

Gender and Japanese Folk Art: *Shunkei* Lacquers and *Edo Hagoita*

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Although folk art is considered a core element of “Japan-ness”, little attention has been paid to the gender aspect of its production, distribution, and representation. This collaborative study by Mexican and Japanese scholars examines two types of Japanese folk art, which differ not only in their production and use, but also in their recognition as “authentic” Japanese folk art. *Shunkei* lacquer from Takayama, a mountainous region in Gifu prefecture, is a product of its natural environment, and because of its simple, elegant beauty has been conferred the title of “National Folk Craft” since the 1970s. *Edo-Hagoita*, the product of the flourishing urban, popular culture of Edo, the old name of today’s capital of Japan, is widely known by its elaborate decoration and the lively street market where it is sold. Its official recognition, however, is limited within the metropolitan Tokyo. This study examines the socio-cultural background of folk art in Japan, including the important influence of the Mingei Movement and its ideas. It describes the role of men and women in the artistic process of creating these objects, and points to their unequal visibility in folk art representations.

Key Words: Gender, Folk Art, Mingei Movement, Lacquers, Hagoita

The century which is now underway was born with the deep scars of various kinds of migrations upon it; multiculturalism is the order of the day. Our collaboration reflects all this; the big difference, of course, is that in our case transculturalism has been voluntary and pleasurable and not a response to hunger or violence. This research has been carried out by two academics, a Japanese and a Mexican, and so it will be noticed that our views of the artistic processes we will be speaking of—which are simultaneously those of a an insider and of an outsider—are inextricably intermingled.¹ This, we think, lends an interesting and rather unusual aspect to our work. Generally, a single text will give either an interpretation from within or from without, but not both at the same time.

We will be looking at the *shunkei* lacquers from the town of Hida Takayama, in the Prefecture of Gifu, and at the decorated paddles or battledores known as *hagoita* from Tokyo, giving particular attention to the gender divide and the importance of women throughout the whole artistic process; we have chosen two examples of folk art that are completely different from almost all points of view. The *shunkei* lacquers are authentic works of Japanese folk art, praised and indeed almost venerated. This has been so to the extent that by the nineteenth century there was

a general tendency in Europe to refer to lacquer work as japan or japanning, in the same way that porcelain is still referred to in English as china (Mitsukuni 1992, 6).² The *hagoita*, on the other hand, are not considered “authentic” and are not to be found in the list of traditional handicrafts at the national level, although they are so regarded at the local level.

Nonetheless, for our present-day purposes, both are objects of folk art that have developed from an original production for the nobility, but with the passing of time, have become “popularized”, *déclassé*. The Takayama lacquers, whose origin is rural, are characterized by their simplicity, elegance, fine workmanship and sobriety; they are monochromatic and almost completely lack decoration of any kind. In contrast, the *hagoita*, of urban origin, are decorated in the extreme, loaded with Churriguesque complexity, saturated with information and loudly clashing colours to the limit of the conceivable. At the same time they absorb other elements of folk culture, such as the characters of the Kabuki theatre, and turn them into visual folk art.

It is curious to discover that, as in many other parts of the world, certain objects, culinary items, songs, local or regional representations of folk art or culture, are raised to the level of national emblems. The lacquers of which we are speaking are a symbol of the Japanese nation while the *hagoita*, on the other hand, are not, despite the fact that, apparently, the lacquers were first introduced from China and the *hagoita* are of Japanese origin. (In this case too, there are some who claim that the game with the battledores also came from China, but be that as it may, the decorated *hagoita* as they are today are eminently home-grown.)

It seems necessary—as a prelude to consideration of the particular objects that concern us here—to say a few words about the examples of folk art that can be seen in Japanese museums. In the National Museum of Tokyo, all the lacquers on exhibition carry the name of the maker, and all of these are men. This matter of signatures is an extremely curious phenomenon when dealing with folk art; we find it, above all, when such objects begin to be admitted into museums (which is precisely when they begin to be regarded as “art”). In the National Crafts Gallery of Tokyo, likewise, all the pieces on exhibition carry the name of their maker; and in the Nippon Mingeikan (Japanese Folk Art) museum, in the same city—which is devoted basically to the Mingei Movement—the names of the creators of each piece are given, except in the case of antique works. In the Edo Shitamachi Crafts Museum of Tokyo there are some fifty photographs of recognized craftsmen of the city (and not a single woman). Just for the sake of comparison, in the Museu do Folclore in Rio de Janeiro, the exhibited photographs show a total of 54 craftsmen and 17 craftswomen. Of course, in the real world, the women are always there, although often in a supporting rather than a leading role. To give an



Shunkei lacquer artisan, Gallery of Arts and Crafts in Kyoto, Feb. 2006

example, in the Gallery of Arts and Crafts in Kyoto, we found three women carrying out a demonstration of craft labours, one painting on ceramic, another doing lacquer work and another weaving baskets and sunshades.³

Today it is impossible to speak of folk art in Japan without referring to the Mingei Movement which began in the second decade of the twentieth century led by Sôetsu Yanagi (1889–1961); Yanagi launched an attack on the traditional art history that had established a cult of genius which was, so he said, a “history of heroes and not of the common people” (Yanagi 1949, 5). The influence of Yanagi and his movement was so pervasive in re-creating Japan-ness in Post-war Japan that it is only recently that critical studies about the Mingei movement started to appear (See, for example: Takenaka 1999; Kanetami 2000; Kikuchi 2004).

Sôetsu Yanagi was also against the modernization of Japan and the out-and-out individualism it brought in its wake; in contrast, he praised the art of the people, of craftsmen who served the general public, that art which is above all utilitarian and has nothing of pure aesthetics. He thought that folk art was a necessary part of a full life and hence its importance, although it is precisely this quality of practical utility that has led it to be considered inferior.

Like many other promoters of folk art, such as the Mexican Dr. Atl (1875–1964), for instance, Yanagi held a somewhat romantic and unreal idea of folk art. For him this art of the people consisted of simple products and not works of genius; he believed that the common people were, in general, also the consumers of this kind of art (*op. cit.*, 7). Folk art, according to Yanagi, is the “culture of the great masses of the people”; it is that which is made by the many for the many, unlike the *beaux arts* which are made by the few for the few (Yanagi 1989, 103). Craftworks are “things made to be used by the people in daily life” (*ibid.*, 197).

Yanagi’s classifications of folk art are extremely interesting. He divides crafts into two categories: folk art proper and artistic crafts. The first of these groups comprises the “guild arts” and the industrial arts; the second group is made up of aristocratic handcrafts and individual crafts (*ibid.*, 198). For Yanagi, therefore, the crafts that interested him had to be anonymous, cheap, and hand-made for use by the masses, functional in daily life and representative of the regions from which they came.

For this intellectual the basic characteristic of folk art, besides its simplicity, was its traditional and non-individual nature; thus “no work of people’s art is signed by the creator” (Yanagi 1949, 13). Nowadays, however, it can be fairly stated that individualism has permeated much of folk art. As is well known (and as we shall be seeing), in Japan itself tradition and modernity (which implies individualism), are not always opposed but often go hand in hand. Yanagi affirmed with lucidity that “now that capitalism has killed handcrafts, the only way is the guild system” (Yanagi 1989, 208), which in our opinion is absolutely true. We have indeed noted the proliferation of the modern equivalents of the guilds—trade associations (some official and others not) and production cooperatives—as a way of surviving in this ferocious world of competition and commercialism.

