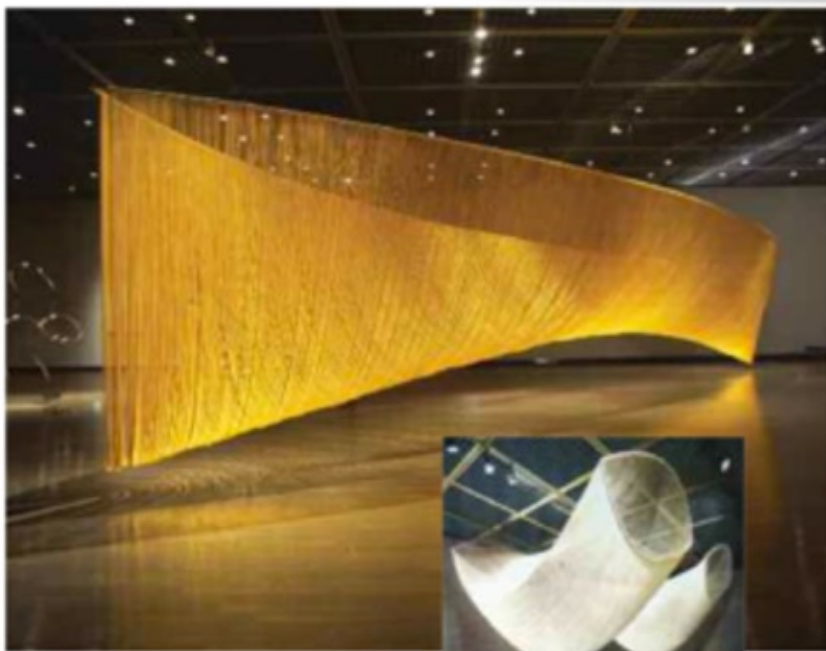


The *fine art* of Japanese fibre work

New fibre fusions are at the heart of Japan's fibre-art culture, developing from its craft origins in weaving, into an art form that draws together the sculptural with designing interior space. **Toshimichi Kuwayama** discusses its development over recent decades.

Japanese dyeing and weaving techniques came originally from overseas, travelling from China and later through trade with Spain and Portugal; Japanese craftsmen took these advanced techniques and skilfully adapted them to their culture and environment resulting in unique styles of weaving and dyeing. These developments gave rise to the development of a variety of different weaving techniques such as twill, brocade, gold brocade, damask, similarly a unique and wide variety of patterns were developed through shibori tie-dyeing, yuzen dyeing and stencil dyeing, resulting in a unique traditional dyeing and weaving culture unlike that seen in the west and one which is still being passed on today.

Dyed and woven cloth has always been fundamental to the everyday lives of the Japanese people. The cloth, which evolved out of this long history of dyeing and weaving was almost always thin and made in order to be worn on the body. There was no tradition of creating woven items such as tapestries, which are used widely as wall hangings, covers or rugs in European countries and Central Asia; such things were almost never made in Japan. In contrast to the aesthetics of European people who use tapestries within their living space, in Japan it was not customary to place woven items such as thick, multilayered wall hangings in the spaces where people were living. I believe if you consider and contrast the aesthetic of woven and dyed products like tapestries which are part of European and US tradition, and the aesthetic of cloth and clothing, items which are used on a daily basis, you can perhaps understand the reason why this cultural concept, the form of tapestry or wall hangings did not develop during the long history of the development of skills among Japanese craftsmen.



Captions



The start of the art movement known as fibre work or textile art is fairly recent in Japan and its history is still short. Flat items made by dyeing and weaving which were affixed to the surface of a wall developed into relief type semi-solid shapes, then in turn, in the 1970s three-dimensional pieces which interact with the surrounding space, that is to say, installations such as are often seen nowadays, developed. However it is not correct to say that prior to this, that three-dimensional woven pieces were not seen in Japan.

One of the first artists who pioneered modern dyeing and weaving was by the artist Toshiko Takagi (1924-87). Takagi, who was born in Kyoto, taught at the Kyoto City School of Fine Art (currently Kyoto City University of Arts) and was in charge of teaching weaving, but, her unique pieces were displayed at the Nitten (Japan Fine Arts Exhibition) – the largest public exhibition in Japan. Interestingly, in 1958 she submitted a piece entitled "Woven Interior Decoration" to the 4th category of Fine Arts and Crafts Section of the '1st New Nitten' exhibition (the exhibition had changed hands and from that year was under new management as the Nitten Corporation). This prize winning exhibit appeared to demonstrate a break away from the usage of tapestry of previous eras as a wall hanging – it was a

three-dimensional work which stood on the floor, supported on three fine metal rods in the shape of a spiral, it was stretched thinly like lace and a geometrical image had been created with tapestry. Also, in the previous year 1957 at the "13th Nitten" she exhibited a tapestry entitled "Woven wall hanging - Vineyard" with a sketch of people gathering grapes, in addition the following year in 1959 at the "2nd New Nitten" she exhibited a piece entitled "Woven Interior Decoration - Wheat Field" with a distorted woven pattern showing a woman farmer holding wheat sheaves inside a screen frame made of metal rods.

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Taking a fresh look at the pieces submitted in 1958 "Woven Interior Decoration" and "Woven Interior Decoration - Wheat field" the following year, the older works appear extremely flat and calm in comparison to the individualistic three-dimensional pieces which Takagi produced in abundance in the 1980s. However, when you think that at that time in the 1950s, other weaving and dyeing artists who exhibited at Nitten created flat works such as screens, frames or tapestries it is quite surprising that Takagi was already experimenting with three-dimensional works which were ahead of