

A Study of the Methods and Traditions of Tsutsumi:
The Concept of Japanese Packaging

In 1974, the Japanese government passed the Law for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries to protect and promote traditional crafts.¹ But this law also established specific criteria for the identification of craft objects. Tragically, tsutsumi, the Japanese word for wrapping and packaging, did not meet those criteria. Even though it is given high status and is considered nostalgic, tsutsumi is not considered "art" or even craft because it is perceived as merely "packaging".

With a Mortimer Hays-Brandeis Traveling Fellowship I plan on traveling to Japan to learn more about the Japanese concept of tsutsumi in an effort to aid in the preservation of its tradition and also to learn techniques to enhance my own artwork. This fellowship will allow me to study with several Japanese artists who have been working in this technique for over 50 years.

Tsutsumi is the Japanese concept and process of wrapping and packaging. The origin of the word tsutsumi is thought to come from the verb tsutsushimu, which means "to refrain, to be discreet or moderate."² Tsutsumi is not limited to the sole function of wrapping and packaging. It plays a central role in a wide variety of spiritual and cultural aspects

of Japanese life. Tsutsumi encompasses many areas not included in the Western idea of wrapping. For example, gods or Buddhas are wrapped in an altar containing their hidden image. Other examples include; portable shrines carried during festivals; gardens enclosed by a variety of fences; architectural spaces defined by translucent shoji doors and bamboo blinds, pictures that are rolled up in hanging scrolls, and food that is placed in lacquer containers. The wrapping style illustrated by these examples is not a tight, hermetic seal, but a loose, flexible covering or shading. As author Kunio Ekiguchi so poetically describes, "These styles embody the concept of "gentle concealment", a central, yet vanishing part of the traditional Japanese sense of beauty."³

In its verb form, tsutsushimu is defined as the concept and process of giving, an aesthetic that also plays an important role in gift giving. The Japanese have always considered it discourteous to simply pass an unwrapped, unconcealed object from one hand to another. Wrapping an item demonstrates a kind of pledge that what is inside of the package has been protected from all impurities.⁴ In the Japanese form of writing, kanji, the word tsutsumu is described in a pictograph showing a fetus in a womb. To me, this symbol is Japan's genuine and auspicious description of "packaging" and should be treated as such.

Because of modern technology and industrial advances, tsutsumi is vulnerable of becoming a lost form of artistic expression. Due to the

economic development that took place in Japan following World War II, much of the traditional culture was left behind in the rush to embrace a new, more modern way of life. But, as Japan progresses each day, it is also in danger of losing a vital part of its cultural identity, with the passing of traditional craftsmen and honored artists who have achieved the status of Living National Treasures - a prestigious award comparable to our Kennedy Center Award honoring lifetime achievements in the arts. Sadly, there seem to be fewer and fewer artists replacing them. The traditional ways of tsutsumi and the lifestyles of the artists are considered too old fashioned by much of the younger generation. It is understandable why they don't want to make the commitment to apprenticeship because as author Diane Durston points out, "Japanese craftsmen believe that no skill of any worth can be learned in less than ten years".⁵ It is also understandable why they wouldn't want to create works that are perceived to be no longer marketable. Even if they wanted to, today's young artists and students cannot financially afford to select this great tradition as a satisfactory means for making a living. Author Hideyuki Oka, in his second edition of *How to Wrap Five More Eggs*, a compendium on tsutsumi, writes "Even to us Japanese it is a world that is beginning to be remembered only as a vestige of the past or, in the case of younger Japanese, one that has now become only a myth".⁶

Throughout my studies I have been researching various ways to

aid current efforts to have the Traditional Craft Industries perhaps broaden its criteria to include tsutsumi. If tsutsumi were included within the Industry, the artists and craftsmen would receive financial support, therefore increasing the chances for the continuation of this tradition.