Surely one result of the Mingei Movement has been modern Japan's heightened concern for the continuing existence of a space for folk art among the other arts; this has been reflected, on the one hand, in the mushrooming of galleries and museums and, on the other, of laws and regulations. Two important laws were introduced after 1950: the Act for the Protection of Cultural Properties (*Bunkazai-Hogoho*) was passed in that year and rectified in 1954 by the Education Ministry (Sato 1996). The other was the Act for the Promotion of Traditional Crafts (*Dentouteki Kougeisangyono Shinkounikansuru Horitsu: Densan-Ho*) promulgated in 1974 by the Economics and Industry Ministry.⁴

What stimulated the introduction of the *Bunkazai-Hogoho* was the fire in the historic temple of Horyu-ji in the town of Ikaruga that destroyed its famous mural (Sato 1996, 183). the purpose of the law was basically to protect and conserve Japan's tangible and intangible national treasures. Lacquers are included in the section on intangibles (Living National Treasure), being viewed not as so much objects but rather as a traditional technique (*waza*) that must be conserved. While the *Bunkazai-Hogoho* was impelled by cultural and nationalist considerations, what motivated the promulgation of the *Densan-ho* was surely Japan's rapid economic growth and the disappearance of traditional cultures.

In 1975, in accordance with this law, the Association for the Promotion of Traditional Crafts Industries was set up; this Association recognizes 198 object types as constituting "traditional craft industries" and also provides official recognition of the status of Master Craftsman. For an object to be considered a traditional craft product by the Ministry of Economics, Trade and Industry—eligible for protection by the law on Promotion of Traditional Craft Products—it must satisfy the following criteria: (1) the object must be essentially for use in everyday life; (2) it must be basically hand-made; (3) it must be produced using traditional techniques with a history going back at least 100 years; (4) the principal materials used must be those used traditionally, and (5) the industry in question must be of a regional nature.

In Japan there are 4,592 registered Master Craftsmen, of whom 520 are women.⁵ The *shunkei* lacquer of Takayama was designated a Traditional Craft at national level, and in 1975 twenty-one master craftsmen were designated (in this case no women are listed).⁶ The *hagoita*, on the other hand, has not been defined as a traditional craft at national level, though for the last twenty years it has been recognized at the prefecture and local levels only.⁷ The associations at this level also issue certificates of authenticity for objects that comply with the requirements, organize exhibitions, events abroad and promote the creation of what are called "modern traditional crafts" (*sic*).⁸ The *hagoita* is a traditional craft of the Tokyo metropolitan area—where there are 504 Master Craftsmen (no data are available regarding women)—and of several other localities such as Taito-ku (where the biggest *hagoita* market, Torino-ichi has grown up), and Sumida-ku, where the "3M" started up in 1987.⁹

In the late nineteenth century Japan was an exporter of raw materials and folk art to Europe, there being at that time no industrial products available for export. The high quality of Japan's

art and craft exports won it a considerable reputation in the West. According to some authors, an important impulse for the boom in Japanese folk art was the Universal Exhibition in Vienna in which Japan participated in 1873 (Haino 1994; Mitsui 1999).

This was during the Meiji period (1868-1912) and Taisho period (1912-1926), when a powerful westernizing movement was underway in Japan; yet at the same time—perhaps in reaction to this westernization and the increasing industrialization that accompanied it—an increasing concern for the roots of Japanese identity became manifest. It was as part of this search for identity that attention turned to the folk arts, and the Mingei Movement gave a strong impulse to these arts whose impact has lasted to the present day.

Robert Moes states that “The Japanese have never recognized the basic distinction between ‘art’ or ‘fine arts’ (painting, sculpture, architecture) on the one hand, and ‘crafts’ or ‘applied art’ (ceramics, metalwork, textiles, woodwork, lacquer, basketry, paper, etc.) on the other, that we make in the West.” (Moes 1985, 11). We do not agree with this statement since in all the existing literature, in museums, galleries and in daily life one can verify the enormous difference made between the two spheres of art. Nevertheless, this author is right when he says: “This distinction is, after all, really quite an arbitrary one” (*idem*).

In our opinion, one can distinguish between crafts—whose function is primordially utilitarian and practical—and other objects that can fairly be called folk art and which are eminently “ornamental”. There are a number of features that serve to differentiate handcrafts and folk art, but often the frontier is not very clear; one difference is perhaps the fact that in the former a much greater emphasis is placed on the technical aspects than on those of creativity and the expression of ideas.

As for the two examples of which we are speaking here, we think that both can be classified as folk art, since their value, nowadays is fundamentally aesthetic rather than practical or functional. However, in the case of the *shunkei* lacquers the technical question occupies the foreground; it is thanks to the consummate skill of its makers that pieces of such extraordinary beauty are created: “All crafts demand technical skills, but perhaps none entails so much expertise as lacquer, where technique determines everything” (Okada 1982, 9). As for the *hagoita*, the question of technique is of course also fundamental, but perhaps here there is a greater allowance for the expression of imagination and creativity.

The *shunkei* lacquers of Takayama and women extras

Much research has been carried out into the Japanese lacquers and their fame throughout the whole world, and many commentaries have been published both in Asia and the West.¹⁰ Thus our intention is now only to present a brief approach to this artistic process in a concrete geographical space, with close attention to gender, and posing the specific question: Where are the women?

There are more than twenty different types of lacquer-work regarded as traditional Japanese

crafts. Several of them bear the name *shunkei*, like the Awano *shunkei* of the prefecture of Ibaraki or the Noshiro *shunkei* from that of Akita. We chose Takayama *shunkei* for eminently aesthetic reasons, on account of its elegance and simplicity (in order to contrast as much as possible with the *hagoita*, since these display the opposite characteristics).

The origin of Takayama *shunkei* can be traced back to 1606 in the times of the feudal lord Arishige Kanamori. Two Takayama craftsmen, the carpenter Kizaemon Takahashi and the lacquer worker Sanaemon Narita, presented a varnished tray to the lord's son Shigechika Kanamori. The latter—who is nowadays recognized as an important figure in the development of the tea ceremony—assigned the name of *shunkei* to this type of work because of its similarity in colour to that of a famous tea vessel known as the *hi-shunkei*.

It was at the beginning of the twentieth century when the red *shunkei* began to be made; previously, since the seventeenth century it would seem, only the yellowish lacquer was made. Nowadays there are approximately forty lacquer workers in Takayama. Supposedly, some years ago—maybe ten—there were 250 people devoted to this craft in Takayama, of which thirty-one were acknowledged masters at national level.¹¹

Attempting to find the women throughout the process of elaboration of the lacquers is like searching for pearls in the sea. They are there to be found, but scarce. In a video made in 1975 two women appear fleetingly working wood, although one of them is “sewing” a box with little strips of wood in order to close it (which is unusual because generally women are not involved in this part of the process).¹²

The process of elaboration of the lacquers at Takayama differs from craftsman to craftsman, but in all cases is very long drawn-out and laborious. In fact the process consists of three quite separate parts. The extraction of the lacquer is carried out by certain people, the making of the wooden pieces by others, and finally the application of the lacquer to the wood is the work of specialized artists. In order to elaborate a lacquer without any decoration a total of thirty-three operations is required and in the case of decorated work, this may rise to seventy.

