



Furoshiki and Stencils?

A furoshiki does not usually conjure up images of stencils. Rather, it is more likely to conjure up images of pretty Japanese cloths that are best used as wall-hangings (for us Westerners at least). In fact, the first furoshiki I encountered, in Hiroshima many years ago, impressed me simply because of the way it "looked so Japanese" with its samurai-like pictures, and I bought it to



use as a wall-hanging. It did indeed

add a nice touch to my dorm room the first year of college.

The Japanese, being ever so more practical however, have been using the furoshiki in a variety of ways since the Nara period. The original function of the furoshiki was to lay it out flat to sit on or wipe the feet on after taking a bath. This is where the word "furoshiki" comes from as well since it is a combination of the word "furo" (bath) and "shiku" (spread, lay). Actually it was the second main function, of wrapping things, made popular in the Edo period, that became the main known usage of the furoshiki though. This usage is where the traditional meanings, such as a sense of formality (in gift-giving) or a sense of being "tied together for eternity" (in weddings) originate. Aside from simply wrapping things up, I was quite surprised to learn that the furoshiki has been stretched to include an astonishingly wide range of uses in Japan. For example, while it is

probably common knowledge among Japanese, it was a bit of a surprise to me to discover that the traditional Japanese thief *always* uses a furoshiki to haul away his loot. I suppose even a thief can appreciate the convenience and flexibility of the furoshiki. Japanese lawyers also appreciate this aspect too, and they prefer to carry important documents to court in a furoshiki rather than in a smart-looking briefcase that is more likely to be stolen. The modern-day "Green Movement" has also gotten into the furoshiki act — environmentally-conscious Japanese can now purchase a special "recycling furoshiki" to take grocery shopping with them in lieu of receiving the plastic bags from the store. Actually, it is rather convenient since a fair-sized



furoshiki can not only be folded up to fit in the pocket but can also be tied around any number of bulky or unwieldy items to carry home.

So, in all these images of the furoshiki, where does the stencil come in? In fact, the stencil is the very heart of the furoshiki, since, without the stencil, the furoshiki wouldn't exist, as I learned. Not having much knowledge of textiles, either Western or Eastern, I really had no idea how furoshiki were made. So, you can imagine my surprise when I learned that not only furoshiki, but also the kimonos and shibori tie-dyed silk cloths of old, were all created with the aid of katagami, or Japanese stencil paper. One advantage to using paper, over plastic for example, seems to be the ease with which very fine and detailed designs can be stencilled. Katagami also proves to be quite strong and durable since, once reinforced with silk gauze, it can be used over and over again to dye the fabric.

Today, about half of the remaining

professional stencil cutters in Japan live in Suzuka, and it was there that I was able to find help in creating my own furoshiki. With the kind assistance of Mr. Ishimi Osugi, a professional stencil cutter, I quickly learned the basics of stencil cutting and started working on cutting out my own design. It was quite an absorbing task, as two hours seemed to pass like ten minutes, and, moreover, it was a great feeling of satisfaction to have completely cut out my own design. This feeling of accomplishment was nothing compared to the feeling I had when I actually saw the furoshiki produced from my stencil however. I was amazed at how vivid and beautiful the final creation turned out, beyond even what I had expected, and was also deeply touched and grateful not only to Mr. Osugi, for all of his counsel and help on the stencil, but also to the men at the furoshiki factory who carried out the process to completion. Although I had been able to watch the dyeing process on

another furoshiki, I was basically kept "in the dark" about my own design until the very end. It had the effect of "taking my breath away" to go from a simple colored-pencil design on paper to a brilliantly colored furoshiki. All in all, my furoshiki TAIKAN proved to be quite a remarkable experience that I am not likely to forget. Indeed I expect it will number among my most treasured memories of Japan.

Notes: With credit to Professor Yasuda, Nanzan University, for the origins and original uses of the furoshiki and to Katagami by Susanna Kuo for some of the facts concerning katagami and the stencil cutters in Japan.

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