

Enduring Japan: Craft, Culture, and Symbols of National Identity

I was introduced to the Japanese aesthetic and visual language through my studies at university. In level 4 I analysed some of the traditional techniques used in Japanese textiles and how these techniques influenced Western design; the aim of my work was to collate and state what information I had gathered. Now in level 5, I have continued my research into this area; and this article aims to explore the theoretical elements surrounding the cherry blossom (as a national identity, symbol of Japan and culture), and the sustainability of the traditional Japanese crafts (specifically: parasols, katazome, hand embroidery and origami). As I move into the final year of my degree, and begin writing my dissertation, I have begun to take this research further as I delve deeper into the topic, to explore how the West's obsession with the Japanese aesthetic has changed the way Japan produces its wares.

Japan began trading with the West in the 16th century but closed its trading doors to the world soon after. When the Portuguese landed in Japan in 1542, they set up trading colonies and were soon followed by the Dutch. Alongside trading, these outsiders made an attempt to move Japan from its Buddhist (originally Shinto) beliefs to those of Catholicism. Japan objected, pushing out all foreign parties and closing the borders. This resulted in no foreigners being permitted on Japanese soil, except for a small number of Chinese and Dutch traders. A small island was built for these traders to live on beside Japan, in order to keep the country completely closed off from the world. During this period of isolation that lasted over 200 years, Japan had the opportunity to embrace its national identity and develop a unique visual language.

When Japan 're-opened' (Wilhide 2016, p.82) to the rest of the world in 1854 (after negotiating with the Americans for over 2 years) its wares became internationally sought after. The rest of the world became obsessed with mimicking its style. The problem was that while Japan was closed the rest of the world had been in the midst of the Industrial Revolution of 1760 – 1840 (although it could be argued that this was the second Industrial Revolution, and these dates are only an approximation). No longer were

products made by hand and laborious to produce, they were made by machine and the process was much simpler. There was no longer a need for skill. It was now easier than ever for anyone to own a piece of Japanese work (or replica), especially during the reign of Emperor Meiji (1867 – 1912).

Buisson (1992, p.160) states that 'The symbols of the past were sold off to Westerners who were eager for exotica'. This applies particularly to [origami](#). Japan had recently created new origami shapes and patterns; so therefore felt it could afford to sell its more traditional, dated work. The West, however, found that origami is one art form that is very difficult to replicate using technology. It is a process that still to this day requires time, effort and patience. Originally, origami was invented for domestic purposes. It began as packaging for items such as powdered medicines or food, and was also used for sealing jars. Over time it developed into more decorative forms and eventually into a leisure activity. It can be dated back to the year 1000, when Buisson (1992, p.153) argues it 'became established as a social art'. It then became popular during the Muromachi Period of 1333 – 1573. It could be argued that the West has always seen paper as a means of communication, whereas Japan recognised the material's potential to become an art form. The West often embellished its origami, even though this goes against traditional origami teachings; which state:

An origami must be as simple and free of ornamentation as possible. If you have to paint or decorate it to make it comprehensible, it is no longer origami (Buisson 1992, p.166)

The West's obsession with Japanese art and style will have initially proved financially beneficial for the country; but as time wore on and it grew bigger it would become more of a burden. Previously, crafts like origami were reserved for palaces and other places of grandeur. It was the invention of recycling, and subsequently, the sustainability of resources that allowed it to spread into homes, and become more commonplace across Japan. Still, the pressure on craftsmen to produce origami works was not massive until the West became a customer.

The West 'drew inspiration' (Wildhide 2016, p.82) from Japan's style, mass producing everything it could. It never directly copied this style, but interpreted it and worked it into its existing style. It could be argued that this was both a blessing and a curse for Japan. On the one hand, the West producing Japanese inspired pieces by the thousands was very good publicity for the country. Yes, everyone could buy a piece for a reasonable price, but those who had a genuine piece would be respected and admired – gaining Japan more custom. A counterargument to this, however, is that with mass production came companies and brands. With those came status. Owning a mass-produced piece from a brand whose name held stature within society could also give the owner some of that stature. This obsession with Japan came during the Victorian era, when status and morality were to be displayed explicitly. Exhibiting objects with connotations of status and cultural intelligence would be highly encouraged.