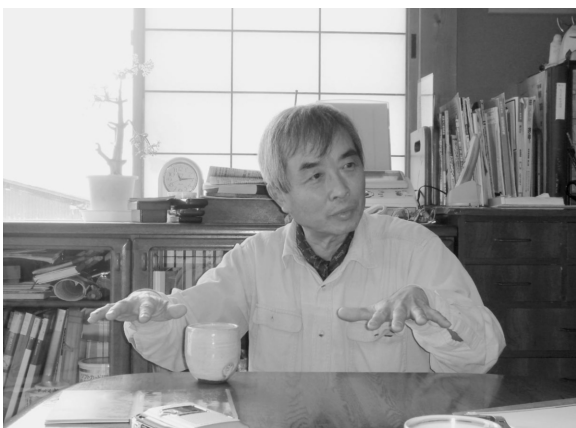
Generally speaking, the process is as follows: first the sap of the *urushi* tree (*Rhus verniciflua*) is collected on some twenty occasions at five-day intervals by means of incisions in the bark down to the endodermis. A tree of some fifteen years of age will produce 135 grams of sap, following which it will normally die (Sawaguchi n/d). Unlike other lacquers, *urushi* requires heat and moisture in order to harden. The piece to be varnished is obtained from cypress or chestnut wood and coated first with a past made of lacquer mixed with mud which is known as *tonoko*; it is then polished. The next step is to paint it with a yellow or red pigment (*chakushoku*), and later a soy-bean juice is applied (*shita-nuri*). After this, successive coats of lacquer are applied, being left to harden for long periods of time in a kind of wooden cupboard built especially for the purpose, the interior of which is made to rotate by means of an electric motor (*kaitenki o kaiten-buro*). The work has to be done in the hot and humid season, thus hardly any of it takes place in the winter. If the work has a painted decoration this is executed before the final application of the lacquer.

For the last stage (*uwa-nuri*), special clothing is worn that does not give off any kind of fluff, and every care is taken to keep the space free of dust. The lacquer is highly toxic and it is necessary for the workers' skin to acclimatize to it; some skins, however, do not develop resistance to contact, and such people are unable to do this work. The finest pieces are also polished (*shiage-migaki*) with ash obtained from burned deer horn, also as a finishing operation. The preferred brushes are made from women's hair, the best being from women who engage in diving (*ama*) since this results in their hair being less oily.

We will now present our reports of three interviews which will enable us to get a closer look at the process of elaboration of the *shunkei* and some aspects of relations between the genders that will come to light. The first interview was with master craftsman Hiromi Takimura and his wife Keiko, an institution in their own right on account of the degree of development of their lacquers, which are genuine marvels. The second was with Toshifumi Suzuki, an eminent craftsman from a family that has been devoted to the elaboration of *shunkei* through no less than fifteen generations. The third is with a woman resident in Tokyo, new to the craft of decorating on lacquer, she is the only woman we know of who does this kind of work for the *shunkei* of Takayama. We believe that these interviews are of particular interest, each one for a different reason, since they facilitate an understanding from within of the process of elaboration of the *shunkei*.

A famous couple

On the outskirts of Takayama (70,000 inhabitants), in the Prefecture of Gifu, is the delightful house of Hiromi Takimura and his wife Keiko, whom we interviewed on February 7, 2006, while a tremendous snow-storm raged outside at a temperature of seven degrees below zero. The house is situated on a hill and thus has a spectacular view of the city, which is no chance matter—this couple of artists shows exquisite taste in everything. He is from a family of craftsmen working *shunkei* lacquer—the city's main craft activity after woodworking—for years, and the tradition is already being carried on by his son who also devotes himself to the same trade. Beside the house



Hiromi Takimura, Takayama, Feb. 2006

is the ample studio where he has worked for 26 years. We sit on the floor, on an electrically heated carpet, in front of bowls of green tea just brewed for us by our hosts, in the traditional-style Japanese living-room where a Siamese cat with enormous blue eyes entertains us with continual dramatic entrances and exits. We begin to talk under the attentive surveillance of the collection of *maneki nekos* (the kittens that greet one with a raised paw), which keep an unblinking watch on us from their shelf, as do the telephone,

the fax and an object that is never absent from any Japanese space: the clock. There is no house, office, classroom, shop, hotel, *ryokan* or any other place where there is not, inevitably, a clock.

Right from the start we ask about the women in the process of making lacquer and he, in jest, says he would prefer the women to stick to having babies! Nevertheless, throughout the conversation we realise that his wife is indispensable in both his life and his work.

He was born in 1940 in Takayama and has always lived there. His wife is also from the region. They have been together for thirty years and have a son and a daughter. Despite the fact that his father was a lacquer-maker, aged fifteen, Hiromi decided to go to a master, Tani Ichiro, for



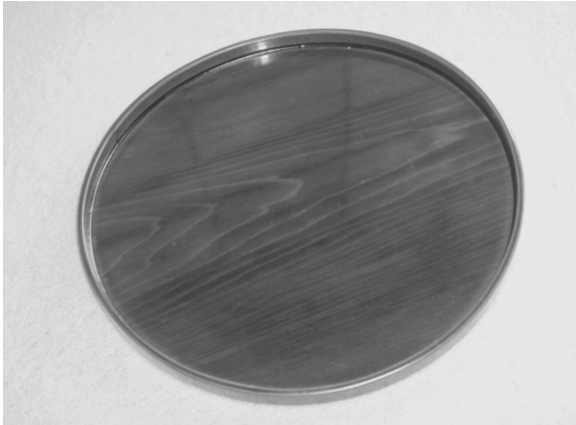
Keiko with a shunkei plater, Takayama, Feb. 2006

whom he says he had a deep respect. He achieved his independence in 1965, but the first workshop he had got burnt down; most craftsmen manage to become independent after some five years of working for a master, but his father urged him to stay with the master for ten years in order to learn the trade perfectly. There were also women working for master Tani but they gave up the craft on getting married.

Generally, the craftsmen work for the shops that sell folk art, but Hiromi does not. He arranges with the wood-workers for them to supply him the pieces he requires, instead of letting a shop organize the whole work process, as is normally the case. He creates the designs; first he sets them out on cardboard in order to see how they look and in this part of the process Keiko also takes part with ideas and suggestions. He buys the lacquer and stirs it himself until it turns black. This town is one of the few places where the craftsmen who apply the lacquer actually prepare it themselves. Elsewhere, this is a separate process carried out by different people.

Normally the women are occupied in painting the pieces with soy; in Hiromi and Keiko's case, however, she only polishes and cleans the pieces of wood and at the end polishes the lacquer. "It's work that isn't seen, but that's what my wife helps me with", says Hiromi. When the work is painted with soy, the wood becomes less absorbent, and so less lacquer is used. Hiromi disapproves of this practice since it means that the lacquer is also more prone to lifting off.

The particular characteristic of *shunkei* is that it is a transparent lacquer that allows the veins of the wood to be seen underneath. But the Takimuras' lacquer is not so transparent as the more typical lacquer because they don't mix oil with it. Hiromi has developed his own style of working the lacquer. When oil is mixed in, it becomes easier to work, but the resulting lacquers are weaker and don't stick so fast to the wood. He tries to make the traditional designs that have existed in Takayama for a long time and also to make new designs. He is teaching the traditional style to his son but not the new ones since he says that his son must develop a style of his own. He feels



Shunkei plater created by Takimura, Takayama, Feb. 2006

that if you mount an exhibition there shouldn't be identical objects made by father and son. He makes the same type of piece for a period of around three years and then changes. If he receives an order he will interrupt his cycle and devote some four to six months to completing the order and then go back to his own cycle of production. When he has an exhibition of eighty pieces, for example, he has to have another eighty ready in order to replace the ones he sells.

But his own style does not change in response to the galleries where he exhibits. In Takayama he has only exhibited his work on one occasion. His wife thinks that one needs to have courage to mount exhibitions in the town, because of the rivalries that exist there. Hiromi criticises the mentality of the local people because they talk a lot about culture but their own awareness is not very cultured. The townspeople always keep to the fold, and if someone wants to break free they all take a knock at him to prevent him from standing above the rest, he says. For instance, he makes bowls, which is not traditional in the town, and they criticise him for this. There are some pieces that have been made for centuries and others that are innovations: the bowls are an example. They find themselves always trapped in the net between tradition and modernity, in a permanent tension. If people ask him for something in particular, he will do it. And when people criticise his work they don't voice their criticisms to him directly but to his son.

