

Japanese boro

A NEW WAY TO SEE BEAUTY

The Japanese term boro refers to objects that have been used, broken, and worn to tatters, then mended extensively and lovingly used far beyond their normal expected life cycle.

THE TERM BORO BORO is also used to describe an extensively used and worn state of being. In the late 1960s, Kousaku Nukata, a painter, ceramist, and dentist in Osaka, Japan, was deeply moved as he observed a threadbare piece of cloth, carefully darned and mended. He was overcome by the keen perception that the kind of beauty and power he had sought with his paintings was “expressed through this humble, unpretentious, castaway rag.” It taught him a new way to see “beauty.”

UNABLE TO REFRAIN from acquiring boro, Nukata’s collection grew to nearly one thousand. He mounted a major exhibition at ABC Gallery in Osaka in 2002, and the response was tremendous. School teachers returned with their students in tow, a young man stood silently and wept, women stayed in the gallery for hours, and both young and old returned again and again. Viewers were fascinated by artful darns, patches, and reinforcement, and touched by the imprint of ancestral hands. The selfless labor of these unknown forebears transcended their material limitations to provide comfort and utility to the family, creating beauty that was never intended to be put on display. The exhibition led viewers into the personal inner life of common folks from the past.

In 2004 I curated the first viewing outside Japan of Nukata’s boro collection at the Museum of Craft and Folk Art in San Francisco. The exhibition—*Ragged Beauty: Repair and Reuse, Past and Present*—also featured contemporary artwork and folk art objects that collectively explored the theme of repair and invited viewers to reassess the value of objects and consider the meaning of mending in our throwaway culture.

THE TEXTILES IN THE NUKATA COLLECTION provide a stunning example of Japanese vernacular aesthetics where there was no rule to follow other than to instinctively and selflessly uphold the basic purpose and function of the object through the

simple process of darning, using only the limited available materials. The darning process is utilitarian in function yet subtly elegant in its fascinating detail.

Each boro is an unassuming piece of artistic beauty: quiet but expressive and rich with history. At one time, these textiles were unblemished cotton fabrics, some serving as garments, others as futon bedding, furoshiki carrying cloth, and noren door curtains. Cotton cultivation was brought to Japan via China and firmly established by the seventeenth century in warmer regions where commoners could enjoy this new material as did their urban counterparts. Rag dealers collected functional cast-away textiles for a small price, and cotton rags became one of the commodities traded to rural folks in the colder regions. Worn from repeated use and further piecing and patching, these humble cloths are tangible remnants of stories lived by the common people: artisans, merchants, servants, farmers, fishermen, and lumberjacks in rural areas along the Sea of Japan and the northeastern Honshu Island until the mid-1950s.

NATURALLY, ONE WONDERS about the circumstances in which these boro came into existence. Was it poverty or merely frugality? For example, a piece of worn-out indigo textile dating over one hundred years old came from a futon bedding. It is sewn together with four panels of traditional narrow cloth and there are four patched holes visible on the surface. The reverse side of the same piece of textile reveals 147 small, rectangular patches and reinforcements in a wide variety of indigo fabric ranging in shades of blue stripes (shima) plaid (koushi) sometimes ikat (kasuri) and paste-resist print (Katazome). These fragments must have come from a wide variety of sources. One wonders if they had been saved and collected in a household over generations of family members living and dying. Who pieced and patched this textile, stitching and darning it so thoroughly? And who was the recipient of such effort and care? Who used this covering night after night, to later

Inside of a futon top showing an extensive reinforcement with pieces of recycled fabric; 181cm x 138cm. Late 1800s to early 1900s.



BORO

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pass it on to a younger generation. This transformation of material represents a visual record of the social and cultural history of common folks in Japan.

LIKE EARLY AMERICAN PATCHWORK quilts, these cloths embody cultural aesthetics, family histories, and transformation of materials while shedding light on social stratification, agriculture, economy, and trade. A majority of pieces are small fragments recycled from cotton clothing and other castaway rags brought by a ship called *Kitamae-sen*, literally “north coastal ship,” which traveled a commercial shipping route established during the Edo Period (17th to 19th centuries). Cloths were often transported from large urban cities in warmer regions and sold to residents of rural areas where severe winters and heavy snow made cotton cultivation impossible.

COTTON WAS PRECIOUS in such areas where the available local fibers included hemp, ramie, wisteria, and mulberry. These bast fibers, though strong, were not resistant to friction, not warm against the body, and laborious to produce. Owing to a harsh economy and long bitter winters, the inexpensive, warm cotton cloths were a treasure even though they were already worn, stained, and

faded. High demand for cotton led to the emergence of regional folk textile traditions such as *sakiori*, rag weaving where torn strips of castaway cotton cloth were woven with bast fiber warp yarns into a thick material and made into jackets and vests. Other forms of folk textile tradition, *sashiko* and *kogin*, were derived from stitching or quilting precious cotton yarns onto locally available bast fiber cloth or layers of worn cotton fabric, transforming them into sturdy textiles for work clothes and coverlets. Linking these traditions are two common threads: first, a respect for and ingenious use of scarce materials and goods and, second, the handwork visible in their design and manufacture. The careful and patient act of repairing or reinforcing mundane, well-worn objects was a foundation for personal relationships and a form of silent dialogue among family members. The repaired objects signify the unspoken relationships among the family members who worked on them and used them.

Subject to extensive repairs to maintain an element of functionality, the Japanese *boro* underwent significant transformation from their original form: kimono into a basic coverlet, futon into work clothes. Such transformation of goods, a common practice of economy in resources, resulted in a massive accumulation of time and

Probably kotatsugake, quilt cover in a wide variety of indigo fabric in stripes and plaids ranging in shades of blue. Late 1800s to early 1900s. Teapot. Russia; ceramic,



memory for people who used the repaired and recycled objects. Artifacts from the past link us to stories at once personal, social, and cultural. We are challenged to consider the perspectives of those involved in the process of an object's transformation: the creator, the mender, the owner, the community member, and the outsider. Boro may also inspire us to reexamine our notions of beauty, value, scarcity, and resources and to deepen our respect for labor and reuse as presented in both historical and present-day contexts.

Yoshiko Iwamoto Wada SHORT PRESENTATION

This article was adapted from the catalog she wrote for the exhibition she curated in 2004 at the Museum of Craft and Folk Art in San Francisco—Ragged Beauty: Repair and Reuse, Past and Present

