outcome. Carving techniques yield a specific style of design influenced by the blade tools that the stencil carver makes. Many categories of dyeing, including *nagaita chûgata* and Edo *komon*, could not exist without the superb *katagami* made by artisans in Ise. This interdependence of skills is so crucial that the Japanese government gave designations to recognize the following five artisans who specialize in four stencil carving techniques as well as to an artisan who applies the silk filament reinforcement to stencils. They are: **Nambu Yoshimatsu** (1894–1976, LNT 1993) in *tsukibori*, thrust-carving (pictorial pattern); **Rokutani Baiken** (1907–1973, LNT 1993) in *kiribori*, drill-carving; **Nakajima Hidekichi** (1883–1968, LNT 1993) in *dôgubori*, punch-carving; **Nakamura Yûjirô** (1902–85, LNT 1993) in *dôgubori*, punch-carving; **Kodama Hiroshi** (1909–92, LNT 1993) in *hikibori* or *shimabori*, pull-carving or strip carving; and **Jônoguchi Mie** (1917–2003, LNT 1993) for stencil reinforcement with silk filaments.

In the past, artisans lived in anonymity. This changed in the twentieth century when pursuit of craft media deviated from its original way of practice and was approached on a different level. Take for example **Inagaki Toshijirô** (1902–1963, LNT 1962) and **Kamakura Yoshitarô** (1898–1983, LNT 1973). These

artists of *kata-e zome*, or pictorial paste resist stencil dyeing, created textiles and identified their work by signing it. This phenomenon changed the century-old craft of *kata-e zome*.

Noteworthy here is that “artist-craftsmen” Inagaki, Kamakura, **Serizawa** and **Tamanaha** (see below) created their own designs, carved their own stencils, and by themselves completed the entire process from dyeing to finishing. This phenomenon of a single individual doing all the steps of what is basically a community craft happened both inside and outside the LNT system and is one of the trends in Japan that aids the survival of traditional skills.

## Case 2

### Individual designations: *Yûzen* dyeing

*Yûzen* is one of the textile art categories that has the most number of designations—nine in orthodox *yûzen* plus one in *yûzen yôjinori* (rice paste resist coupled with splint application and silk painting), total of ten out of forty-four individual designations in twenty-three categories. This fact itself presents an interesting insight into the hierarchy in Japanese textile art and the forms in which artistic expression is made.

The *yûzen* process parallels painting in that the artist begins with drawing and painting images on paper to plan the design. An artisan holds a small conical tube with a metal tip (like a pastry tube) and applies the rice paste freehand to outline shapes. Once the paste is completely dry, the artisan applies dye with a small brush within each paste outline. Thus polychrome, painterly images grace a robe, which is as exquisite draped on a special kimono rack as when it adorns the body of its wearer.

For a dyer and weaver, the kimono serves as an ultimate canvas. Originally, *yûzen-zome*, the pictorial decoration of *kimono* robes with paste-resist dyeing was practiced in Kaga, present-day Kanazawa, and in Kyoto. It was an ultimate fashion statement for upper-class women and entertainers. **Tabata Kihachi III** (1877–1956, LNT 1955) represents this tradition of artistry in kimono making. He was born to a *yûzen* dyeing family in Kyoto who had specialized in commissioned kimono making for a prestigious clientele, including the imperial palace and the shogun’s Nijo Castle. He studied Japanese painting under renowned painters of the late 19th and early 20th century. Around 1895 he began working and learning *yûzen* dyeing with his father, Kihachi II. He explored fresh, daring styles in design as well as embracing new techniques such as the use of finer synthetic resist paste and colored resist paste with chemical dyes, responding to the cultural milieu of the vigorous early decades of the 20th century—the interwar period of economic and social dynamism that contributed to an artistic style combining Western concepts of modernity and nostalgia for Japanese tradition. Kihachi III was inspired by painter and advisor to Kyoto kimono makers, Kamisaka Sekka, and was responsible for a revival of the decorative Rimpa painting school, which was started by Ogata Kôrin in the 17th century. His artistic style responded well to the mood of the twenties. Counted among his patrons were the industrialists and wealthy politicians of the time. He continued to collect period costumes and textiles and amassed the well-known Tabata Collection, which inspired artists in all media. Today, the family tradition remains strong as Tabata Kihachi V continues the artistic and technical traditions of *yûzen* dyeing in Kyoto. Commitment and rigorous training of a member from each generation in an artisan’s family is one of the strengths of Japanese society. This attitude of craft-art as a way of life is passed on to each successive generation and ties the family together with an unspoken bond.