Hiromi Takimura exhibited in Germany around 1997 in a joint exhibition on the crafts of Japan. At first nobody wanted lacquers, but the organizer ended up buying the whole lot. They weren't able to go themselves because his wife was ill. They have never been abroad; he says he's afraid of flying. He only speaks Japanese, but has had to learn the language of the Internet. He also exhibited in Saitama (Japan) in March, 2006. He mounts two or three exhibitions a year, some of them together with his son, who began to do lacquer work when he was eighteen. Now the son is married to a nurse, whose work helps to keep the family economy afloat; and meanwhile Keiko looks after her grandchild. Hiromi also helps with the domestic chores, washing the rice for example, especially since his wife fell ill.

The pieces he works on are not supposed to clash with what else there is on the dining room table; there has to be harmony. From his point of view, his work is utilitarian, he is a craftsman and what he does has to be useful for everyday life. A vase is a utilitarian object because it also has an everyday purpose. He thinks that the material is what decides and the lacquer-ware is meant to be used. What he most likes doing are serving pieces. He doesn't decorate his lacquers with designs; his only decoration is the vein of the wood. Each finished object is carefully examined by both partners to ensure the absence of the most minimal flaw.

According to Hiromi, there are two categories of lacquer craftsmen: those who make the utensils necessary for the tea ceremony, who are regarded as those of the highest level, and those who make objects for everyday use. He learned the former art but decided to devote himself to the latter. The former has very strict rules that leave no room for creativity; this was not to his liking so he gave up that path.

On being asked whether what he does is art, craft or folk art, he takes a lengthy pause for thought. His lacquers are very expensive; they are all unique objects that carry his signature, and in this sense one could say that he is an artist. He doesn't agree with this opinion, however, and says that he signs them because, should there be any problem, that is his way of accepting responsibility. If after selling a piece it becomes necessary to repair it, he is willing to do it.

His wife remarks that the lacquers are bought by a wide variety of people. Some buy them for special occasions like weddings. The public relations are basically her department. He criticises people who publicize their work; but she says that if the work isn't publicized it doesn't get sold.

"I never thought I'd do anything other than lacquer-work", he says with passion. "If I was born again I would chose to do the same".

Living history

Toshifumi Suzuki is another great master in the elaboration of *shunkei* in Takayama. He is a direct descendant of the lacquer-worker Sanaemon Narita (who created the first piece of *shunkei*), as his calling card informs.



Toshifumi Suzuki, Takayama, Feb. 2006

In February, 2006, this rather shy man, in his fifties, allowed us to look around the spacious workshop which forms part of his large house, and we had the opportunity to chat while observing his way of working. He warned us that he could only spare an hour to attend to us; nevertheless, an hour went by and Mr. Suzuki continued to talk uninhibitedly and finally cancelled the appointment he had arranged. Moreover, he invited us back the following day to see how he applied the final coat of lacquer to some

plates. It is a very delicate operation because the atmosphere must be completely free of dust; he therefore asked us to be very still. It was an enormous privilege to be allowed to be present in order to witness this very special part of the process.

The *shunkei* technique, as Suzuki explains to us, is very simple and even primitive, but precisely on account of its simplicity, once you embark on the journey, you find yourself deeply involved because, since the lacquer is transparent, you can't make mistakes and correct them

afterwards. He learnt the trade aged eighteen and so has been working lacquer for nearly forty years. He has a son and a daughter and neither of them has continued with the family tradition. He believes it is difficult to live solely from the lacquers; his wife works in the *ryokan* and at weekends helps her husband. He accepts orders of lacquers but apart from that he is always at work building up stocks. This is very good, because if a shop suddenly needs lacquers they can go to him since they already know what he aims to keep in stock.

He signs certain pieces, the most valuable ones, with the name Yoshikata (his family has always had two names), but the simpler pieces (worth five or six thousand yen) go unsigned.

He makes the same designs his ancestors made, but also, like Takimura, produces new things, and even experiments—for example with colours, since he uses black, yellow, green, and this is new. To change colours is difficult because it means using other instruments, different temperatures and levels of humidity. He believes that other people too want to introduce changes, but since it involves so much work they don't do so.

Suzuki belongs to the Takayama *shunkei* craftsmen's association, of which he was director some fifteen years ago: the directorship is rotating. In other places, there are isolated craftsmen, but no guild associations. The wife's family had no involvement with lacquer work. She began to do it when she was twenty, but she never felt much involvement nor any wish to sign her work; she only helps. He believes that his daughter's character is more suited to being a craftswoman, but neither does she get much involved.

He would like to stage more exhibitions; the problem is that they are expensive to mount and so it is very difficult for him. He has had three exhibitions in large stores in other cities that have approached him, but in those cases the costs were covered by the shops.

Suzuki produces both utilitarian and ornamental objects; he doesn't make an important distinction between them. He has objects meant for adorning houses and even some plates decorated with designs, but as he himself says, he hasn't much talent for the designs, and so has someone else do them.

After observing and becoming quite well informed about the work process of *shunkei* making,



Shunkei lacquer with painted decoration, Takayama, Feb. 2006

we realised that women are almost always present in it, carrying out fundamental tasks, but without playing a leading role.

All by herself

On seeing some pieces decorated with designs we immediately thought that they must have been done by a woman, and indeed when we followed the thread we found Fusae Tabi who lives in Tokyo, and we were able to talk to her on

February 10, 2006. It is interesting that from the beginning we established an empathy with her that was no doubt due to the gender factor. She is a woman with a smiling face who was born in Tokyo forty-nine years ago. It is only a year since she began to paint lacquer, but she was already painting on glass a year before that.

One day she gave a glass object that she had painted to a friend, and the owner of the Lacquer Museum in Takayama saw it and liked it. He asked her to try painting on lacquer. At first she didn't think she could do it but the meeting with the museum owner pleased her and she accepted the challenge, although there wasn't much money to be made out of it. She earns 500 yens from each little plate she decorates, and so far they have only placed a few orders of thirty pieces each.

Since she was a child she wanted to be a fashion designer; she began making clothes for her dolls. As an adolescent she took a correspondence course in fashion design and, after leaving school, she got a place at a design school where she graduated at the age of twenty. Then a friend offered her a job designing material for kimonos, and she spent a number of years doing that. She got married several times and had one child. When the boy started primary school she changed her way of working so as to have more time to spend with him and she began to do her designs at home, although, naturally, her earnings fell and so she had to take an evening job as a waitress in a restaurant serving traditional food. Now she only has her mother to look after, who suffers from Alzheimer's disease, and she devotes the free time she has left to her designs. It was an aunt of hers who was learning the technique of painting on glass who showed her how to do that.

It is extremely sad to discover time and time again that the lives of women in the world of folk art—but of course not only there—are always determined by their marital or couple relationships and that they invariably organize their work, when it is possible to do it at all, around the demands of their role as mothers, or the needs of elderly or sick relatives. These points may seem obvious, that's how things are with gender relations, but the fact that one continually finds the same situation and realizes how exceptional those who manage to override these constants are doesn't make it any the less overwhelming.

At first, the owner of the lacquer shop only entrusted her with two or three designs as a trial, but she felt the need for a greater variety and she did about five designs. She is still nervous about it because painting on glass, plastic or paper is very different from doing it on wood. She has only once seen the finished *shunkei* with her designs; that was because she bought a piece to give as a present. She also gives classes in painting on glass to a few students who come to her home. Her dream is to earn enough money from her designs to live on, since at her age it is virtually



Fusae Tabi, designer, Tokyo, Feb. 2006

impossible to find work in a company. For the moment she survives on money she receives from the government out of her mother's pension in return for looking after her.