I was introduced to tsutsumi seven years ago while taking a basket-weaving course. As a sculptor I was immediately attracted to the shape and form of tsutsumi. These traditional package designs are unequivocally beautiful. But as I continued to examine them, I sensed that the beauty of these objects lay beyond their mere shape and form. I came to understand that it was the spirit from generations of Japanese artists, their vitality and spirituality exuding from within while seemingly embracing each piece of packaging. This introduction could not have come at a better time.

Although I had spent several years studying and pursuing a career as an artist in the field of sculptural ceramics, I was frustrated with my inability to incorporate some kind of organic nesting place or wrapping that would encompass and embrace my ceramic sculpture. Up to this point I had investigated different textural surfaces and I had tried various ways of joining natural fibers within my work, to no avail. I used ceramic domes to experiment with different types of clays, glazes and slips to create different layers and textures in an effort to "wrap" my sculpture. These works were appealing yet didn't offer me satisfaction. It was tsutsumi that provided the solution for my desires of wanting to combine natural fibers that would not

only complement my work but envelop it as well.

Artist and writer Nancy Moore Bess taught the basket-weaving course I had taken seven years ago. Mrs. Bess is an internationally known textile and bamboo craftsperson, who, for the past 30 years, has been creating unique baskets that reflect her research into the cross-cultural influences of her craft. Because of my peaked interest to learn more about tsutsumi, I continued to study with Mrs. Bess. Her years of experience as a basket weaver, her ability to create tsutsumi, her use of a variety of natural fibers for weaving and her incredible knowledge of Japan, have helped me learn more than I ever imagined.

This past fall, Mrs. Bess conducted a private tour in Japan, highlighted by visiting artists' studios and traditional workshops. Through scholarships, working many hours of overtime and borrowing money from family and friends I was able to join her in Japan. We traveled to Kyoto and a few remote locations where tsutsumi is still being created. I also had the opportunity, through her generosity, to be introduced formally and personally to many artisans. These artisans range from the most highly respected and elite, to the everyday local craftsman. With the help of this fellowship I will have the great pleasure and reward of returning to Japan to work side by side with some of these fascinating artisans.

My initial trip to Japan will be spent mostly in Kyoto to secure and develop the acquaintances I made this past fall. I plan on returning at least

two more times to continue my studies and research in the more remote areas of Japan. Due to visa limitations of 90 days and the almost impossible process of receiving an extension,⁷ taking two additional trips is the most logical method of working within these limitations.

Although my first trip to Japan this past fall was only two weeks long I feel that the experience further enhanced my preparation for this fellowship. For instance, traveling and being with the people of Japan taught me first hand the importance of developing a relationship and trust with the craftsmen before I can begin to work with, photograph and videotape our study sessions together. Also, I will now plan on videotaping more than I had previously planned because I noted that most of the craftsmen preferred to work in silence and teach solely through observation and demonstration. This will also decrease the amount of time and expense of an interpreter, although due to the importance of technical terms, I will still require their expertise.

My principle interest in tsutsumi is to enhance and strengthen my personal artwork. I also hope as an educator, to help this tradition gain a wider audience and greater appreciation. Upon completion of this fellowship I believe that through my artistic endeavors, exhibitions, and my ability to share what I have learned, I will be able to successfully convey the importance of preserving the methods and traditions of the beautiful and spiritual process of tsutsumi.

Endnotes

- ¹ Durston, Diane. Japan Craft Resources (Tokyo: Kodansha Ltd., 1987), 15.
- ² Kunio Ekiguchi, Gift-Wrapping (Tokyo: Kodansha Ltd., 1985), 6.
- ³ Ibid. 6.
- ⁴ Ibid. 6.
- ⁵ Durston, Diane. Japan Craft Resources (Tokyo: Kodansha Ltd., 1987), 14.
- ⁶ Hideyuki Oka wrote this upon visiting Japan, only ten years after writing his first edition, How To Wrap Five Eggs, (Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1965), 9.
- ⁷ Florence, Mason. Kyoto (Australia: Lonely Planet Publication, 1999), 61.