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Investigating Sustainability Through Japanese Textile Art Practices

The object of inquiry explored over the course of this project is the *Komebukuro* (figure 1), also known as the Japanese Rice bag. The form of this bag is a circular panel around a square bottom. Combined with a drawstring closure, this bag can be opened and stand as a basket before being cinched back up. I made my own Komebukuro (figure 2-3), decorated with the Sashiko stitch method. This style of stitching is unique to traditional Japanese textile arts, as exhibited by the *Sashiko Jacket* (figure 4) in the collection at the MET.

The process of creating this bag myself took into consideration multiple facets and possibilities. One of these considerations is the sourcing of materials and tools. The fabric, being the primary medium, was the most important procurement. Traditionally, both the Komebukuro and Sashiko methods are made using Indigo dyed cotton, which is not something that I have easy access to. Therefore, instead of taking the traditional approach, I decided to take on the contemporary ideas about Sashiko's sustainable and mending qualities. At the thrift store near me, they luckily had a navy blue pillowcase that gives a similar look to the project as an Indigo fabric, without the purchase of something new. For thread, I began with using white embroidery thread from the supplies I had on hand, however, it ultimately was not enough to complete the project and I used a new skein of DMC thread for the second half. The cordage for the drawstring was also extra that I had already. Fortunately, I received Sashiko needles as a gift in

the past and was able to put them to good use with this project, as opposed to buying new or making do with an embroidery needle.

The Sashiko needle allows for the proper stitching technique to be employed. Sashiko embroidery is worked in long lines of running stitches, either horizontally, vertically, or diagonally across the entire piece of fabric. After applying a pattern template or graph onto the material, the stitches are worked in rows until the pattern is complete. I created a total of four square panels (figure 5), each featuring a different type of Sashiko pattern that is often seen on historical garments. I started with the most basic stitch, which is the plus or cross-shape stitch. I did not use a graph when making this square, therefore the stitches are very uneven. I used a graph and followed patterns for the other panels which greatly increased the quality and decreased the difficulty, even though the pattern is more complex. The Shippo-Tsunagi (Seven Treasures) pattern, made up of intersecting circles, was difficult to create but proved easy to stitch once the pattern was transferred (figure 6). It was very interesting to see the hitomezashi (figure 7) pattern appear. After completing the horizontal rows, it was impossible to see how the pattern would work. But as the vertical rows went on it seemed as though the pattern magically appeared. Once these squares were complete I joined them together to create the fabric walls of the Komebukuro. Once it was lined and the tabs were attached for threading the drawstring, my project was complete.

There are a variety of art historical perspectives from which to navigate the Komebukuro and the Sashiko embroidery tradition. One mode of interpretation takes the form of Mottanai, a Japanese word that means “to waste nothing”(Wallinger 337). This concept prioritizes the reuse and mending of materials, as well as the use of every piece of material in the creation of a garment. It is an ancient tradition that has seen a revitalization in the past few decades, “

encourag(ing) frugality of all resources”(337). As climate change becomes a prevalent issue in the everyday lives of people around the world, sustainable practices have come into fashion. The Sashiko embroidery tradition transitioned from functional to decorative practices and has partially returned to a functional technique. The Komebukuro has also seen a transformation, from culturally functional to decorative. Both of these transitions will be explored within the context of Mottanai and the everchanging social attitudes towards function and craft. However, it is impossible to discuss these ideas without first examining them from the standpoint of personal positionality. I am writing on these ideas as a white woman from Canada, which means that I do not have the position to be an authoritative voice on these topics. This also impacts my making of the object, while it followed traditional methodologies, it was not made for a traditional purpose. Therefore, I will also be using the *Komebukuro* from the Tatter Library and the *Sashiko Jacket* from the MET to inform my understanding of the practices throughout this exploration. Ultimately, the Japanese tradition of textile arts, particularly Sashiko and the Komebukuro, has evolved between functional and decorative purposes as social contexts change, finding their way into mainstream craft methods due to their sustainable ideology.