## Case 3

### Individual designations: natural indigo dyeing

In contrast to the elitist kimono dyer’s tradition in Japanese urban society practiced by Tabata Kihachi, **Chiba Ayano** (1889–1980, NLT 1955) represents ancient craft traditions of rural pre-WWII Japan. Chiba’s existence itself was met with astonishment. In 1950, she was discovered living and carrying out her craft in a small rural village. Immediately, the two men who had come across her – the former head of Tokyo National Museum’s textile division, Yamanobe Tomoyuki, and local ethnologist, Satô Chûtarô, reported to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology the importance of Chiba’s

work and to designate her as a holder of Important Intangible Cultural Asset. The extraordinariness of Chiba's practice is dual in that she alone carried out the entire process of making indigo dyed hemp cloth and she did so in a manner harmonious with the dictates of her rural life and environment. Her process began with sowing hemp seeds in April, harvesting the plants, making yarn and weaving the cloth during the winter, and dyeing with indigo in early summer. For hundreds of years, this self-sufficient lifestyle was the norm in rural areas but thought to have long been lost with the modernization of Japanese society.

Chiba grew *chijimi-ai*, a strain of *tade-ai*, or *Indigofera tinctoria*, which is tolerant of cooler climates in the Tohoku region of northern Honshu Island. She harvested the plants in August, removed the leaves and rolled and dried them completely, then stored them in an attic. She chose the first auspicious day in January to begin fermentation of the indigo leaves – a three month process to decompose and extract the dyestuff in the form known as *sukumo*. She further pounded the *sukumo* and made *aidama*, or indigo balls, with pulverized composted plant matter. Once the outside temperature grew warm enough in May, she activated the indigo vat. Chiba used a wooden container for a dye vat instead of the large ceramic jars commonly used in other parts of Japan. She also used her own hearth ash for the dye reduction process. Rinsing was done in the nearby river; thereafter, the dye was returned to fertilize the earth and plants.

Over a lifetime of daily practices, Chiba cultivated a cultural ecosystem of the purest form. Her extraordinary craft lives on through the women of her family who continue in this same tradition.

#### Case 4

##### Individual Designations: Shuri Weaving of Okinawa

The people of Shuri, the former capital of the Kingdom of the Ryukyus and now a suburb of Naha city, lead quiet, rich lives and have a vibrant textile culture. Growing up in such an environment leaves a powerful and lasting impression, clearly evident in the work of artist and weaver **Miyahira Hatsuko** (b. 1922; LNT 1998).

The vigor of the Okinawan people is echoed in every aspect of their culture. Music, dance, lacquerwork, textiles, etc., all reflect the unique energy and history of this archipelago, located in the center of the East China Sea and situated relatively close to Japan, China and Southeast Asia. The beauty of Okinawan crafts was recognized in the 1930s by Soetsu Yanagi, philosopher and founder of Japan's *mingei* persuasion, and by other *mingei* artists, including potters Hamada Shoji, Bernard Leach, and textile artist **Serizawa Keisuke** (1895–1984; LNT 1956 in *kata-e zome*), who was inspired by the brilliant *bingata* stencil/resist dyeing of the Ryukyuan aristocratic garments.

In 1939, the year Miyahira graduated from the prestigious Okinawa Prefecture Women's Craft School, she met Yanagi and the *mingei* aesthetic. Miyahira then traveled to Tokyo to study weaving and natural dyeing at the Textile Study Institute of Yanagi Yoshitaka (1911–2003) and also became associated with Serizawa.

These formative experiences gave Miyahira the foundation for her development as an artist in Shuri weaving. After leaving an instructor's post at the Ryukyu Crafts Research Institute, she opened her own weaving studio in 1970 with the realization that reviving her native traditions of Shuri would require much effort. Both WWII and changes in lifestyle had eroded Okinawan traditional culture.

The women of Shuri once passed down secrets in weaving to their daughters. Seven to nine different types and techniques—ikat, supplementary weft pattern, leno, supplementary warp pattern and so on—using cotton, banana, ramie, and silk have been found in Shuri cloth.

Astonishingly, despite war devastation and US occupation of the islands for 27 years, Miyahira's weaving studio thrived. Presently, she works with many young women of Okinawa, including her daughter, Le Bars Ginko, a weaver and professor of textiles at Okinawa Prefecture University of Fine Art in Shuri. Since 1959, Miyahira has successfully replicated many important and rare historical examples of Shuri weaving, including pieces in Tokyo's Folkcraft (Mingei) Museum (one example) and the Berlin Ethnological Museum (two examples). Within the traditional precept, Miyahira searches for her personal creative voice with a play on colors and innovation in design.

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