Of course, she would also like to stage exhibitions, but she has not been lucky in this. What she most likes is painting on glass since as a beginner with the *shunkei* she still doesn't feel very confident. When she does the designs she calls her friends and asks for their opinions on what seems best to them, and at times their opinions are the opposite of what she herself feels, and so she gets disoriented.

We asked her what she thought of the *hagoita* and she said that she didn't think it was right that they should be made as purely decorative objects; they ought to be seen as toys for children to play with. Once again one meets the idea that folk art ought to be above all useful and not merely ornamental. She does say, however, that the craftsmen decorate their work with love and it is this feeling that she likes about Japan. She has seen many exhibitions of ancient Japanese art and thinks that this feeling of the Japanese craftsmen regarding their decorations is in the process of being lost.

Her grandmother was an expert in the art of flower arranging (*ikenobo*) and her uncle was a graphic designer. Now she regrets not having learnt her grandmother's art, but when she was a child she didn't want to learn anything so formal and so she missed the opportunity.

Fusae Tabi thinks that one can perceive a difference between male and female designs. However, although she paints flowers, which might appear essentially feminine, she actually sees her work as rather masculine, since she uses a very rough stroke. But since she doesn't have so much confidence when she does her designs on lacquer, her stroke is less strong, and perhaps because of this they turn out more feminine. In general she does what she is asked to do, but she tries to express herself within the parameters available to her. For example, when she was doing dress design she always did three kinds: one just like she was asked to do, another with small changes and a third quite different, but with an eye to what would suit the person giving her the order. She felt very satisfied when the customer chose the third option.

She doesn't see herself as an artist; her uncle told her one day that she would only be a part of the company she worked for; she would have no individuality. She is clearly waging a fierce battle against this notion whenever an opportunity presents itself. If the *shunkei* museum asks her for several pieces with the same design, for example a bamboo pattern, she will do it, but she paints every one differently. She complies with the customers' requests, but at the same time tries to give expression to her feelings.

In such highly developed societies as that of Japan it is all the more remarkable to submerge oneself in the world of folk art with its ancestral techniques that have been so little modified with the passing of the centuries. Practically the only "modernity" in the elaboration of lacquers is the automatically rotating cupboard where they put them to dry; they also sometimes use a vacuum cleaner to remove the dust from the pieces before applying the final coat of lacquer, and that is all.

Hagoita for Japanese girls

The decorated paddles or battledores known as *hagoita* are made from a Japanese timber known as *paulownia*, a very lightweight wood; their original purpose was for women and children to play a game (*hanetsuki*) similar to badminton, but without a net. A shuttlecock (*hane-ume*) is used, made with the hard berry of the soap-tree or mukuroji (whose scientific name is *Sapindus mukurossi*). To make the shuttlecock, the berry or “soap-nut”—which is about a centimetre in diameter—is surrounded with feathers painted in lively colours, giving it the appearance of a flower. The idea of the game is to keep the shuttlecock in the air; each time a player lets it fall she has a point marked against her on the forehead with Chinese ink. When her face is all black the game is over and this player is the loser. It is not strictly speaking a sport but just a pastime for women and children. The battledores are given to girls at birth or at New Year, which is when by custom the game is played. Apparently they have also been used as *ex-voto* offerings to be placed in temples in order to drive away evil spirits and bring good luck. The sizes range from around 20 cm. to a metre and the prices from 4,000 yens for a small one to as much as 250,000 yens or even more. It was Bunka-Bunsei of Edo period (1804-1929) that representations of characters from the Kabuki theatre began to appear on the *hagoita*: a practice that has continued to the present day (*Edo Oshi-e Hagoita*).

There is much uncertainty regarding the exact period when the *hagoita* began to be elaborated, particularly as regards the decorations. The practice appears to go back to the Edo period (1603-1868), but the game is known to have existed at least since the fourteenth century. The first written mention of a *hagoita* is in the *Kanmongyo-ki*, the diary of the Imperial Prince Sadafusa compiled between 1416 and 1448 (*Hagoita, Kites and Tops*, 1992). There are several antique engravings that show girls or women playing at *hanetsuki*, but they are from the nineteenth century. There is an engraving by the artist Kunisada (1786-1864) dating from ca. 1850 which shows two girls playing with *hagoita*. There is also an engraving by Georges Bigot of 1886 where two women are seen playing *hanetsuki* (Edo-Tokyo Museum). It began no doubt as a game played



Noguchi Toyoo, Tokyo, Feb. 2006

by the nobility before spreading to women of the families of rich merchants, and then little by little becoming popularized. By the mid twentieth century little girls were playing *hanetsuki* throughout the country in cities and villages. The *hagoita* market at Asakusa began some 350 years ago, around 1658, during the Edo period.

A long-established family business

In Tokyo there are only about five studio

-shops specializing in *hagoita*, and in Asakusa-bashi there are several shops devoted to Japanese dolls that also sell the decorated battledores. We went to visit Noguchi Toyoo in February, 2006, in his studio-shop called “Musashiya Hozan” in the Ryogoku district of Tokyo, the neighbourhood where he was born in 1950. Owing to the damage caused by World War II there are no documents preserved regarding the history of the manufacture of *hagoita*. He represents the fifth generation of his family devoted to this craft. He began when he was twenty-two, and now has a twenty-year old son of his own; it is too early to say whether the son will continue with the trade.

To manufacture *hagoita* one needs actually very little raw material and the total material input cost amounts to some 20 per cent of the selling price. The business is better for those who live in the villages because the costs are lower than in Tokyo where everything is very expensive. Noguchi’s most highly-priced *hagoita* cost about 600,000 yens. They are made with silks, some of which are imported; he buys, for example, from a company in Kyoto that imports the silk from China. They are cloths made especially for the manufacture of the typical Japanese dolls. Red and pink are the prominent colours since more female than male figures are made; as they are normally given to girls, female figures are preferred. It is a family business in which he, his wife, and his mother collaborate, with parts of the process being put out sometimes to other workers.

Noguchi’s mother (who came originally from the countryside) is eighty-four years old, but she continues to work. She smiles saying, “There is no retirement in our business”. She devotes herself above all to making the hair of the figures in silk, which is one of the parts that women most specialize in. His wife does what is called *oshi-e*: she covers various parts made in cardboard with the different pieces of silk, putting in the cotton stuffing and sticking it all together.

Demand for *hagoita* is falling off significantly, more than anything because of the changing style of home living. People no longer have a special place to display them as was the case in the traditional Japanese houses where there was always a wooden crossbeam (*kamoi*) that was the ideal spot and provided room for many. For this reason the smaller ones are sold nowadays with a base so they can be displayed on a table, but now there is only room for a few. Another reason is that there are no longer so many little girls. The birth-rate has fallen drastically, to the point that the overall population is declining.

The *hagoita* are made in a four-stage process. First the basic paddles are made out of wood (*Ita-zukuri*); these are bought in ready-made for decoration. Secondly, there are people who make the faces and the whole design; this process is called *menso* (the people who do *menso* are known as *menso-shi*, and they have most control over the work; normally some ten years of practice are necessary to reach the stage of *menso-shi*). Thirdly, there are the people—generally women—who do *oshi-e*; and finally, the fourth stage is when the *oshi-e* is assembled into a single piece by being fixed with copper nails (*toritsuke*) by the master craftsman (or craftswoman) onto the wooden *hagoita*.

