

WASHI

By Elaine Chandler

At the height of prosperity in the 34th year of the Meiji Period (1901), there were more than 68,000 manufacturers of Japanese handmade paper throughout the whole country. Recently many have been driven out of business by the manufacturers of machine-made paper and presently their numbers have decreased to less than 700. At present, the amount of production of Japanese handmade paper is no more than 2,000 tons against the 17,000,000 tons per year production of machine made paper. (Reference: Oji Paper Museum, Tokyo.)

The production of handmade paper started as a winter time occupation for Japanese farmers to supplement their income. The principal raw materials – *kozo*, *mitsumata* and *gampi* – were readily available in the surrounding countryside. Eventually the demand for these beautiful papers reached the point where papermaking became the primary occupation of whole, small villages.

Washi is made from the bast fiber of native shrubs such as *kozo*, *mitsumata* and *gampi* etc. Bast fiber comes from the white inner bark of these shrubs and is flexible, soft and strong. The fibers are cooked in alkaline liquor such as ash lye or soda ash to remove impurities. Next, after being thoroughly washed many times, the fibers are beaten and refined. In between washings, the fibers are inspected by hand for any specks or impurities (some only the size of a grain of sand!) that need to be removed. After this arduous and tedious process, what is left is known as paper stock. The paper stock is then suspended in a vat of water and *neri* (a mucilaginous vegetable material glue). The *neri* adds viscosity and acts as a dispersing agent. Without *neri* the fibers would clump together and sink to the bottom of the vat. The best paper is made in the winter when the temperatures are cold. The viscosity of the *neri* is a constant. And when the freshly made paper is couched into a damp stack of paper sheets called a *shito*, there are no worries about the *shito* becoming moldy before the individual sheets can be separated for drying. In warm weather the *shito* can spoil very quickly. During the winter it is possible to produce about 300 sheets of paper per day; however, in warm weather, *neri* will break down rapidly. This means that the papermaker has to continually monitor the vat and add more *neri* quite frequently. Much efficiency is lost.

There can be a great deal of difference in the bast fibers of these plants depending upon whether they grow in the southern part of Japan where conditions make for rapid growth or in the cooler north of Japan where growth is slow. The fibers from the southern regions are longer, stringier and much more difficult for the papermaker to work with than the fibers from the north, which are known for being tough, strong and thin. Which fibers, how they are used or in what proportions they are used when making paper stock, depends upon the type of paper being made. For example, our *Kizuki Hanga* (P6802) is made of 100% *kozo* from the north because it is a relatively thin, strong, fine fibered paper. The best *kozo* is grown near Nikko. Our P6855 *Torinoko light weight* is composed of 30% *mitsumata* and 70% *gampi* making it a very fine, strong light weight paper and a bargain at the price.

Washi compared to machine made paper

Consider the difference in feel, touch and appearance of the following:

1. A hand thrown pot and massed produced china or dinnerware albeit Lenox or other.
2. A fine art, limited edition print as opposed to a reproduction (even if it is signed and numbered!)

The stamp of the individual artist is on each of these original sheets of paper, as is the touch, energy and craft of the papermaker on the washi. No two pieces of original work is exactly the same. It is the "print of the hand" on each that gives it life. When you use washi you are using an original to make an original. It is art complimenting art. What an exciting and pleasurable thought.

Sources:

Oji Paper Museum

Japanese Handmade Paper Association



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