Embroidery has often been used functionally, as a means of repairing torn clothes or strengthening weak cloth, as in quilting for example. The Sashiko stitch followed this path, used by women in rural Japan who were looking to make heavy garments in an aesthetically pleasing manner (Zhang 131). This functional technique gave way to elaborately stitched patterns as women began to share with each other. Hui Zhang’s account of the Sashiko tradition elaborates on the forms that begin to appear, noting: Japanese Sashiko motifs are related to the customs and culture of the country, influenced by religious ideas, Zen motifs and auspicious motifs, and borrowed a large number of elements from other textiles (131). The “borrowing” of elements

from other textiles and other embroidering women is a recurring theme in this artistic tradition. This is an unspoken element of Mottanai. Learning from each other allows us to expand our knowledge and create garments that will wear for longer, which is an aspect of sustainability. The functionality of the Sashiko stitch also works wonderfully as a mending method. The *Komebukuro* from the Tatter collection has visibly mended seams in orange thread. This visible mending practice allows for the object to be of use for much longer, without sacrificing aesthetic appeal. The *Komebukuro* that I made, on the other hand, uses the Sashiko stitch as a purely decorative art form. The transition to Sashiko as a decorative practice began as fabrics were able to be produced stronger (131) and technology developed into the fast fashion market in which we live today. The *Sashiko Jacket* at the MET is exemplary of the complex detail and pattern making that goes into a Sashiko kimono or other garment. The decorative style presided as an art form in Japan for decades. However, during the first half of the 20th century, Soetsu Yanagi, a folk art theorist, led the revival of the folk art movement in Japan (132). As this began to be re-contextualized in a contemporary craft landscape, the practice found its way to North America. The tradition was presumably shared within art circles, continuing the ideals of Mottanai, and has become a popular method for visible mending. This is clear by the number of books recently published on the subject, such as *Sashiko for Making & Mending* by Saki Iiduka, 2021 and *Visible Mending* by Arounna Khounnoraj 2020. So, the Sashiko stitch in the contemporary landscape is used both functionally and decoratively. Functionally through the re-visiting of the visible mending tradition and decoratively in art projects such as my *Komebukuro*.

The history of the *Komebukuro* is one of important cultural and religious significance in Japan. The unique shape of the bag was made to transport offerings to temples, often rice or

other grains, hence the name “Japanese Rice Bags”(Enderle). The ideology of Mottanai is heavily present in every aspect of the creation of the Komebukuro. They are, at their very basic, a patchwork concoction, made from any spare textiles or scraps. They are always a recycled project that breathes new life into old fabric (Enderle). These two concepts of the Komebukuro’s essence: spirituality and Mottanai, are directly tied. The recycled nature of the Komebukuro enhances its spiritual value, as the moral teachings surrounding repurposing are often religious in essence(Enderle). This dual functionality has lost some of its meaning in the contemporary craft culture. Sustainability practices have moved away from spiritual ideology towards the necessity of fighting climate change. As individuals attempt to challenge the ever-changing environment, so has the Komebukuro been changed in the eyes of the Western world. Sustainable repurposing is the main objective and the bags can be used for anything and everything. It is worthwhile contemplating whether this change has been beneficial or harmful towards the culture of origin. In a way, the Komebukuro has followed the same path as the Sashiko stitch, moving from purely functional to a decorative, restorative art.

The practices of both Sashiko embroidery and Komebukuro bags have thus seen evolutions in relation to their sustainability, moving between functional and decorative use. However, there are many other modes of inquiry to explore along these themes. These include: considering your own positionality concerning the objects you are producing and their cultural significance and how has colonialism and Orientalism affected our perceptions of Asian creative practices.

Works Cited

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List of Figures



(figure 1) *Komebukuro* (rice bag), 19th century, indigo-dyed cotton, Tatter Textile Library, New York, USA. <https://tatter.org/komebukuro/>.



(figure 2) Walker, Rebekah. *Sashiko Decorated Komebukuro*. 2023, Polyester Cotton blend, cotton six-stranded embroidery floss, and macrame cord. Montreal.



(figure 3) Walker, Rebekah. *Sashiko Decorated Komebukuro from above*. 2023, Polyester Cotton blend, cotton six-stranded embroidery floss, and macrame cord. Montreal.



(figure 4) *Sashiko Jacket*, 1868–1912, Indigo-dyed plain-weave cotton, quilted and embroidered with white cotton thread, 129.9 x 125.7 cm, MET Museum, New York, USA.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/50805>.



(figure 5)) Walker, Rebekah. *Four Sashiko Stitched Panels*. 2023, Polyester Cotton blend and cotton six-stranded embroidery floss. Montreal.



(figure 6) Walker, Rebekah. *Shippo-Tsunagi (Seven Treasures) chalk pattern*. 2023, Polyester Cotton blend. Montreal.



(figure 7) Walker, Rebekah. *Hitomezashi Sashiko Panel*. 2023, Polyester Cotton blend and cotton six-stranded embroidery floss. Montreal.