The technique of *oshi-e* was probably introduced into Japan from China and in the seventeenth century was known as *isho-e*, which means “picture of dresses”, perhaps because the same cloth

was used as for kimonos. It is said that the *oshi-e* was elaborated first of all by the women of the court, people of the class of Samurai. The most representative figure was the daughter of Hidetada Tokugawa, the empress Tofukumon-in (Fister 1994, 93-95). At the beginning of the Edo period *oshi-e* was popularized due to books like *Hana musubi nishikie awase* (lit. “Flowers joined, brocades fixed”) published in 1736. In the late Edo period women of the lower classes began to make *ema* (ex-votos) with *oshi-e* for temple offerings (*ibid.*). This same writer comments that the *oshi-e*, together with the embroideries, were excluded from the history of Japanese art on account of having been made by women lacking official artistic training (*ibid.*, 96).¹³ This work was not regarded as professional, but merely a “pastime” of the women; each *menso-shi* needs ten *oshi-e* -*shi*.

Noguchi had to go to learn with another master in order to achieve a command of the whole process since his father was only a designer. He makes the designs based on antique Japanese drawings or paintings, and one of the most difficult things is to make them fit into the rectangular form of the racket. There are certain rules of design and colour regarding the characters of the Kabuki. For example, the wisteria girl is supposed to wear a kimono with wisterias. This flower has to be painted on the cloth; but if they need to lower the price, they leave this part out. Noguchi belongs to the Doll Association which also has members who make *hagoita*. He feels himself to be a craftsman and not an artist; he signs his pieces, but with the surname of a family of craftsmen: Hosan.

The customers are of various types, but mainly they fall into three groups: those who buy for a new born girl; the collectors; and those who buy them to take abroad as presents.

It would seem that in the past acquiring a *hagoita* with the favourite character from the Kabuki was equivalent to acquiring nowadays a photo of a favourite film star or pop idol. It is thought that they were mainly women who bought them.

The *hagoita* are traditional and what is new about them has to do with the characters represented on them. For copyright reasons, it is not possible to make scores of *hagoita* of a famous television actor, for example; only if someone requests a special order is this done, but one can't go making dozens of the same thing and selling them in the shops because this could give rise to a lawsuit.

Every year, the Traditional Folk Arts Association in Tokyo organizes a great fair in Asakusa which represents the big sale of the year; practically everybody comes. Noguchi takes part; he also once went to an exhibition in Chicago and comments that it was interesting to see the diverse reactions of the public of Japanese descent: the older people were more appreciative than the young.

A “mistress” of the craft

Almost by accident, and when we had already lost hope of finding a craftswoman who made



Akiko Goto, Tokyo, March 2006

hagoita, we came across Akiko Goto in her shop “Harimaya”, the name of a well-known Kabuki family; this shop has existed for 150 years. She is a woman of sixty-five, taciturn to begin with, but in the end quite friendly, as she got talking to us and, once again, an immediate empathy appeared. She tells us that she began to make *hagoita* when she was thirty and by now has been doing it for thirty-five years. Her parents-in-law used to do it, but as she was busy bringing up her two daughters she did not take up the work immedi-

ately. Her husband makes the traditional Japanese dolls. Neither of the daughters is following in her parents’ footsteps.

She gets up at half-past-four every morning and works until seven. For the details she needs sunlight, so she works on these later in the day. She has breakfast, leaves home at nine o’clock for the shop, which opens at ten and closes at six o’clock in the evening. She works as maker and saleswoman, cleans the shop and attends to the customers, does everything in fact, and goes to bed at nine. Her husband has no time for domestic chores. “He’s very busy”.

She is hoping to make it to her eighty-eighth birthday, because the government gives a prize to the craftsmen and women who spend most time in their trades. She works 360 days a year and rests five, during the New Year. She says that if she doesn’t make at least one *hagoita* a day she doesn’t earn enough to eat. She can make a *hagoita* that measures half a metre in two days if she already has several parts of the process under way. She uses a glue that she has made specially; in the past she used a paste made from rice, but this is no longer available.

She began when the older daughter started primary school, the grandmother helped with the children then. First she worked at home, but after the older daughter started at secondary school she was able to look after the shop. She wanted to work anyway, but her father-in-law insisted on it because, as he said, since his own daughters refused to work, his daughter-in-law must take their place. The result is that they are mere housewives, while Akiko is happy to be making *hagoita* because this is something she could do anywhere as long as she had the instruments to do it. Both she and her husband, each involved in their own thing, work there in the rear part of the shop.

She wanted to make the *hagoita* figures with a very different sense of movement from those which existed and she thus decided to design them in full body. She would thus free herself of competition since hers, she said, would be unique. She works alone and does it all herself, even painting the faces that other makers buy printed from Taiwan in order to lower costs. One of the things that seems most difficult to her is to find adequate material; she says that when she travels she always goes looking around and when she finds something good she buys a lot of it.

In Japan tradition must be maintained irrespective of hopes of profit. Thus the *hagoita* have to be made well although it costs more to do so, and people who understand this buy them. Hers normally cost three times as much as those of other makers. “It’s like the difference between a 100 per cent cashmere sweater and any old pullover”.

One of the questions that particularly call for attention regarding her *hagoita*—and which we haven’t noticed in the work of others—is that she reproduces in them works of famous painters. For example, she reproduces the paintings “Wind” by Shoen Uemura (1875-1949), “Selflessness” by Yokoyama Taikan (1868-1958), or “Yayoi” by Ito Shinsui. She thus achieves a syncretism between folk art and fine art that is highly suggestive.

She says that there are examples of her work in the British royal household, because they have a boat for the disabled and the volunteers who work on the boat went to buy in her shop. One person was particularly taken with a *hagoita* which was extremely expensive, but she lowered the price and it went away to England. Some twenty years ago she took part in an exhibition in Los Angeles, California, and that has been all.

In order to do the designs she goes to see Kabuki; she finds inspiration watching the movements of the actors, and this is reflected in her designs. She also goes to see the Noh theatre. The faces of the figures she makes are traditional Japanese female faces; she doesn’t make “modern” figures like other workshops. The “modern” consists, in many cases, in making the eyes less slanted, more western, for example.

Akiko thinks that the difference between male and female craftsmen is a matter of sensitivity. The parts of the hair or the way in which the underwear to the kimono is placed so that it is just visible—only women know how to do this kind of thing. Another difference between the work of men and women is that the former are more rigid, and once they have their design, there’s no room for change. The women’s designs, however, do change; they are more flexible. Even when they copy a model, a painting by some artist, for example, they make changes. Sometimes they ignore the design altogether and make something completely new. For instance, women know what kind of clothing the female figures ought to wear, and she thinks that in this the artistic sensibility of women shows through.

She says she knows no other master craftswoman who does *hagoita*. She devotes a lot of time to teaching *oshi-e*. She has about twenty pupils aged between thirty and eighty. She also regards herself as a craftswoman, although of a low level, because her master used to tell her that when one reaches mastery one has to return to the basic level because otherwise one ceases to grow. She is never satisfied with what she does; she always wants to do it better. This is why she regards herself as a beginner and not a “mistress” of the art.

She has an assistant who is also a craftsman and helps her with the sales. He has been with her since he was fifteen and was there before she got married. He helps to nail the *oshi-e* to the racket; sometimes he doesn’t ask her what colour she wants and uses something she doesn’t like, but as she doesn’t want to take his work away from him, she keeps quiet.

She is a member of the Hagoita Shopkeepers' Association, but not of the national Traditional Folk Arts Association, and probably will never be accepted since her work is not considered traditional enough for them. She thinks that there is much rivalry among the craftsmen of the different shops. There are few who do the whole process and most just sell what others make.