This mass production would also negatively impact traditional Japanese crafts. Those who wanted something in the Japanese style would be less likely to buy a genuine piece when they could buy a mass-produced replica for significantly less – losing Japan custom and making the craftsmanship involved in the making of its goods difficult to sustain. In modern day, owning a 'Japanese' piece of work is more affordable than ever. Now that we have the luxury of the internet, 'making things has gone digital' (Anderson 2012, p.17) and in some way or another all design processes now involve a screen. The fact that a cheaper replica could/can now be bought strips genuine Japanese pieces of their previously luxurious air and worth.

The knowledge of the traditional craft disciplines is passed from generation to generation, the Japanese method being to watch and learn in order to absorb rather than directly teach. As has happened before, and will happen again, we are currently seeing a movement towards the more traditional crafts. It is these movements that sustain the traditional crafts in today's society, where machinery has made the job of a craftsman obsolete. Society will turn back to the craftsmen to request an original/

bespoke piece; whether that is to appear fashionable, cultured, or out of interest – the circle will continue.

Japan has a very distinct style, making it easily recognisable. The Japanese have a flair and appreciation for balance in art. They can work areas of heavy, intricate detail; yet allow the piece to breathe and not overpower by leaving adequate negative space. This could be compared to the cherry blossom, in that it only lasts 2 – 3 days in full bloom. The Japanese appreciate its beauty; but appreciate it more because it is fleeting. It does not linger or overpower and displays beauty for only a short time. It is this that the Japanese apply to their artworks; the ability to display enough beauty, without overindulging. Their works are usually simple and celebrate beauty across a broad range of subjects.

This style extends through all of their creative practices; resulting in a ‘uniformed society’ (Cambridge 2011, p.183)

The term ‘uniform’ refers to designated styles of dress which mark wearers as affiliated with particular social units, embody hierarchical relationships within units and communicate information about individuals, units and their interrelationships both within the group and to outsider observers (Cambridge 2011, p.172)

Following this definition, the cherry blossom could be viewed as a uniform. It ‘marks wearers’ (Cambridge 2011, p.172) as Japanese in style; and to those who are aware of the connotations attached to the blossom it ‘marks wearers’ (Cambridge 2011, p.172) as spiritual. The kimono could also be viewed as a uniform. It plays a large part in Japan’s history and recurs often, still being worn and celebrated in today’s society; even if only as occasion wear and no longer standard dress. Any outsider can easily recognise the kimono as Japanese. The cherry blossom, being a common motif on kimonos (and other forms of Japanese clothing), is therefore a uniform. Prior to industrialisation, all decoration on items of clothing had to be created by hand, making embroidery an obvious and frequent choice as a form of decor.

[Katazome](#) is a resist-dyeing technique that the Japanese used as another form of decoration for textiles. A stencil is cut into paper (made from the mulberry tree and strengthened using persimmon juice), through which a resist – rice paste in this instance – is applied. The fabric is then dyed, and the areas covered in the paste remain untouched by the dye, creating a print. Navy and white are the traditional colours. This is because indigo was the dye of choice (for a multitude of reasons, including the repelling of insects); cotton was a widely available fabric, and the dye took to cotton particularly well. As this technique was used on actual uniforms (the samurai) and also widely in Japanese fashion, it would be fair to argue that this is another ‘uniform’ of Japan. When observing katazome, it is obvious how much time and work has gone into just a small section; and when applied to a kimono as a whole – how much time and effort has gone into the whole piece.

Japan is well known for combining techniques to complement, enhance and create more sophisticated pieces than its neighbouring countries, from whom it learned most of its crafts in the very beginning. The Japanese flair for balance in their art is not lost in the combination of techniques.

Less really is more – the eye of the viewer should be allowed to fill in the gaps
(Gray 2009, p.7)

The katazome technique can be dated ‘at least’ (Webb & Bower 1988, p.7) back to the Nara period of 646 – 794; and was especially popular in the late Edo period. Many of Japan’s traditional crafts can be dated to the Edo period of 1615 – 1868 or even earlier. This was a period of creative advances for Japan; with a lot of its techniques and processes being updated or altered to make the end product a better quality. Japan does not necessarily invent but adopts and perfects other nations/cultures works. They are made to a superior quality, and are therefore Japanese. Japan’s [embroidery](#) originates from traditional Chinese/Korean embroidery, for example. To make the techniques Japanese, the craftsmen utilised much more negative space. While China

and Korea would fill an area with stitches, Japan would use significantly less space and therefore less stitches. It also used longer stitches, secured with smaller, ornamental stitches, which gave its pieces a much more luxurious air.