Once she put together a collection of eighteen relatively small *hagoita* representing Kabuki plays and each one costs 50,000 yen. She sold the set for a million yen to the *Kabuki-za*. The largest figure measured 1.80 cm. and cost 500,000 yen. The fair at Asakusa is fundamental as far as sales go because there she sells in three days the work of a whole year. There is also a shop outside Tokyo that sells her *hagoita*.

She has never felt that being a woman made things difficult for her; she only experiences certain physical problems, such as when she wants to take down the *hagoita* from a high shelf and doesn't reach them easily (of course, if the person who put them there was somebody taller than her—her husband perhaps—we chip in).

She signs her *hagoita*, but with the name of the shop, in other words there is no way to know who actually made them. Perhaps it is for this reason that no other craftsman we spoke to admitted to knowing of the existence of a “master craftswoman”. Her work is thus, to a certain degree, anonymous like much folk art and in fact, in the end, she is invisible. Could one say that her labour as a craftswoman parodies the well known invisibility of the domestic work of women?

The now deceased craftsman Hideo Hiroshima stated in an interview in Internet that those who buy *hagoita* are mainly women over sixty. Women aged between thirty and forty don't buy them.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the craftsman Ikuo believes there are buyers of all ages.

Every time we get to interview a craftswoman there is that rapid empathy between them and ourselves that we have already mentioned; all of them smile and burst into laughter more easily than the men: once again a matter of gender.

The Little Museum

In the old Mukojima neighbourhood of Tokyo one finds this tiny *hagoita* museum. The sign at the entrance says that it is also a “Model Shop”. There is an exhibition of some sixteen antique *hagoita* that are not for sale; all the remaining *hagoita* that are on show are the work of craftsman Kogetsu Nishiyama. The museum is a family project.

Kogetsu Nishiyama's wife, eighty-year old Atsuko Nishiyama, has to do everything, she tells us; there is literally nothing that she doesn't do. She was born in Tokyo of a family that had no



Hagoita with “Naozane Kumagai” created by Goto, Tokyo, March 2006



Atsuko Nishiyama, Tokyo, March 2006

connections with *hagoita*; she got married at twenty-two with Kogetsu and it was then that she began to help with the craft work. They have a son who also works at *hagoita*; he is aged forty-two and does almost the whole process, besides going to exhibitions and looking after the museum. Unlike Akiko's shop, here in this museum, they only make *hagoita*, no dolls. Although she used to take part in all the craft operations she has never done the designs, since this required a special technique that she doesn't possess. "The only thing my husband said to me when we got married was: just be calm, because otherwise you'll put me off with the expressions of the *hagoita* characters". Nowadays, she still makes all the hat strings. In other workshops they just buy them ready made. The album with the photos of the customers who have bought *hagoita* is a treasure for those who share in their tiny museum. "There are people who order them because the daughter is going to dance in some play and they want us make the same character on the *hagoita*". They also make them to be given as presents to daughters or granddaughters, following the tradition.

Her husband has grown very fond of schools and schoolchildren and goes to give talks on handcrafts. He lived in Asakusa before the war, but his house got burned down and so the family moved to Mukojima. In the old days, many geishas used to walk past the house but nowadays that hardly ever happens. They used to enter with their patrons so that they would buy them a *hagoita*, but none of that exists now.



Kogetsu Nishiyama, Tokyo, March 2006

The *hagoita* they make are very different from the rest. For example, her husband paints patterns on cloth of the kimonos and also paints the back side of the paddles and writes both his name and that of the person who is to own the piece. In this case, the work is not at all anonymous. Several articles have been written about Kogetsu Nishiyama in important journals; there is also a video (in which his wife doesn't even appear) and a book. For more than sixty years he has been devoted to his work, has travelled to England (1978), to the United States (1981), China (1981), France (1983), Thailand (1992), Australia (1994), and has even been visited by the German Chancellor (1986) to whom he gave a demonstration of his technique and his work.

Atsuko Nishiyama tells us that he sells more *hagoita* with female characters than with male ones. They put on exhibitions every year in hotels and department stores. Sometimes the stores

call them to place orders of *hagoita*, but as they have no catalogues, he asks them to call at the shop. When the orders are placed from far away, they send them photos of specimen *hagoita* for them to choose. Both he and his son love going to see Kabuki. She on the other hand doesn't go very often. She hardly talks about herself; she talks of her husband, her son, and occasionally she



Michie Nitta, Tokyo, March 2006

refers to herself as “the craftsman’s wife” (in the third person). We, however, had the luck to chance upon one more invisible craftswoman.

A workshop specializing in *oshi-e*

In this studio-shop called “Minamikawa” in Takasago, in the Katsushika district of Tokyo, they don't make the *hagoita*, but basically they buy and elaborate certain parts of the process. They neither make designs nor paint the faces, they are not *menso-shi* but only *oshi-e-shi*.

Michie Nitta has worked there for twenty-seven years, since she was twenty-three. She began *oshi-e* because her children were starting kindergarten and she needed a job.

She lives nearby and goes to work by bicycle. She didn't know how to do the work, nor had she had anything to do with *hagoita* before, but now she loves it. The details of the *oshi-e* are her speciality nowadays.

The other woman who works there, who is the wife of the owner and master, is Yoshiko Minamikawa; she tells us that she began to do *oshi-e* immediately after getting married at thirty years of age. She has two children and neither of them has followed her in the trade. Five or six people may be involved during the process of making a *hagoita*. There they cut the cardboard, make the filling and mount everything on the wooden racket. She selects the material and makes the combinations. They have to buy a lot of fabric because they only use the parts where the designs suit the *hagoita* and throw the rest of it away. There are cloths with classical and modern designs and one or the other type is chosen in keeping with the kind of *hagoita* being made. To see the new fashions in kimonos she goes to girls' coming-of age ceremony; she also tries to keep abreast of the fashions in European clothes.

They talk to us about two types of *hagoita* that represent women: the classic and the modern. Among the classic models there are some that have received the seal of tradi-



Yoshiko Minamikawa, Tokyo, March 2006



Modern style Hagoita with “a girl with a long-sleeved kimono”, Tokyo, March 2006

tional metropolitan folk art—these are the most expensive—and others that have not. Among the former, there is also a new model that is characterized by the fact that the sleeves of the kimono project over the sides of the battle-dores so as to make them more imposing. The faces are different according to the type, especially as regards the eyes: in the modern type they are slightly rounder, as we have already mentioned. Young people tend to buy the modern kind and older people prefer the classic. The craftswomen too like the classic models best.

Ikuo Minamikawa is Yoshiko’s husband; as soon as he enters the room, he dominates the space and the conversation taking place in it. His wife and Michie merge into the background; the wife gets up to bring the tea, she serves it and sits behind him, practically ceasing to speak. He was

born in the Sumida neighbourhood, but since, as he says, there were many houses burnt down during the war, he went to Katsushika. Basically, the three of them work together alone, but if the work accumulates they have to put out some part of it to others.

He has been director of the Asakusa *hagoita* market for more than ten years. He says that previously he used to sell more *hagoita* with male figures, but this is no longer the case since the people who used to buy them keep dying or else they no longer have money to spend; the purchasers nowadays prefer female figures.

Prices range from 3,500 to 700,000 yen. The ones that sell most are in the 18,000 yen bracket, although they would cost twice as much if you were to buy them in the department stores.



Ikuo Minamikawa, Tokyo, March 2006

Characters on the *hagoita*

As regards the main figures represented on the *hagoita*, one can say that women always show a passive, expectant attitude with the face inexpressive and slightly sweet, with an indifferent gaze. Their clothes and their hairdos change, but the faces are always the same. Often they are a mere adornment, showing how beautiful the woman and her attire can be. Even those who are shown dancing have a hieratic face, although it seems that as far as the craftsmen are concerned, this is not so. The craftsman at the Little Museum, Kogetsu Nishiyama, is quite positive that he gives

a different expression to each female figure, because a geisha is not the same as a housewife, a princess, or a servant. The men, on the other hand, display strong attitudes, their expressions are a lot more variable, their faces expressive and often even look annoyed. Neither of the two sexes looks directly at the beholder; they are always looking the other way, at a 45 degree angle. This is so to a considerable degree because in the Kabuki likewise—from whence the great majority of the characters represented originate—the women almost always keep a frozen expression on their faces. The men, on the other hand, move their faces and their eyes, they are more expressive. Only the old women make more gestures with their faces. The women in the Kabuki often weep, but without altering their expressions.

The Kabuki theatre was begun by a woman called Okuni in the early seventeenth century and it was soon after that this type of performance and form of entertainment won the name of Kabuki in reference to its scandalous nature. It is curious that Okuni was able to wear men's clothes. After Okuni, came the continuation which was a Kabuki staged entirely by women and was called *Onna Kabuki*. In 1629 a prohibition was placed on women acting, and it became for a short time a theatre for adolescents of thirteen or fourteen years only, known as *Wakashu Kabuki*. In 1652 it was prohibited once more, but in 1653, the prohibition was lifted (Shaver 1996, 39-40). Ever since, it has been a theatre in which only men act, interpreting the roles of both sexes. The actors who specialize in female roles are known as *onnagata*.

The craftsmen and women may represent in the *hagoita* whatever the customer asks for, whatever characters they wish, and there are an endless succession of these among both the leading roles of the plays and the secondary ones, plus the characters of the dance.¹⁵ However, there are certain favourites, the most common being, for example, Sukeroku (a male character), the two



This photo was found at the *El Nacional* Archive of the INEHRM in Mexico City. An excerpt of a text (perhaps a telegram) that comes with it says: "International News Photo. Doug makes a hit with manufacturers Tokyo, Japan. Gen. Douglas MacArthur is given what the Japanese consider a signal honor. A military portrait of the supreme allied commander now adorns Japan's 'battledores' [...] This is the first time that a foreign personality has had his portrait on the battledores. One of the girl workers of a toy shop places finished samples of the new 'hagoita' on the shelf with some of the older types. Photo by Charles Rosecrans. (Nov. 13, 1946)".

lions, one with a long red mane, and the other white, from *Kagamijishi* (the "lion dance"), or the three picaresque characters from *Sannin Kichisa* (which features two men and one woman, all called Kichisa); foremost among the female roles are Sagi Musume or Fuji Musume (dancing girl with wisteria). According to Kogetsu Nishiyama, the Kabuki characters most often represented are: the temple dancer from *Kyo-Ganoko Musume Dojoji*, and Benkei from the play *Kanjincho*. The colours that characterize the costumes of the Kabuki theatre characters are reproduced exactly in the *hagoita*, but one can't say the same for the delicacy and finesse of much of the decorative elements of the theatre. That aspect is not at all integrated in the *hagoita*.

Apart from the Kabuki characters other subjects from the real and imaginary worlds have been represented. In the 1930s, for example, a lot of “Modern Girl” figures were made on the models of Shirley Temple or Norakuro, Betty Boop or Kurobe (*Hagoita, Kites and Tops*). In the 1940s General Douglas MacArthur made his appearance on the *hagoita* scene. Nowadays there are also *hagoita* with Snoopy, the Mona Lisa, Hello Kitty, rabbits or dogs with kites in the form of clowns and a multitude of television actors, sumo wrestlers, sportsmen and women, the Japanese royal family, pop singers or contemporary politicians, whether Japanese or foreign (George W. Bush for instance).

Conclusion

After having taken a close look at two examples of Japanese folk art and the men and women who create it, we realize the importance of technical perfection in achieving the aesthetic effect of the objects. A greater mastery of the techniques seems to result in a greater aesthetic value of the pieces, although this can not be absolutely guaranteed. There are some objects of folk art in which technical perfection is not so important for the aesthetic effect; nonetheless, in the case of both the lacquers and the *hagoita* its importance is not to be doubted.

Given the constant and persistent invisibility of women and their work, it is indispensable to look closely at their part in the process and bring them to the surface. In the Japanese books on handcrafts women are almost completely absent. From time to time, some embroideress or weaver appears, but in many cases even these are ignored. Women are always left in the background; they do not appear as craftswomen, their names are not mentioned, their faces are only fleetingly glimpsed, they are hidden and so is their work. The men, however, are present, perfectly visible, their names are known. That is why our work attempts to uncover the women.

The *shunkei* lacquers are the epitome of Japan-ness on account of their simplicity, discretion, elegance, beauty and technical perfection. It is not surprising that they have been the pride of Japan for hundreds of years. Their ultimate origin is foreign, like much that exists in this country, but it was here that they attained their supreme degree of artistic excellence.

In the highly developed and ultra-modern Japan of the twenty-first century, the *hagoita* represent a conjunction of efforts to achieve the survival of a very long-established folk culture given static visual form, but for all the effort that has been invested in these objects, they will no-doubt become, in the not-too-distant future, a mere relic of the past in museum show-cases. In this case, Japan-ness is underlined, above all, by the representation of women in kimonos and all the traditional costume. It is thus possible to see the woman in traditional attire as an archetype that represents the essence of Japaneseness, rather like the figure of the China Poblana in Mexico¹⁶.

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- * We received permission to use all of the photos that are used in this article.

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Notes

- 1 Kanae Omura is a Japanese specialist in Mexico who has spent long periods of time in the latter country; Eli Bartra, who is Mexican, spent several months in Japan delighting in Japanese culture.
- 2 In fact, in England the terms ‘japan, japanning’ were already in use in the late seventeenth century, and metal with a glossy black coating is still called “black-japanned”.
- 3 In January, 2006.
- 4 (<http://kougei.or.jp/laws/tml>). As regards the laws regarding folk arts and lacquer work in particular, see Masami Shiraishi, 1982, pp.15–23.
- 5 <http://www.kougei.or.jp/kougeishi/f-index/htm/>
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 <http://www.dentoukougei.jp/kougeilist.htm/>
- 8 See <http://www.kougei.or.jp/english/promotion.html>
- 9 3M refers to *Master Craftman, Museum, Model Shop*. “Model Shop” is a kind of small museum of a didactic nature where the process of elaboration of the object is demonstrated; it also functions as a sales outlet.
- 10 For a brief history of the *shunkei* lacquer see Tadashi Inumaru, 1992, pp.126–7.
- 11 http://www.b-zenjapan.com/crafts/gifu_02.phtml
- 12 Video “Hida-Shunkei Lacquerware”, 1975.
- 13 And this exclusion lasted down to our days. Of course the *hagoita* are not to be found in the books on Japanese fine art, but they are also seldom mentioned even in books on folk art. See, for example, *Timeless Beauty*, 2002, where the total lack of mention is noteworthy.
- 14 <http://www.edocraft.com/products/harashima/creator.htm>
- 15 For example, in 1832, Ichikawa Danjuro selected 18 Kabuki plays as the most important: *Fuwa, Narukami, Hudou, Uwanari, Zôhiki, Kagekiyo, Shibaraku, Kanjincho, Sukeroku, Uirouri, Yanone, Oshimodoshi, Kanu, Nanatsumen, Kenuki, Gedatsu, Jayanagi* and *Kamahige*.
- 16 Legend and history have amalgamated around a mythical character called *La China Poblana*. It is also a typical female dress, and an archetype of Mexican women.

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