The [parasol](#) is another example of Japan adopting techniques from others. It was originally a Chinese invention, but it was Japan that created and perfected the paper version in the 8th century. Paper may sound a fragile material, but it is a widely utilised medium across Japanese crafts – often soaked in persimmon juice and dried carefully (similarly to the katazome process) to give the paper more strength and versatility. It is this persimmon juice that also made the parasol more durable during wet weather.

Shinto considered the parasol to be the temporary residence of a deity (Buisson 1992, p.111)

Like most traditional Japanese crafts, the parasol carried/s religious and/or spiritual connotations. Japanese craftsmanship is heavily linked with religion, the main focus and pursuit being on quality. The belief is that the parasol acts as a ‘temporary residence’ (Buisson 1992, p.111) for Shinto deities.

The cherry blossom tree is also believed to be a vessel for deities/spirits. It has a long history in Japan. Its ‘appreciation’ (Smithsonian Institute 2015, p.36) of the blossom originated several centuries ago from China’s welcoming of the plum blossom in the Lunar New Year. China, unlike Japan, did not attach any religious or spiritual connotations to its blossom. The religion of Shinto, the first main religion in Japan, gave the cherry blossom connotations of the life cycle, the fragility of that cycle, and how fleeting that cycle is. Cherry blossom is used in many pieces of Japanese art as a symbol for an array of things – this could be from the falling of the blossom acting as a metaphor for the passage of time, loss, grief, and sadness; to the budding of the blossom acting as a metaphor for new life, new beginnings and hope. In modern society the blossom is not often viewed as a religious symbol but is still very spiritual and awe inspiring; as demonstrated by the annual Hanami festival (blossom viewing festival).

The cherry blossom has been donned an 'essential symbol' (Smithsonian Institute 2015, p.82) of Japanese culture. It has more often than not appeared as a motif across all of Japan's traditional crafts, making it an undeniably Japanese symbol. The blossom carries a multitude of connotations, each attached to it throughout the course of history for some reason or another. During the 18th and 19th century 'blossoms became infused with nationalist notions' (Smithsonian Institute 2015, p.82) as war became more commonplace. Nationalism is still a relatively recent concept, only coming to fruition in the late 18th century. Japan's leaders used the blossom in propaganda, allowing the blossom to be used as a 'metaphor' (Smithsonian Institute 2015, p.82) and euphemism for lost lives. The blossom became a motif used on Japan's flags for a time and occasionally on its uniforms during wartime as it had centuries before; giving the blossom connotations of patriotism, duty and nationalism.

Nationalism presents itself not simply as a political phenomenon, but also as a matter of cultural identity (Edgar 2008, p.220)

In the case of the cherry blossom, it does present itself as both a 'political phenomenon' (Edgar 2008, p.220) and 'cultural identity' (Edgar 2008, p.220), both of which could easily have been enforced by the tragic natural disaster that was the tsunami of March 2011. In times of disaster, cultures look for a constant to focus on so as not to become overwhelmed by the disaster.

Cultures endure even though the individuals who built them die (Edgar 2008, p.82)

The culture that is Japan endured, its method being the appreciation of the faithful cherry blossom. Only a few weeks after the tsunami the blossom bloomed, reminding Japan's people of all those religious and spiritual connotations: the cycle of life, the fragility of life, new beginnings, rebirth, et cetera. The 'nationalist notions' (Smithsonian Institute 2015, p.82) of the cherry blossom would give Japan the emotional foundations it needed to rebuild after the tsunami. The blossom became a phenomenon, as

something so trivial in comparison to the nation's suffering became the one thing that would help the nation through that suffering. Nature's willingness to carry on inspired others to do the same.

The cherry blossom is a staple of Japanese identity. It appears regularly across all of its creative practices and is easily recognised worldwide as a symbol of what it is to be Japanese, therefore making it a theoretical uniform. Advances in technology do pose a threat to traditional Japanese crafts, but tradition is what sustains the crafts. The skills are passed down from generation to generation, in the sound knowledge that society's interest will come back around; as interests in tradition regularly peak and fall, and the cycle continuously reaches full circle. To conclude: the cherry blossom will continue to blossom each year; so will therefore continue to be a symbol of national identity. Japan, its culture, and its traditional crafts will also continue – today's technology-powered design industry cannot continue without its traditional roots.

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